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Old Dongola, 1991-1992

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OLD DONGOLA, 1991-1992

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The 25th season of excavations at Old Dongola lasted from December 17, 1991, to February 13, 1992.¹ Fieldwork comprised full scale excavations on Kom H2 and additional work in the area of the pottery workshops on Kom B and in the abandoned village of Old Dongola.

KOMH

Kom H has been confirmed as a monastic compound built of mud brick and red brick, measuring c. 120 x 100 m overall. It is located in the vast area of cemeteries of the Early and Classic Christian periods. The 10th and 11th centuries would appear to be the main period in the monastery's development; however, there are units which are obviously much earlier.

Excavations were conducted in the northeastern corner (NE), northwestern one (NW), and to the south (S).

In the northeastern corner of the compound a square area 20 x 20 m was excavated. (Fig. 1) All the structures, preserved to a height of c. 2 m, are of mud brick including the local desert

¹ The expedition included: Dr. Stefan Jakobielski (director), Dr. Bogdan Żurawski, Mr. Krzysztof Pluskota, archaeologists, and Mr. Przemysław Wierzbicki, architect.

² For previous work at this site, cf. S. Jakobielski, PAM 2, 1991, (1992), pp. 65, 71-72; S. Jakobielski, K. Pluskota, B. Żurawski, Polish excavations at Old Dongola – twenty fifth season 1991-92, *Kush* XVI (in print).

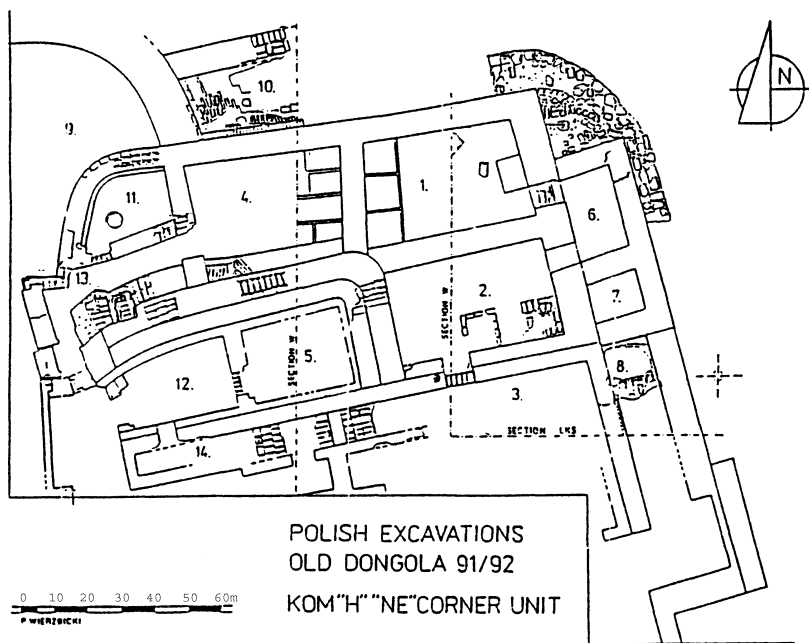


Fig. 1. Monastery on Kom H. Northeastern Corner Unit (NE).
 Plan P. Wierzbicki.

clay (*kurba*), occasionally used also as mortar. The plaster is still extant on some of them. In most cases the rooms were originally barrel-vaulted. Floors were of hardened mud or bricks.

This part of the monastery was undoubtedly domestic in character. Rooms 1 and 4 were probably storerooms: masonry containers (most probably for grain) occupied more than one fourth of the available space. In room 8, to the east, there is a

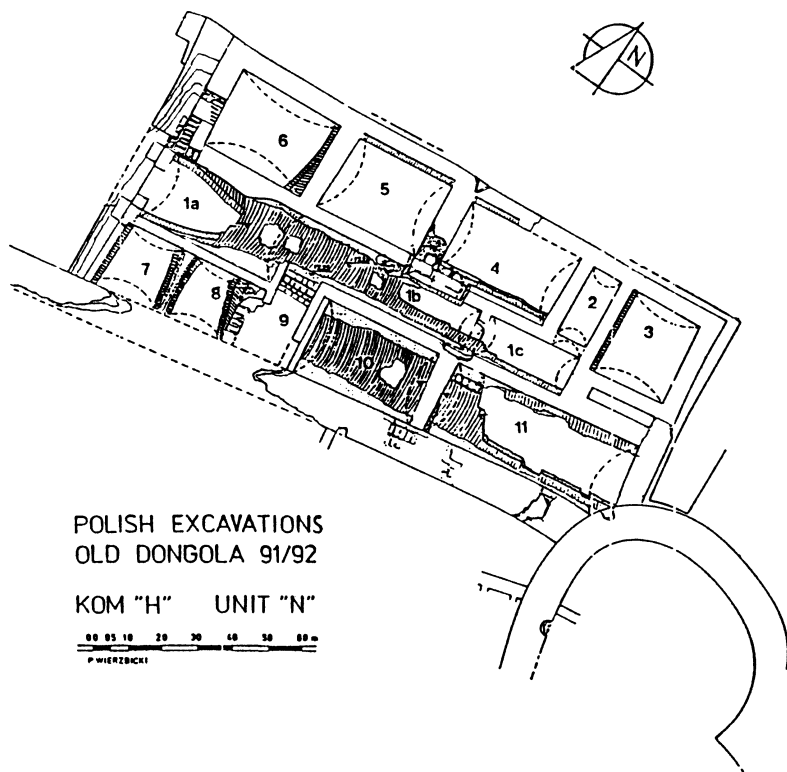
two-chambered kiln.³ The ashes from the kiln were put into the lower cesspit, which served the latrine located above. To the south of the complex, not yet fully excavated, a kind of yard (unit 3) and a stairway (room 14 and unit 14a) were recorded. These appear to be the oldest structures in the area for a deposit of potsherds found in the substructure of the stairs contained only Early Christian ceramics. It is still impossible to establish the character of this area.

The complex expanded steadily towards the north and north-east. Five main periods of occupation can be observed, encompassing a time span from possibly the 7th until the end of the 13th century. Numerous rebuildings considerably changed the plan of the compound. A characteristic feature, starting perhaps in the Classic Christian period, are the rounded corners in this part of the monastery. This is also apparent in the outer (obviously later) girdle wall, which contains bastion-like projections. Against the outer northeastern corner a sort of rounded reinforcement of rough stones and red-brick was built.

An architectural survey along the northern enclosure wall included measurements and a partial clearing of Building N.

This is a roughly rectangular unit measuring 17.5 x 8 m with rooms positioned on both sides of the central corridor (1a, 1b, 1c) and the main entrance on the west side. (Fig. 2) It was built entirely of mud brick, on a thin 5 cm stratum of habitation deposits containing Early and Classic Christian potsherds, directly on bedrock. It is outside the monastic complex adjoining the girdle wall. The rooms appear to be preserved

³The kiln itself was investigated in 1989.



*Fig. 2. Monastery on Kom H – Building N.
 Plan P. Wierzbicki.*

in the southern and central part of the building to their original height of about 3.5 m together with virtually complete barrel vaults (rooms 1, 10, 11). The northern end is largely destroyed. The northwestern part of the building, including Rooms 1a, 7 and 8, is probably of an earlier date and was incorporated in the Classic Christian period, most probably in the 11th century. A stairway in unit 9, leading to the roof, is obviously the latest addition dating to the Late or even Terminal period.

Whether or not the whole unit originally had an upper storey is an open question thus far, but certainly some kind of facilities existed above Rooms 10 and 11 in the Late period.

The building's location outside the walls of the monastic compound could perhaps suggest a kind of hospice for those coming

Excavations in a 20 x 20 m. area in the northwestern part of the kom uncovered two apses in the girdle wall at the northwestern corner of the main monastic building complex. (Fig. 3) Only some units (1a, 1c, 1d, 7) were cleared to the well-preserved floor level, which was made up of red-brick or terracotta tiles. The walls were built of mud brick, founded on bedrock and plastered with fine gravel-mud plaster; in places two layers of it were applied, thus marking the rebuilt portions of the building.

On the walls nine fragmentary mural paintings were preserved and recorded. Murals also decorated the northern part of Room 11, but were left covered. Hundreds of painted plaster fragments were found in the rubble including parts of a representation of the Holy Trinity and a Nubian bishop(?). Four of the paintings extant on the walls are better preserved: no. NW7.E1 (in Room 7) – half-figure of Christ, no. NW1b.N1 – lower part of a figure of a saint, no. NW1b.S1 – composition comprising the standing figure of a saint and a monk in prayer and also a kneeling figure below, and no. NW2.S1 – figure of a flying angel. On stylistic grounds, the murals can certainly be dated not earlier than the 10th century, and most probably in the mid 11th century.

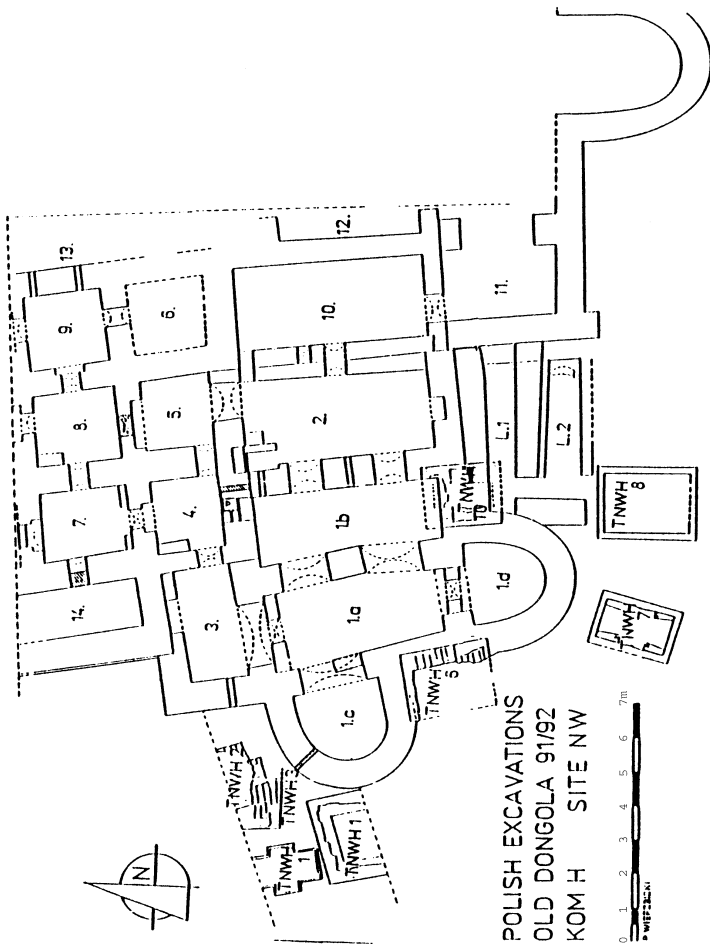
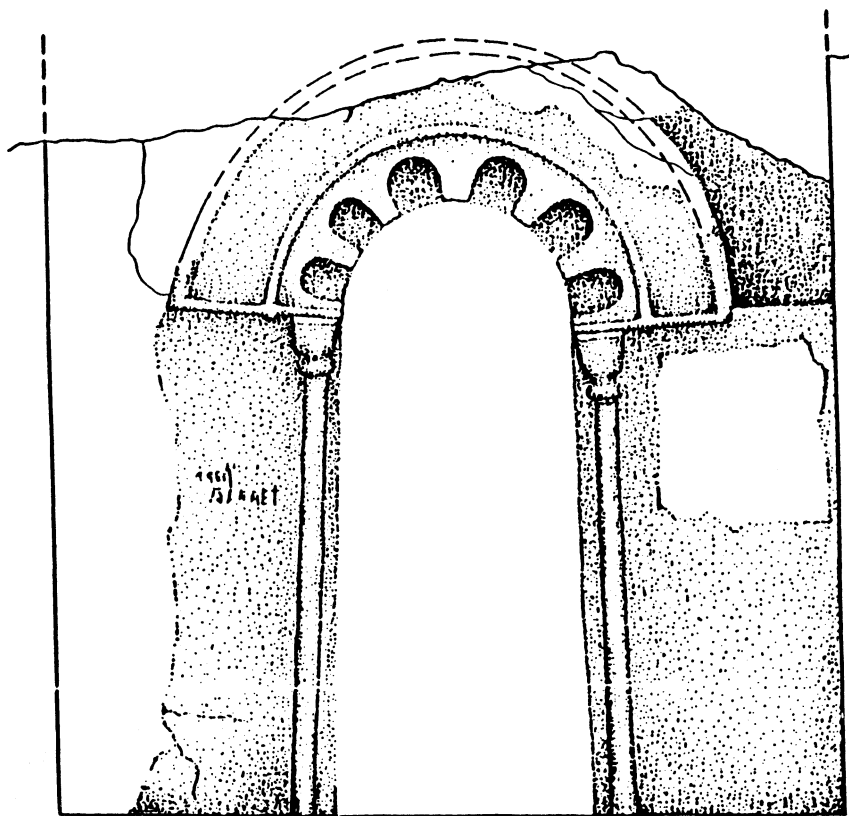


Fig. 3. Monastery on Kom H. Northwestern part (NW).
 Plan P. Wierzbicki.

Several graffiti in ink or scratched on the walls have been recorded. Three larger ink inscriptions of a liturgical and commemorative character were found: two 11th century Greek inscriptions (Room 7⁴) and one in Old Nubian (on the east wall of Room 2). It mentioned Georgios, the archbishop. Most of the Old Nubian graffiti were later, possibly from the 12th century. Some mention the names of clergy from the "Great (church of) Jesus". Could it be the dedication of the Monastery or at least of its main church?

The earliest of four main stages of construction is a compact building, of rectangular layout, composed of Rooms 14, 4-9, and 13 (the eastern and southern parts are still covered) with a projection to the west comprised of Rooms 10 and possibly 12. Later Room 2 was added. Still later, most probably in the 11th century, the northwestern extension was made, comprising the slightly irregular hall of the two apses (1a,c,d), divided by a double arcade partition (1b). Further to the south, another hall (Room 11) was added with adjoining apse. The fourth phase, which can be dated to the Terminal Christian period, comprised Rooms L.I and L.2 with a low, sloping vault. This indicated perhaps that a kind of ramp or stairway had been constructed here on top of the vault, leading from the western side right to the roof of the complex.

⁴ Both texts refer to the consecration of the Holy Bread and are fuller version of inscriptions nos. G 61a.2/3 and G 61b.2/3 found in the prothesis of the Faras cathedral; cf. J. Kubińska, Prothesis de la Cathédrale de Faras, Documents et recherches, *Revue des Archéologues et Historiens d'Art de Louvain*, IX (1976), pp. 18-24 and 26-27.



KOM H SITE N-W
0.0 0.5 1.0m
OLD DONGOLA 91/92 P.W.

*Fig. 4. Decorated portal in the Monastery on Kom H (Site NW).
Drawing P. Wierzbicki.*

The masonry follows high standards. It comprises decorated arched portals, of which one joining Rooms 1a and 3 is totally preserved (Fig. 4), resembling the best Coptic architecture in Egypt can offer. In the outer walls there were slot-like narrow windows, both in the older and the younger sections of the building. A kind of dais close to the east wall of Room 2 and book(?)shelves in Room 4 (in the niche in its eastern wall) deserve mentioning. Amongst the finds there are fragments of sculptured and painted terracotta window grills.

Part of the Christian cemetery was excavated to the northwest of the Monastery. The position of ten tomb superstructures was mapped (tombs TNWH 1-10), (cf. Fig. 3). The tombs represent two general types: topped with a cross of intersected semi-barrels (TNWH 2-5, 7, 8, 10) and rectangular mausolea with (unpreserved) domes supported on arcades (TNWH 1, 6, 9).⁵ Two tombs were incorporated into the outer wall (TNWH 6 and 10) with parts of the superstructures cut off on purpose.

On site S (Fig. 5) excavations showed that unit S originally comprised only two rooms (S.1 and S.2) attached in the 10th century to the western wall of a massive, red-brick building, thought to be a church. The northern course of this wall was found to be preserved to a height of 1.6 m over the outer foundation level, including a corner of the inner E-W wall of the building. The construction of the wall (identical to that of the

⁵ Somewhat similar tombs are known from Faras, cf. K. Michałowski, *Faras, die Kathedrale aus dem Wüstensand*, Zürich 1967, p. 89.

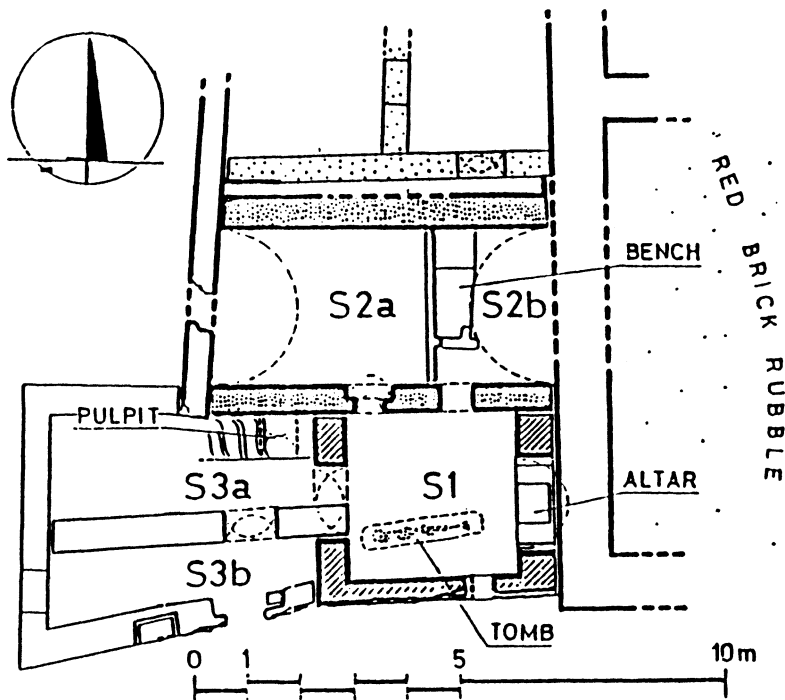


Fig. 5. Monastery on Kom H. Sketch plan of Unit S.
Drawing J. Dobrowolski and S. Jakobielski.

Church of Granite Columns)⁶ can be dated to the early 8th century. Room S.2 was later divided into two smaller units (S.2a and S.2b). An extension was added to room S.1 on the west (room S.3), and was in turn divided into two parts (S.3a, S.3b). It appears to be the dwelling of a single monk, with room S.2b

⁶ P. Gartkiewicz, *Dongola 2, The Cathedral in Old Dongola and its Antecedents*, Warsaw 1991, pp. 89ff.

servicing as his cell and S.1 as a sort of chapel. The structure resembles hermitages usually located outside settlements. It is difficult to say what the reason was for separating this unit from the whole monastic compound.

SITER – POTTERY WORKSHOPS

On Kom R1 three further circular kilns (C, D, and E) were discovered and examined, in addition to the two excavated previously.⁷ Archaeological proof was found for the multiple usage of the same kiln without ashes being completely removed from the hearth. The combustion chambers were simply added to in height. This is evidenced by the positioning of the air tunnels (or control openings), made at increasingly higher levels.

A deep trial pit dug to the south of kiln A (Fig. 6) brought extraordinary stratigraphic evidence. Twenty one recorded strata helped construct a sequence of Early Christian pottery, ranging from the earliest products of the 6th century to 8th century vessels. This matches perfectly with pottery material known from earlier levels of the excavated Dongolan sites: BX (underneath the Cruciform Church), City Walls, the Monastery on Kom D (DM) and the Old Church.⁸ Particularly successful were studies on the development of small hemispherical bowls

⁷ K. Pluskota, Dongola, a pottery production centre from the Early Christian Period, National Museum in Warsaw, *Occasional Paper*, 2 (1991), pp. 34-56.

⁸ Cf. K. Pluskota, Early Christian pottery from Old Dongola [in:] W. Godlewski (ed.), *Coptic Studies. Acts of the Third International Congress of Coptic Studies*, Warsaw 1984, Warsaw 1990, pp. 315-333.

OLD DONGOLA
POL.III EXCAVATIONS 1991/92
SITE R1 KILNS

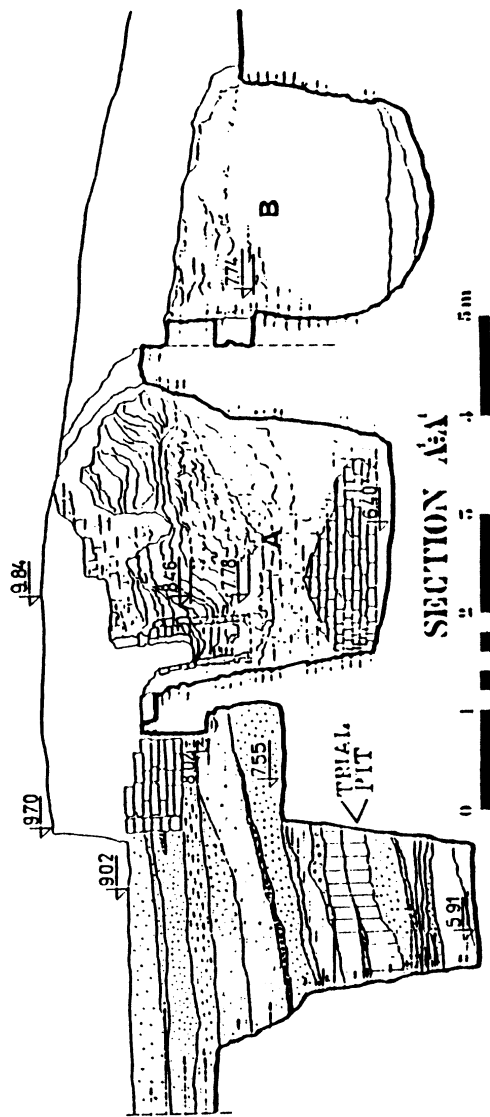


Fig. 6. Site R1, Section S-N through the trial pit and kilns A and B.
Drawing J. Dobrowolski and K. Pluskota.

and amphorae, which can now be precisely dated on morphological grounds (two general types were distinguished).

OTHER SITES

Additional evidence of early pottery was found in the trial pits dug in the casemate reinforcements of the earlier mud brick city walls on Kom B. The earliest Christian pottery material, at the brink of the Transitional Period, was found to be analogous to that from the earliest strata of Kom R1 and site BX.