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Old Dongola: Kom A, 1995

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OLD DONGOLA

KOM A, 1995

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Explorations of Kom A at Dongola were carried out from January 4 to February 16, 1995. The work is a continuation of last season's investigations¹ which led to the identification of two structures connected with the town fortifications: the tower church N.2 (TC) and the pillar building adjacent to the western fortification wall. Both buildings were completely excavated and recorded.

TOWER CHURCH N.2 (TC)

The mud-brick structure was erected on top of the heavily damaged tower N.2 and the fill adjacent to it on the west. This was made possible after the western section of the fortifications between the corner tower N/W and N.2 was developed. New walls were built at the time, reinforced by two towers some 8 m away from the old fortifications; the space in between was filled with debris. The fortifications were extended most probably during the period of Nubian-Mameluke military conflict at the turn of the 13th century. In all probability, the church (Fig. 1) was erected at the same time, probably to help uphold the spirit of the defenders of Dongola. It is a rather large rectangular structure (13.40 x 9.20 m); only in the southern end the walls are preserved to a height not exceeding 1 m. The building was a rather typical Late Period complex² with a central dome supported on four pillars. The apse in the eastern end had the remains of an altar, but no synthronon and was connected with the lateral rooms.

¹ W. Godlewski, Old Dongola. Fortifications, 1994, *PAM VI*, 1995, pp. 93-97.

² W. Godlewski, The Late Period in Nubian art from the middle of the 13th to the end of the 14th century, [in:] F. Geus, *Nubia Thirty Years Later, Pre-publication of the main papers*, Lille 1994, pp. 20-22.

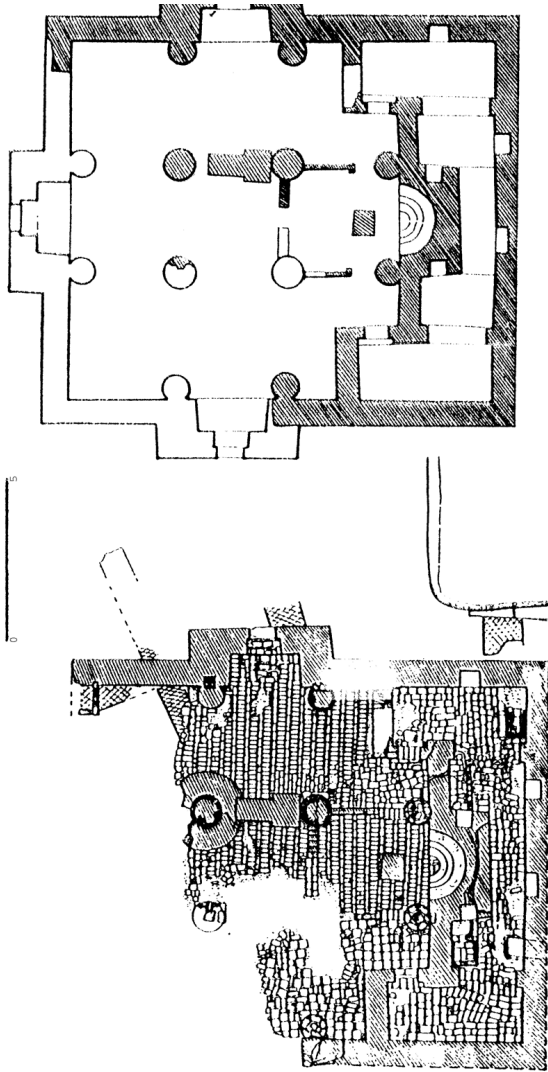


Fig. 2. Pillar Church (1:200). A. Documentation plan. B. Reconstruction of complex.
Prepared W. Godlewski.

The tripartite plan of the interior was preserved in the western end by extended pilasters alone. There was no staircase and no separate corner rooms. The only entrance to the church was from the direction of the city, in the western part of the southern wall.

The Tower Church N.2 is presumably the latest example of church architecture in Dongola as it remained in operation in the 14th and perhaps even in the 15th century. The oil lamps left under a painting on the eastern wall in the southern aisle would indicate that the representation was worshipped even after the church itself had been abandoned.

PILLAR CHURCH (PC)

The fragmentary pillar structure identified last year on a 6th century platform west of the town wall, upon exploration of the part on the eastern side of the fortifications, turned out to be an excellently preserved church. The church walls rise to a height of over 6 m thanks to the fact that in the Post-Christian period the building was included in the system of town fortifications erected beside the original city wall which is preserved here to a height of 6.30 m.

The red-brick structure was built on top of remains of unidentified architecture located on a platform formed on the rocky slope descending to the river.³ The Pillar Church (Fig. 2) was a central-plan structure with the arms of the cross marked insignificantly on the plan and three entrances from the north, south and west. Only the northern entrance is well preserved. The eastern part of the complex, which is the best preserved, consisted of an apse with a synthronon and two L-shaped lateral chambers connected by a passage in back of the apse. An altar has been preserved next to the eastern wall in the prothesis and in the

³ W. Godlewski, The fortifications of Old Dongola. Report on the 1990 season, *Archéologie du Nil Moyen* 5, 1991, pp. 103-128.

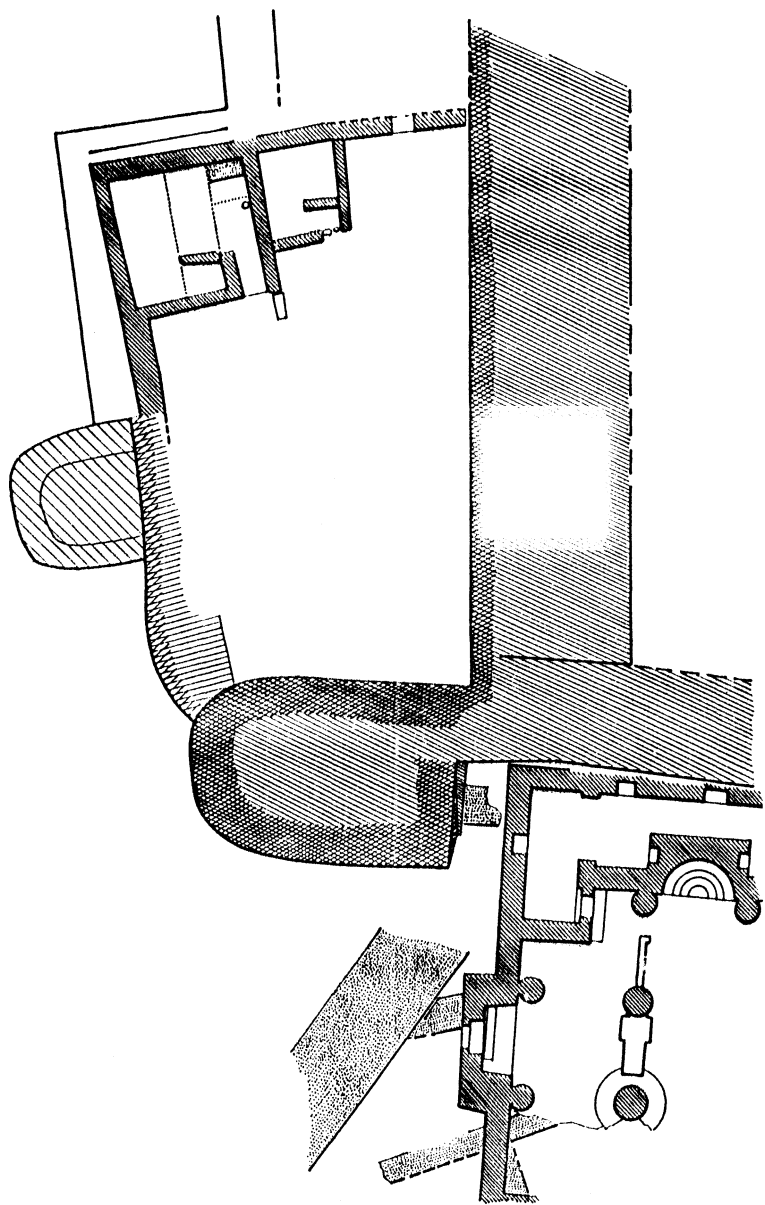


Fig. 3. Dongola fortifications, northwestern section, together with 13th century extensions and the site of the Pillar Church. Prepared W. Godlewski.

diakonikon a small oven for baking Eucharistic bread. In front of the *synthronon* a brick altar has been preserved almost to full height; the space of the sanctuary was marked with parapet wall partitions. The pulpit, of which only the bottom part remains, is attached to the western side of the southern pillar. The liturgical equipment which is so well preserved identifies the function of particular rooms quite clearly indeed.

The four central pillars, and the semicircular wall pilasters, were built of bricks that were specially shaped to create the roundness. A domed ceiling was supported on the central pillars, while the side rooms had barrel vaults.

The dating of the Pillar Church is hardly precise, but to judge by the plan and building technique, it was presumably erected at the turn of the 9th century. The church fits very well into the line of development of Dongola architecture, constituting an important link. The plan reveals clear borrowings from earlier monumental Dongola structures such as the Church of Granite Columns⁴ (two axes, L-shaped plan of the *prothesis* and *diaconicon*) and the Cruciform Church⁵ (arms of the cross marked in the exterior plan, entrances in these arms). The round pillars and pilasters of specially produced bricks are an original idea of the builders of the Pillar Church. This is presumably the first great-dome ceiling to be completed in Dongola and it presumably served as a model for the rebuilding of the Church of Granite Columns which consisted of a central dome being introduced and supported on round pillars.⁶ Thus, the Pillar Church is an excellent example of an architectural idea which matured in Dongola and was later exteriorized in a number of renovations of the largest church complexes in both Dongola and Faras, as well as in many

⁴ P.M. Gartkiewicz, *Dongola 2. The Cathedral and Its Antecedens*, Warsaw 1990, pp. 99-263

⁵ W. Godlewski, *The Cruciform Church at Old Dongola (Sudan). Some Comments*, *Coptic Studies*, Warsaw 1990, pp. 127-137.

⁶ P.M. Gartkiewicz, *Dongola 2. op. cit.*, pp. 285-289

provincial churches renovated extensively in the second half of the 10th and in the 11th centuries. But only in Dongola were the domes supported on round pillars.

WESTERN WALL OF THE FORTIFICATIONS

Only a minor section of the western wall belonging to the original fortifications of Dongola was uncovered (Fig. 3); to a large extent it is covered by the Pillar Church which adjoins it. The wall is 3.60 m thick and is preserved to a height of 6.30 m. It is built of mud brick and set directly on the rocky slope of the kom. Only the bottom part of the outer face (up to 1.5 m) was made of stone blocks.⁷

⁷ W. Godlewski, Old Dongola. The early fortifications, *Proceedings of the 8th International Symposium of Nubian Studies*, Lille 1996 (in press).