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Old Dongola: Kom A, 2001

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OLD DONGOLA

KOM A, 2001

Włodzimierz Godlewski

The excavation was conducted from January 20 to March 2, 2001,¹⁾ and covered two principal sites on Kom A (acropolis): the palace complex (SW.N) in the southwestern part of the town, and the area of the fortifications in the northwestern quarter, where work continued inside the House of the Ecclesiastics (A.106).

1) The Mission was directed by Prof. Dr. Włodzimierz Godlewski and staffed by Dr. Adam Łajtar, archaeologist-epigraphist; Mr. Marek Puzkarski, draftsman; and Mr. Paweł Lisiecki, student of archeology of Warsaw University. The NCAM was represented by Ms Huda Mahgoub.

With the assistance of the authorities of NCAM in Khartoum the fieldwork progressed smoothly and efficiently.

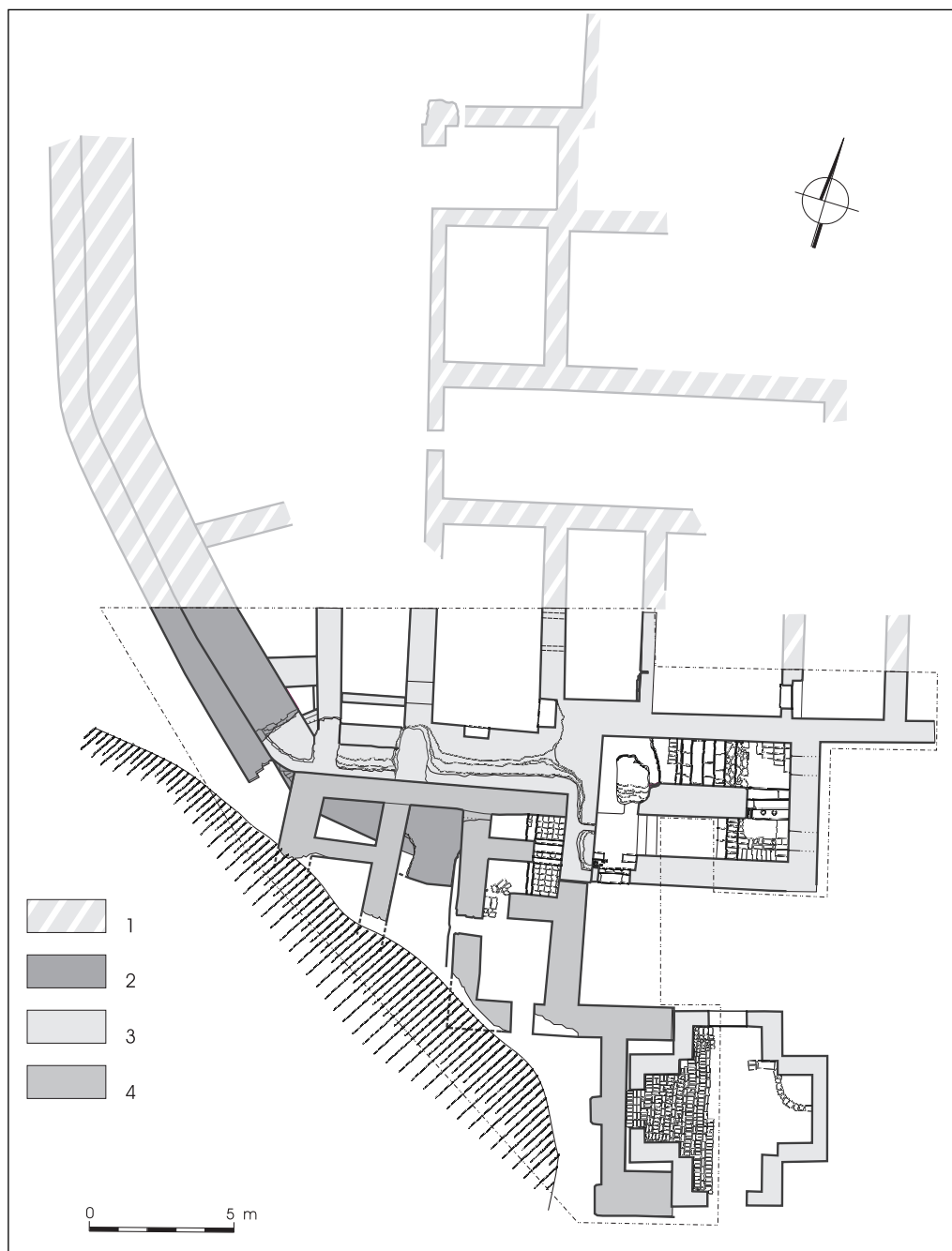


Fig. 1. Site SW.N. Plan of the architecture: 1 - fortifications and structures visible on the surface; 2 - fortifications from the late 5th century(?); 3 - Palace B.I and commemorative Building B.III; 4 - fortifications of the late 13th century (Drawing M. Puzkarski)

SITE SW.N

Work on the site started in 1999, when the stone entrance to Building B.I was identified along with the tops of walls in the southern façade.²⁾ The aim of the current investigations was to gain an understanding of the nature of the architecture in this part of the town and to establish a provisional chronology for the settlement. Explorations covered an area 30.0 by 22.0 m, but an effort to reach foundation levels or original occupational layers was made in only a few chosen sections of the buildings.

The assumption, following this year's research, is that the architecture in this part of the town, presumably connected to some extent with the local river port, came into being in three successive stages. First, the fortifications on the river side were erected, followed by a palace (B.I) and Building B.III in the intermediary stage and B.II in the ultimate one, when

military defenses were constructed in response to the Mamluk wars raging in the last quarter of the 14th century and the sieges that Arab raiders laid to the capital city of Dongola (*Fig. 1*).

FORTIFICATIONS

Excavators followed a wall c. 2.70 m thick for a distance of 23 m. It turned out to be constructed of two parallel structures – an inner one and an outer one, 170 and 100 cm thick respectively – founded on underlying bedrock. The wall presumably paralleled the line of the cliff edge, which is now just about 2 m away from its outer face. It was built of large-sized mudbrick (35-6 x 16 x 7.5-8 cm). Once structure B.I started being built, this wall was incorporated as its western wall. Its southern end was subsequently dismantled. The later building (B.II) from the times of the Mamluk wars was founded on its surviving top surface.



Fig. 2. Site SW.N. Palace building B.I. General view of the site from the southeast (Photo W. Godlewski)

2) W. Godlewski, *PAM XI, Reports 1999* (2000), 204-206.

The trench in room B.I.15 showed that urban architecture, apparently contemporary with the fortifications, had been built against the inside face of the defenses.

The fortifications on site SW.N seem to have fulfilled the same role as the wall abutting the platform in the northwestern part of the town area.³ Neither featured a stone facing and both were apparently designed to protect the town in the general area of the river port. It is assumed that Dongola had two ports – a northern one accessible to the public at large and a southern one, which was more of a private port serving the needs of the later Palace.⁴

PALACE BUILDING B.I

Only the southwestern part of this extensive structure, presumably over 1,000 sq. m, was uncovered in an area where walls survive to a height of as much as four meters (*Fig. 2*). The structure had been erected against the west wall of the fortifications, incorporating it and largely eliminating the southern sections located already in the bay of the assumed port, where also the riverside entrance to the upper floor of the structure (B.I) was to be found. It cannot be excluded that the palace walls were founded on earlier architecture situated in this area and attached to the inner face of the defenses, but the area of the test pit in B.I.15 is so limited that no binding interpretation of the ruins discovered there can be made as yet.

The walls of B.I were built of red brick, mud brick and blocks of sandstone. The mixed building technique based on the application of different building materials has a great deal in common structurally

with the Throne Hall in Dongola.⁵ The outer face of red brick was structurally joined to the mud bricks used on the inside. Sandstone blocks were used to erect the southwestern corner of the building and the entrance in the southern façade along with adjacent sections of the wall (*Fig. 3*). All the inner walls were constructed of mudbrick. Other interesting architectural solutions, like the red-brick vault of the staircase, will presumably come to light as the excavation progresses.

The building had an upper floor, as indicated by the monumental staircase and by rooms of the higher level, partly identified in the eastern end of the trench. The main entrance must have been on the city side, in the part of the palace that has yet to be uncovered. The riverside entrance led directly on to the upper floor of the structure. Not much is known as yet of the interior layout, but enough has been observed to establish the existence of two or more rows of parallel chambers separated by long transversal rooms or corridors. This year only the staircase (B.I.1) and unit B.I.15, which had been used as the depository of toilet facilities on the upper floor, were cleared down to the original occupational level.

One should assume that the staircase (B.I.1) was centered in the southern façade and projected somewhat from the line of the façade. It was a fairly large room, measuring inside 4.15 by 6.95 m and lighted by two windows in the eastern wall. The entrance itself, situated in the southwestern corner of the unit, was 110 cm wide and crowned with wedge-shaped blocks of sandstone (surviving only

3) Id., "The fortifications of Old Dongola. Report on the 1990 Season", *ANM* 5 (1991), 105.

4) Id., "Dongola in the 6th-7th centuries", *African Reports* II (2002), forthcoming.

5) W. Godlewski, S. Medeksza, "The so-called Mosque Building in Old Dongola (Sudan). A Structural Analysis", *ANM* 2 (1987), 185-205.



Fig. 3. Site SW.N. Palace building B.I. Entrance to the staircase, viewed from the south (Photo W. Godlewski)

in the western part). The stone steps of the staircase were quite wide (114 cm) and were supported on red-brick vaults suspended on a central pillar. They survive practically up to the upper floor (3.80 m) – three flights of steps and two landings made of red brick. In size, the palace staircase is comparable with steps surviving in houses A.106⁶⁾ and A⁷⁾ in the northern part of the town and the steps leading to the Throne Hall, which were 180 cm wide, but the stone threads and the red-brick vaults of the staircase in Building B.I suggest an even higher level of structural complexity. In truth, the Throne Hall steps were doubtless more comfortable for those ascending them.

Room B.I.15 was situated in the southwestern corner of the building. Its triangular outline is the effect of the gently curving fortification wall that constitutes its western boundary. Part of it was excavated (at the southern end), chiefly in order to establish when the complex as a whole had been constructed. The fill turned out to be sand mixed with vestigial human excrements and considerable quantities of utilitarian vessels and tableware. In the lower parts the fill was doubtless connected with the early years of Building B.I. Below this, remains of a wall were found attached to the inside face of the fortification wall, representing presumably an earlier, pre-palatial phase in the settlement of this area.

The local tableware forms – chiefly shallow red bowls and plates – resemble closely enough the tableware from house A.106 on site NW and may be dated to the

7th century. Of much greater interest, however, is a set of Egyptian amphorae, imported from Aswan and Mareotis, represented in the fill alongside locally manufactured vessels and mud stoppers stamped with Greek-language inscriptions that should probably be connected with imported amphorae.

Considering the imported amphorae, one can distinguish four major groups.

– ASWAN AMPHORAE (Gempeler, K.713 -720;⁸⁾ Adams, Group A.II, Z.4 -Z.6)⁹⁾

Add.01.170 (*Fig. 4*) H. 62 cm; Dia.rim 8.82 cm; Dia.max. 24 cm. Pink kaolin clay. Neck straight, rounded shoulders, elongated body terminating in low foot. Loop handles. Ribbing all over. Impregnated inside. Monogram (presumably name of the recipient – ΠΙΕΤΡΟΥ) written in white on the upper body and shoulders on one side;

Add.01.273 H. 66 cm; Dia.rim 8 cm; Dia.max. 26.5 cm. Clay as above. Form resembling above, slightly tapering near bottom. Impregnated inside.

– MIDDLE EGYPTIAN AMPHORAE (LR 7; Kellia 174-175)¹⁰⁾

Add.01.162 Dia.max. 25 cm. Nile silt, brown. Upper part of body preserved. Abrupt junction of shoulders. Impregnated inside.

– MAREOTIC AMPHORAE (LR 5-6; Kellia 187-190;¹¹⁾ Gempeler, K.767-768)¹²⁾

Add. 01.291 H. 39.5 cm; Dia. 10 cm. Brown clay. Complete form. Short flaring rim, elongated rounded body, small handles on shoulders. Minor ribbing on shoulders and in the bottom part of the

6) W. Godlewski, *PAM IX. Reports 1997* (1998), 170-179.

7) Id., "Old Dongola 1988-1989. The House PCH.1", *AMN 5* (1991), 82-85, see also figs.3 and 4.

8) R.D. Gempeler, *Elephantine X. Die Keramik römischer bis früh-arabischer Zeit* (Mainz am Rhein 1992), 191-192.

9) W.Y. Adams, *Ceramic Industries of Medieval Nubia* (Kentucky 1986), 540-546.

10) M. Eglouff, *Kellia. La poterie copte* (Genève 1977), 115.

11) *Ibid.*, 118-119.

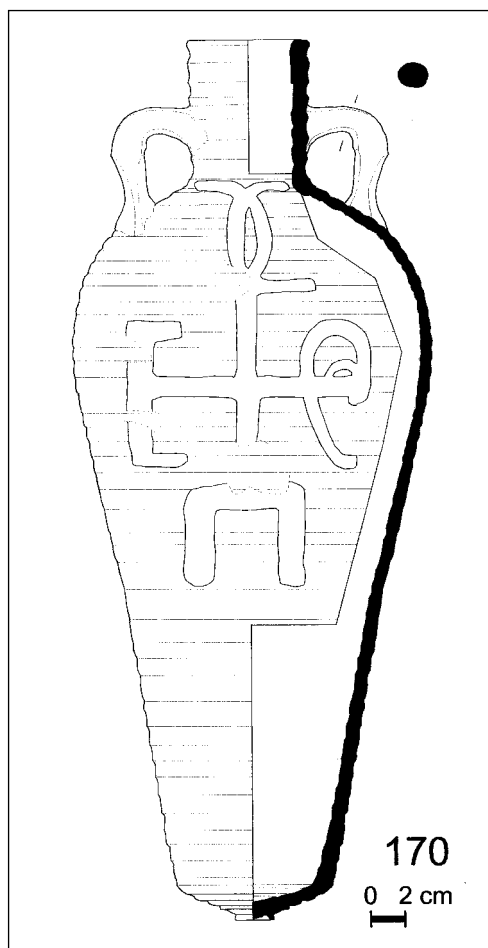
12) Gempeler, *Elephantine X*, op. cit., 200.

body. Impregnated inside. Inscription in Greek inked in black on the shoulders between the handles.

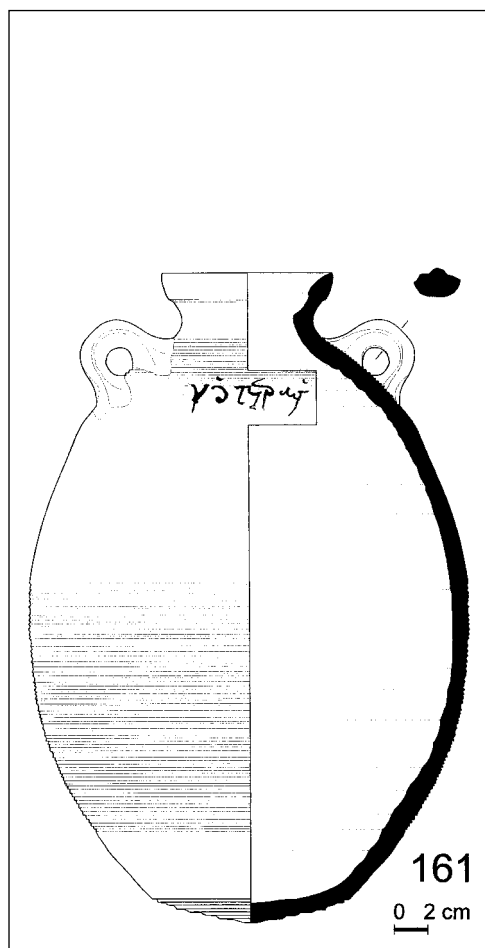
Add.01.161 (*Fig. 5*), Hard pink clay, gray on the inside, beige on the outside. Fragmentarily surviving body with ribbing in the upper and lower parts of the body. Impregnated inside.

- DONGOLAN IMITATIONS OF ASWAN PRODUCTION (Pluskota, A-B;¹³ Godlewski¹⁴)

Add.01.104 H. c. 46 cm; Dia.rim 7 cm; Dia.max. 26 cm. Brown clay. Low straight neck, shoulders gently turning into elongated body on a low foot. Round handles attached to neck and shoulders.



*Fig. 4. Aswan amphora (Add.01.170)
(Drawing M. Puzkarski)*



*Fig. 5. Mareotic amphora (Add.01.161)
(Drawing M. Puzkarski)*

13) K. Pluskota, "The Kiln Sites of Old Dongola", *Dongola-Studien*, ed. S. Jakobielski & P.O. Scholz (Warsaw 2001), 362.

14) Godlewski, *ANM* 5, op.cit., 118.

Ribbing all over. Traces of impregnation inside. On the shoulder, mark "II X II" made before firing.

Add.01.105 H. 57 cm; Dia.rim 7 cm; Dia.max. 27.5 cm. Identical in form with the previous vessel. Traces of impregnation inside. Letter "A" engraved on the shoulder before firing and a monogram in yellow paint with a big sidewise "B" in the upper part of the inscription.

The imported and local amphorae from the fill of room B.I.15 are all to be dated to the middle of the 7th century and they are the first so numerous assemblage of Egyptian amphorae doubtless used for transporting wine. The simultaneous presence of amphorae from the Aswan region, as well as from the Mareotis in northern Egypt is a suggestion of lively trade with the Arab administration of Egypt. It is interesting to note that these types of amphorae were found inside a spacious structure with the traits of a royal palace, while no imported vessels were ever found in the fairly luxurious houses in the northern quarter of Dongola, such as Houses A and B, and House PCH.1, and only sporadic examples of Mareotic amphorae in house A.106¹⁵⁾ in the northwestern corner of the fortifications. It is presumably proof of who benefited from the cooperation with the Arab administration of Egypt that began likely after the failed siege of Dongola by the armies of Abdullah abu Sarh in AD 652.

In the face of these preliminary results of work on site SW.N, the uncovered architecture, that is, buildings B.I and B.III, should be attributed to King Qalidurut, Dongola's defender, while the imported amphorae appear to be a highly explicit effect of the *baqt*, a political and

economic agreement that was signed between the two parties and which guaranteed, among others, the provision of wine from Egypt.¹⁶⁾

BUILDING B.III

The excavation of Building B.III did not progress significantly in view of the surviving wall paintings that require professional preservation treatment immediately upon discovery. In the eastern part of the building, where the walls reach a height of 3.15 m above the floor and the murals appear to be in the best condition, only the tops of the walls were traced. In the western part, the latest floor level was reached and the original walking level tested in places. Here, the wall paintings were preserved in barely fragmentary state.

The small cruciform structure (external dimensions: 7.04 by 7.04 m) with entrances in three of the arms (on the west, north and south) was erected of red brick, each brick measuring 31 x 16 x 7 cm. The arched doorways were 130 cm wide. The northern one is in the best condition of the three; it led to the Palace (B.I) and was at some point neatly blocked with a red-brick wall. The external walls were covered with a coating of hard, coarse lime plaster.

Inside, the central part of the structure was square, measuring 3.34 m to the side, and probably domed. The short arms of the plan opened onto this space. Each arm was 2.32 m wide and barrel-vaulted; traces of the vaults have been found in the eastern one. The maximum span of the interior was 5.74 m, the height of the building exceeding 5 m presumably not by much.

The interior walls were plastered twice. Both sand-and-lime coatings of plaster served as ground for murals, the best

15) Godlewski, *PAM XI*, op.cit., 200-201.

16) W.Godlewski, *The Rise of Makuria, Baqt* (forthcoming).

preserved of which are to be found in the eastern arm of the structure. The earlier representations, on the first plaster layer, are visible partly on the northern vault of the eastern arm, where the later coating has not survived. The bottom part of the composition depicts two figures standing side by side, dressed in courtly attire (a scrap of light-colored mantle is observable) and high black boots (*Fig. 6*). Small colorful flowers on green stems appearing on either side of the feet give the impression of a blossoming meadow.

The second-layer paintings are preserved over a much larger area in the eastern part of the building. Judging solely by the upper parts of murals, the representations in the eastern arm of the

structure included a college of apostles, as in most church apses. One can see a row of heads belonging to figures standing side by side, but without any trace of legends. At the western end of the south wall of the eastern arm there was a representation of two figures of smaller proportions, this again judged solely by the size of what is visible of the heads. One of these faces is dark-complexioned (Nubian), the head being crowned with a small trefoil crown resembling that on the head of a bishop under the protection of an archangel in room 31 of the monastery annex in Dongola (P.54/NW 31.5)¹⁷⁾ and being a close parallel for the crown on the head of a bishop from the sanctuary of the Rivergate Church in Faras.¹⁸⁾ Hence, it is



*Fig. 6. Building B.III. Early wall painting
(Photo W. Godlewski)*

17) M. Martens-Czarnecka, "Wall Paintings discovered in Old Dongola", *Dongola-Studien*, op. cit., 265, pl. XXX.1.

18) F.Ll. Griffith, "Oxford Excavations in Nubia", *LAAA* XIII, 3-4 (1926), 66-69; M. Martens-Czarnecka, "New Look at the Wall Paintings of the Rivergate Church in Faras", *Orbis Aethiopicus*, ed. P.O. Scholz (Albstadt 1992), 369-371.

very likely that a representation of a bishop protected by a saint had been added to the college of apostles in Building B.III. This nicely fits the traditional decoration in apses and prayer niches of churches in Nubia, as well as Egypt.

The latest floor in the building was made of ceramic tiles mounted on a bedding 40 cm thick, filling the interior above the original walking level. Both coatings of plaster on the walls of the structure are associated with the original pavement.

The function of this small domed structure and its dating has not been established beyond doubt during the preliminary investigations. Its localization – 4.20 m south of the palatial building front – and practically the same floor levels in the two structures suggests a relation between them. They may even have been constructed at the same time. The three open arms of the building and its small interior rather exclude its use as a palace chapel, although the college of apostles testifies to the religious character of the structure. It should therefore be considered sepulchral or commemorative in nature. Once the floor has been cleared and any potential underground chambers investigated, this aspect will have been clarified. One thing is already certain – the building was of equal importance to the residents of the palace and to the people of Dongola.

The importance of the structure was emphasized by the way in which the cruciform building, as well as the western façade of the palace were protected with a mud brick defense wall, guarding against a potential attack from the river side in the times of the Mamluk wars of the last quarter of the 14th century. The latest

floor inside the cruciform building also appears to be defensive in nature – it may conceal the entrance to a crypt, if it exists, underneath the building.

There is little evidence for the dating of Building B.III. It may have been erected in the middle of the 7th century just as well as in the 8th. The murals on the original plaster lining the walls of the eastern arm of the building are undoubtedly from an early phase and betray the hand of a talented artist. The landscape character of the background of a fragment of mural (illustrated in *Fig. 6*) finds no parallel in Nubian painting. Similar floral motifs have been recorded inside the bathroom of House A in Dongola, where the murals are currently believed to be earlier than the turn of the 8th century and definitely representing an early stage.¹⁹⁾

Building B.III is interesting yet more in view of the extraordinary penchant exhibited by the Dongolan architectural milieu for buildings on a central plan. It is undoubtedly earlier than the monumental Cruciform Building erected near the Dongolan Cathedral in the 9th century.

BUILDING B.II

This mudbrick structure was erected in front of the facades of B.I and B.III in an effort to defend the buildings against potential damages and to guard the access from the river. It was undoubtedly military in character, intended perhaps for a detachment of soldiers – the palace guard for instance – if the iron fittings of “halberds” can be considered as proof of sorts (*Fig. 7*).

The building is partly destroyed in the southwestern corner, including the founda-

19) W. Godlewski, “The Early Period of Nubian Art: Middle of 6th – Beginning of 9th Centuries”, *Études nubiennes* I, ed. Ch. Bonnet (Geneva 1992), 302-303.

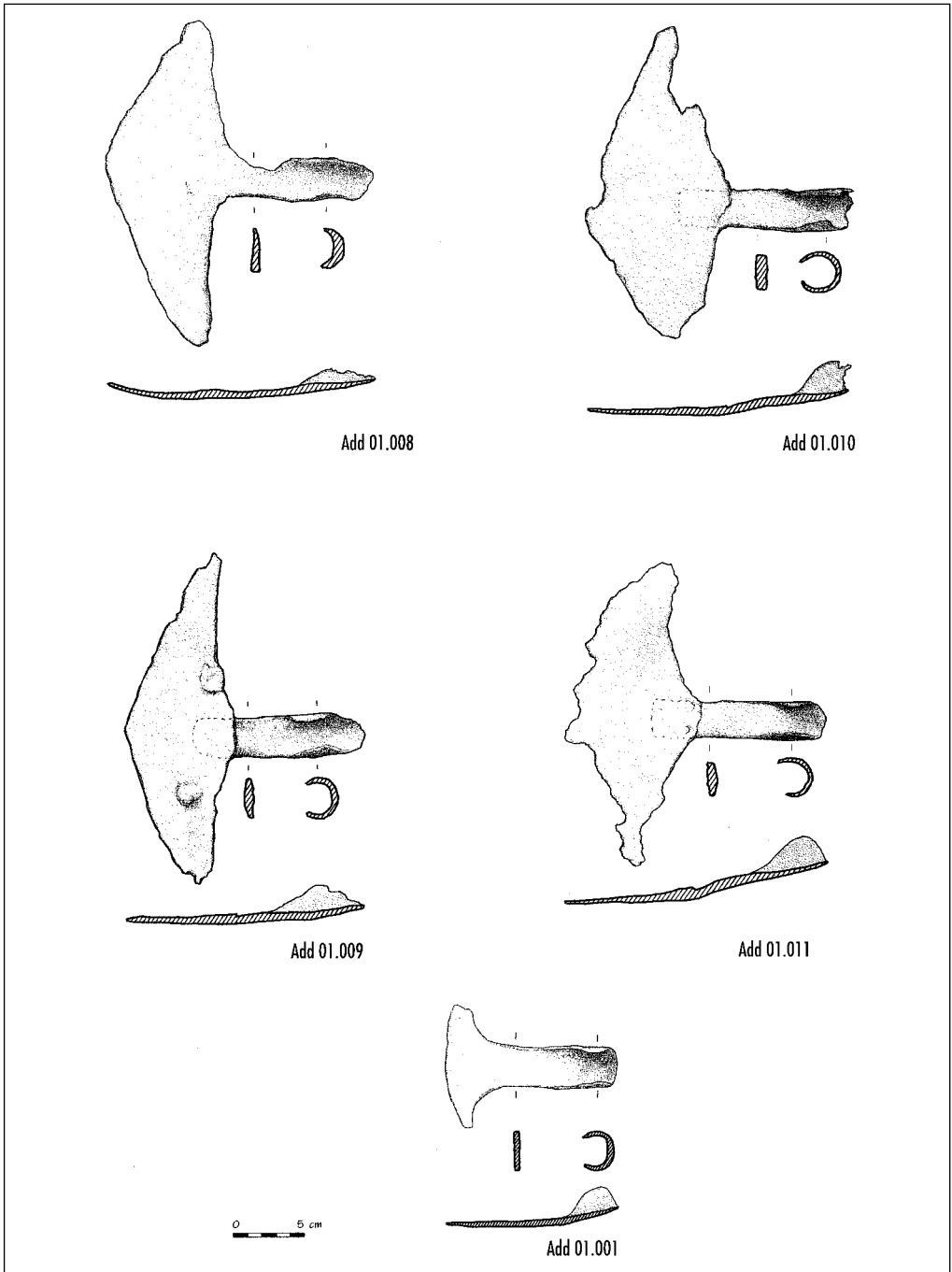


Fig. 7. Site SW.N. Building B.II. Iron "halberd" fittings
(Drawing M. Puzkarski)

tions, even so it must have been a kind of tower, 11.0 by 9.0 m, with a staircase leading up to the upper floor and roof (B.II.5) and four other rooms and massive buttressed walls protecting the western façade of the commemorative structure (B.III).

Local bag-shaped amphorae are a good chronological indicator. Similar amphorae have been found in the North Church²⁰ and are dated to the late 14th century. The present finds include:

Add.01.039 H. 43 cm; Dia.rim 8 cm; Dia.max. 34 cm. Red clay, cream surface. Complete. Short neck, bulging, practically round body, surface plain, small handles attached to rim and base of neck. Small hole on the shoulder. Presumably vessel for storing wine;

Add.01.139 Dia.rim 7.4 cm. Upper part of vessel (preserved H. 13 cm). Gray clay. Short neck and bulging body. Small strap handles on neck.

SITE NW

Excavation in the trench situated in the northwestern corner of the city fortifications had the objective of exploring the stratigraphy inside the fortified town. Work in the eastern part of the trench focused on the actual layout of the southeastern section of house A.106 and on the earlier urban architecture contemporary with the fortifications.

EARLY ARCHITECTURE

Earlier architectural remains were discovered in a few test pits in house A.106, especially in the northwestern corner of room 4, where the foundation of the inside face of the north curtain wall was uncovered (*Fig. 8*, left). The southern face of the north curtain wall, just by the NW tower, recedes slightly toward the top. At a height of 4.50 m the narrowing of the curtain wall – the outer stone face is fairly vertical – reaches c. 40 cm, although this may be partly due to erosion of the face of the mud brick wall. At the bottom the north curtain wall is 5.60 m wide, masking the fortification even more monumental than presumed. It should be remembered, however, that this is the only

spot where the foundation thickness of the wall has been measured so far.

The western wall of room 4 of house A.106 was founded directly on the relics of an older wall joining the curtain wall. It could suggest that the early settlement of the 5th century was also built against the city walls. Under the face of the curtain wall, a wide bench was discovered (2.63 by 0.64 m) alongside two round household bins built of mud brick. Two early occupational layers were distinguished. From the second one, dated provisionally to the mid 6th century, comes an interesting set of ceramic lids decorated with radiate patterns and stylized scrolling-vine motifs (*Fig. 9*).

Vestiges of early settlement were noted all over the trench, but no idea of the layout could be formed at present. The remains are too fragmentary, the walls having been dismantled without surface leveling at the time of the construction of house A.106.

HOUSE A.106

The two-phase nature of the occupation of this house has already been noted in the

20) W. Godlewski, "The North Church in Old Dongola", *ANM* 4 (1990), 51, fig. 13a, Pl. IIIa.

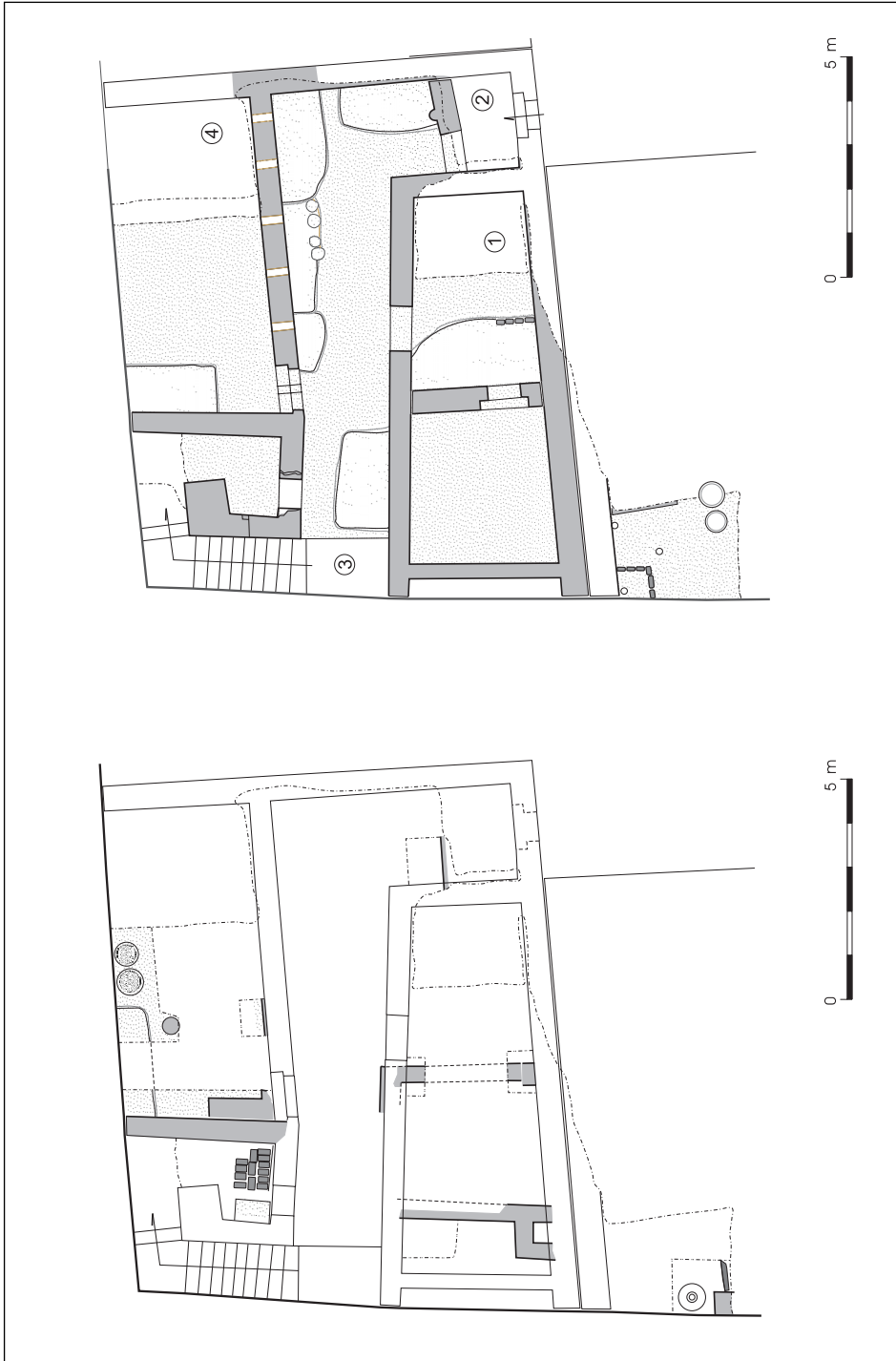


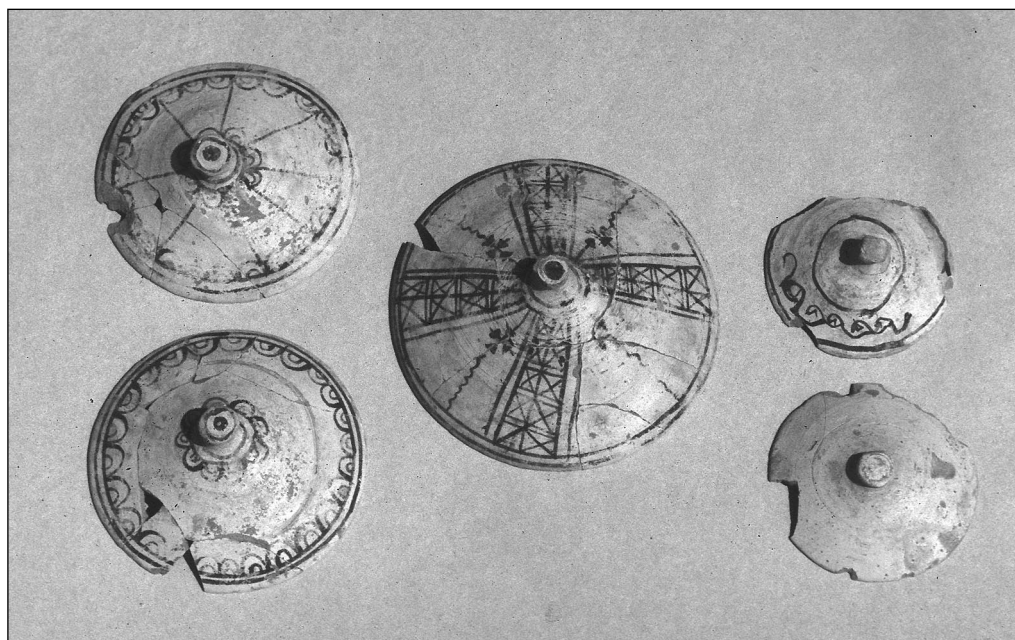
Fig. 8. Site NW. Plan of the early architecture of the 5th/6th centuries (left) and House A.106 in Phase II (Drawing W. Godlewski)

excavation. Current explorations have led to some minor revisions of the known house layout (*Fig. 8, right*). The house was founded on a rectangular plan with 5 rooms on the ground floor: an L-shaped corridor leading to a staircase and two big halls, one on the north and another on the south, the latter containing a narrow space that was set apart in the western end of the room and which served as the depository of toilet facilities on the upper floor. The original entrance to the building was not discovered. This initial phase of the House of the Ecclesiastics, as it has been dubbed, is dated to the first half of the 7th century. It was rebuilt, presumably in the 8th century.

The modifications on the ground floor were connected not only with raising the floor level, but also with a number of interior alterations. A small vestibule was

separated out from the corridor, just by the entrance to the house, in the southeastern corner. A series of benches appeared, lining the walls of the corridor - the oldest in the northeastern corner, followed by ones on the north and south walls next to the landing of the staircase. Amphorae of local manufacture, as well as imported from the Mareotis region (one example) were used in the construction of the benches. The southern hall was divided into two smaller rooms.

Whether the modifications also concerned the upper floor at this time cannot be decided as what has been uncovered in the fill - fragments of walls, window grilles and the base of a roof support - apparently belongs to the original construction and furnishings of the upper floor. House A.106 was abandoned in the 10th century.



*Fig. 9. Site NW. Assorted ceramic lids from the earlier settlement
(Photo W. Godlewski)*