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MtoM: Early Makuria Research Project

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MtoM

EARLY MAKURIA RESEARCH PROJECT

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A new five-year program of studies, referred to by the acronym MtoM, focuses on the beginnings of the Kingdom of Makuria in the region between the Third and Fourth Nile Cataracts (Fig. 1). It will strive to identify the nature of social changes occurring in the area in the 4th and 5th centuries. A core issue to be studied in the program is the way and the circumstances in which Meroitic society (Kush - Meroitic Period) was transformed into Makurian society (Early Makuria). It is believed that the social, political and religious changes taking place in the Nile Valley in the 4th and 5th century should be analyzed and interpreted based on regional evidence limited to the territory occupied in the 6th century by the three separate kingdoms of Nobadia, Makuria and Alodia.

Investigations carried out in the citadel of Old Dongola unearthed fortifications that proved to be no earlier than the late 5th century. Coupled with the work in the extensive cemeteries of Ghaddar, which revealed numerous tumuli from the 5th-6th centuries, belonging to a population of rather average affluence, situated

around two allegedly royal rock-cut tombs of the first half of the 6th century, the Dongola evidence left little doubt that Tunqula, under which designation the capital of Makuria was then known, had not been founded before the first half of the 6th century. Having established this hypothesis, it became only natural to

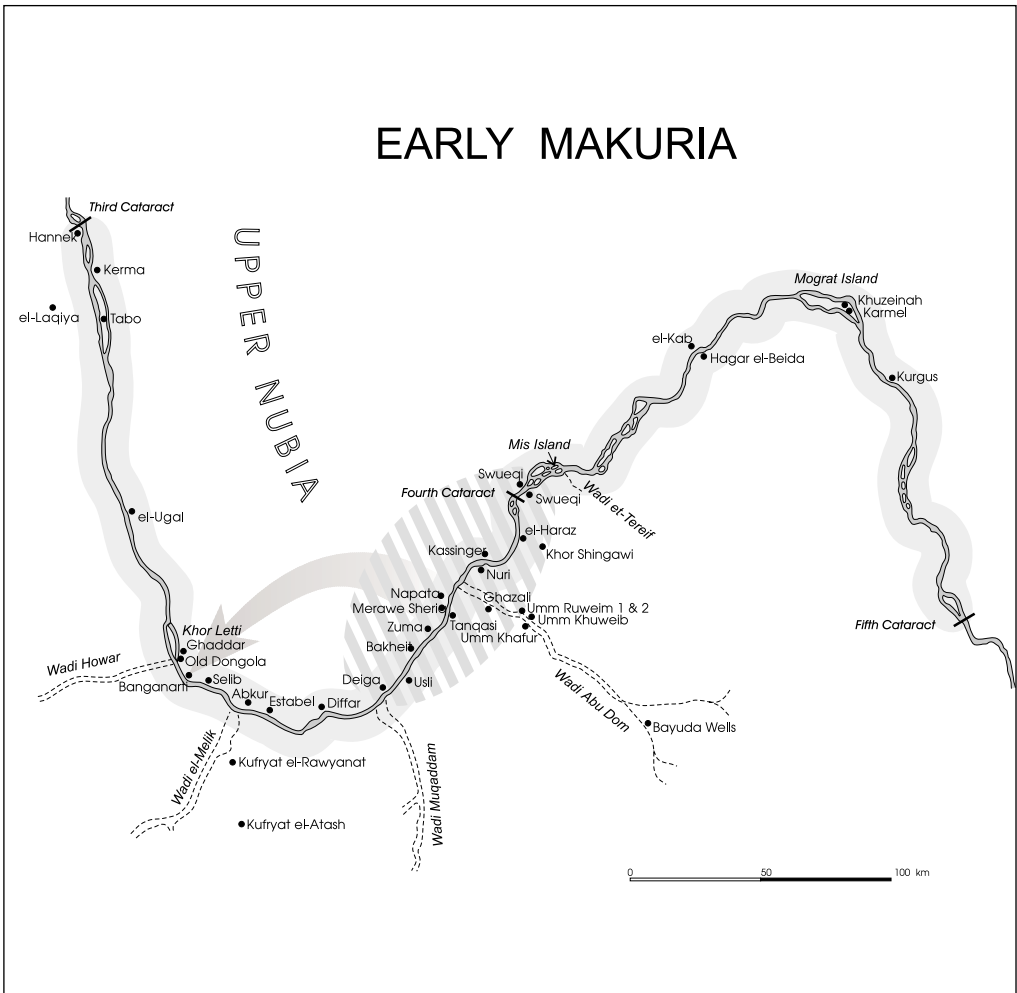


Fig. 1. Map of the Dongola Reach between the Third and Fourth Cataracts (Drawing M. Puzskarski)

search for an older center or centers of the kingdom.

Intensive salvage operations on the Fourth Cataract and a survey of the region between Dongola and ez-Zuma on the east river bank brought attention to the numerous tumuli cemeteries dotting the landscape, as well as a number of fortresses standing on the Nile, all of which have been dated provisionally to the period of Early Makuria.

Fortifications in the region of the Fourth Cataract, at Swueqi East and Swueqi West [Fig. 2], and likewise the fortresses north of Karima, i.e., Bakheit and ed-Deiga, not to mention a number of others lying south of Swueqi and in the Karima area, e.g. Merawe Sheriq [Fig. 3], plus complexes of big tumuli in ez-Zuma and Tanqasi, suggest that the earliest center of Early Makuria was located most likely in the vicinity of Kushite Napata. While the above hypothesis is hardly a ready description of changes in this region based on already recorded archaeological evidence and should be construed more as a keynote formulation of the research program, one thing appears to be beyond any doubt: The appearance of fortifications in the region of the Fourth Cataract is closely linked with numerous tumuli cemeteries preserved all over the area. The observed high technological parameters of pottery production, iron smelting, architectural construction and building materials merit a serious reconsideration of the nature of social changes that were taking place in the region at the turn of the 4th century. On one hand, the Late Kushite population in the area appears to have been relatively sparse in the face of a substantial influx of newcomers, although we cannot say at this point how long this process was in the making. On the other hand, the crafts and industries demonstrate a continued high standard of

proficiency, while there is at the same time a break in the burial tradition and a presumed cessation of Kushite religious practice, even if we still lack any actual evidence of when the Kushite temples were abandoned. It is felt, more by intuition than from the sources, that the period during which a new social reality and new organizational forms were being established, leading in effect to the founding of the Kingdom of Makuria, was relatively short and most lively apparently in the neighborhood of Napata. A working hypothesis drawing on the above observations assumes an understanding between the Kushite elites and the tribal aristocracy of the incoming peoples, presumably the Red Noba, opening the way to quick organizational changes and the building of a system of territorial control and protection of economic resources, accomplished through the construction of small citadels and military camps. This organized territorial defense, most clearly visible today in the archaeological record, met two principal requirements: protecting the borders and ensuring internal security. It is likely that this presumed understanding achieved among the elites and the balance of power prompted a quest for new ideological solutions, that is, adopting Greek as the language of official communication and searching for a new religion to justify the new power system and new uniform society in the building. Not the least were the perspectives for development offered by ties with Byzantium.

The first stage of the MtoM research project has focused on sites in the Karima region: the cemeteries at ez-Zuma and Tanqasi, and the fortified settlement at Merowe Sheriq. The promising results of current work at Swueqi should doubtless help in achieving more fully the goals of the program.



Fig. 2. The fortress at Swneqi (Photo W. Godlewski)



Fig. 3. The architecture in Merawe Sheriq (Photo A. Obłuski)