

Archeological salvage missions in the region of the Fourth Nile Cataract

# Racing to Save the Past



**Dr. Bogdan Żurawski** directs archeological work in Umm Saffaya, Shemkhiya, and Esh-Shellal in the region of the Fourth Nile Cataract in Sudan

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**In four years of salvage work in the region of the Fourth Nile Cataract, Polish archeologists have discovered and studied many artifacts of the Nubian culture. These objects have enabled them to reconstruct the history of these territories, abounding in dramatic events**

In 1960, UNESCO Director-General Vittorino Veronese made a dramatic “appeal to the nations of the world” to participate in a campaign to rescue the relics of

Lower Nubia endangered by the construction of the Aswan Dam. Now, fifty years later, his entreaty is again apt and all that has changed is the place: a new dam is being built in the region of the Fourth Nile Cataract in Sudan, 550 km from Aswan. This dam is to be somewhat lower than its Egyptian counterpart, and the reservoir, which will start to be filled in 2008, is to be almost three times smaller, since the river drop here is several times greater than on the flat area above Aswan.

Fifty years ago, the relics of Lower Nubia were rescued from flooding by a joint operation undertaken by archeologists from all over the world, including a mission from Warsaw University’s Center of Mediterranean Archeology in Cairo led by Prof. Kazimierz Michałowski. This team

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Gold mine in Wadi el-Akhla. Centuries ago gold was obtained by crushing rocks into powder in stone mortars, now the same work is done using Chinese crushing machines





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Bird's-eye-view  
of the fortress  
in Dar el-Arab

wrote the most illustrious chapter in the history of Polish Mediterranean archaeology.

Now the situation is somewhat different. *Noblesse oblige*, Poland, as befits a "Nubiological superpower," has sent three archeological salvage missions to the region of the Cataract. Two of them work under the auspices of Warsaw University's Center of Mediterranean Archaeology, while the third has been organized by the Archeological Museum in Gdańsk.

### Fortress at the end of the world

The two missions of the Center of Mediterranean Archaeology conducted archeological salvage investigations on Saffi and Uli Islands in January 2004, and in December started full-scale work in the area under the concession granted to the Center. From the very outset the large and culturally diverse Polish concession area was divided into two parts. The investigations downriver (Es-Sadda, Hagar el-Beida, El-Gamamia) were headed by Dr Marek Chłodnicki, while upriver work (Umm Saffaya, Shemkhiya, Esh-Shellal) was led by the present author.

In February 2005, following an agreement with the British mission, we conducted archeological and anthropological research as well as geodesic measurements in the area of the fortress in Dar el-Arab, a huge and well preserved stronghold. Along with a twin fortress on the left bank of Nile, it used to efficiently control traffic on the river.

Bird's-eye-view images taken in 2003 greatly facilitated the planning and execution of investigations. The Polish salvage work in Dar el-Arab has verified theories as to the time when the fortress chain in the Middle Nile valley was constructed. It was previously believed that this enormous building effort was associated with the establishment of strong, centralized rule based on a new religion - Christianity. Presently, however, after studying pottery and radiocarbon analyses we are inclined to link the erection of these fortresses with the late pagan period. These strongholds were likely built by newcomers who introduced a new type of barrow tomb and a new burial ritual into the Middle Nile valley in the 5th/6th century. As the area became Christianized the fortresses came to contain churches, which in medieval mentality played a role of sacral protectors of the walls and people.

The salvage excavations of 2005 also encompassed a cemetery dating back to the first period of the fortress's existence, on the west slope of the fortress hill. The dead were buried in earth filled graves with their heads sheltered under a brick construction. In this cemetery a beautiful bronze encolpion with a receptacle for relics was found. A small necropolis also existed inside the walls of the fortress. Those buried here must have held significant positions in the local church or secular hierarchy, since rules of custom and cannon forbid *intra muros* burials.



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Shemkhiya, where Polish archeologists studied barrow cemeteries

Three tombs, at least one of which must have had a splendid tombstone, were surrounded by a wall connected to the existing fortification - thus giving the fortress its final shape, consisting of two courtyards, lower and upper. The final reconstruction involved extending the corner tower and building atop it a mud-brick church covered on the outside with baked bricks. The church outlasted the fortress. It was not until the 20th century that it was pulled down, although it had not been used as a place of prayer for over 500 years; churches, as places where God's shadow had fallen, commanded respect regardless of which religion they served.

**Saffi Island**

The excavations on Saffi in 2004-2005 led to a breakthrough in our perception of the region of the Fourth Cataract as a refugial area, isolated from the rest of the world, where archeological cultures developed independently of major trends. It came as a great surprise when a significant number of Egyptian imports were found in the graves from the so-called Kerma period (2500-1500 BC).

At least three complete vessels from the graves dating back to the Kerma period found in the cemetery denoted Saffi 23 unquestionably came from Egyptian workshops, e.g. from the Fayum oasis. It appears that trade routes in the second millennium BC must

have passed through the Fourth Cataract. Trade with Egypt was probably conducted by land, using the Korosko-Abu Hamed shortcut, where the English established the famous Sudan Military Railway in the 19th century. Like the whole region of the Cataract, Saffi experienced intensive development at 2500-1500 BC, and then after some stagnation it saw an influx of settlers from the south populating the area again in the post-Meroitic period (mid-4th to mid-6th century AD).

**Gold rush in the Gurgirib mountains**

The archeological landscape of the Fourth Cataract is strewn with stone mortars, used not for grinding flour but for crushing rocks into powder to extract gold. While there were few such mortars in the region of Saffi and in the vicinity of Dar el-Arab, more and more of them were to be found as research proceeded upriver. This is not surprising given that the region of the Fourth Cataract and particularly Shemkhiya, where the mission moved after completing work on Saffi Island, has been known for centuries as one rich in gold.

Our last campaign in Shemkhiya gave us a glimpse of what gold mining might have looked like in the times of the pharaohs. After arriving at the site and unpacking our gear we discovered that there were no men in the village of El-Meghera who could



be hired for excavation work – they had left due to a gold rush that had broken out in the Gurgirib mountains.

The gold-digger settlement is situated on the road running along the Wadi el-Akhla bed, approximately 7 km from the Nile. When visiting in December 2006, before the settlement came into view we could hear the noise of hammers used by squatting men to crush lumps of rock. The only element of the scene reminding us that we were in the 21st century AD, rather than the 21st century BC, was a Chinese combustion engine coupled to a crushing machine grinding rocks broken down by hand into powder. In earlier centuries this work had been done in the big stone mortars found in great numbers in the area.

### Kerey, Shenkir, Shemkhiya

Given the absence of written records, the task of reconstructing the history of Shemkhiya falls to archeologists. According to the French Egyptologist Jean Vercoutter, the region around Abu Hamed was in the past called *kry* (Kerey?). From the times of Thothmes III to those of Ramses II the land of *kry* is often mentioned as the southern boundary of Egypt. It is possible that the name has something in common with the etymology of the name of the largest city in the Fourth Cataract – Karima. The fact that *kry* was an area rich in gold is confirmed in the stele of Pharaoh Amenhotep III found in his tomb shrine, which says that a sacred barge was built from the gold obtained from *kry*.

Not much can be said about the history of Shemkhiya in the times of Christian kingdoms. In 1951 the British archeologist O.G.S. Crawford posited the thesis that Shemkhiya/Shamkhiya was the region of gold mines once known as Shanka.

Crawford stressed, however, that at that time (1950) no trace of gold mines in Shamkhiya had ever been found. That is no longer the case, as Polish work in Shemkhiya shows that gold has been extracted there from primeval times. The British archeologist evidently was not aware of the import of his statement, not realizing that by identifying Shemkhiya with Shanka and Shenkir he was resolving the mystery of a lost Nubian bishopric that had been mentioned by 17th-century German preacher and traveler J.M. Wansleben, in his *History of the Alexandrian*

*Church* published in Paris in 1677. It is a pity Crawford was apparently unfamiliar with this document, as Wansleben quotes a list of Nubian bishoprics subordinate to the Alexandrian patriarch. He writes that there were seven bishoprics in the province of Makuria, six of which are known. The seventh, Shenkir, has so far remained unidentified.

### Amazons from Shemkhiya 5

Gold was not the only source of Shemkhiya's wealth. The region is rich in arable areas situated along the riverbank zone. The flooded areas of Nile oxbow lakes were the site of basin cultivation, characteristic for Nubia.

It appears that the best conditions for settlement existed in the second millennium BC – the period when most barrow cemeteries, a characteristic element of today's archeological landscape, date back to. Around 1500 BC the population in the region began to decline for unclear reasons. Another stage of settlement is associated with the late Meroitic period. Around the mid-4th century BC the region saw an influx of well organized ethnic groups from the south, burying their dead in barrows in a contracted position on their left side with their head turned southward and face turned westward.

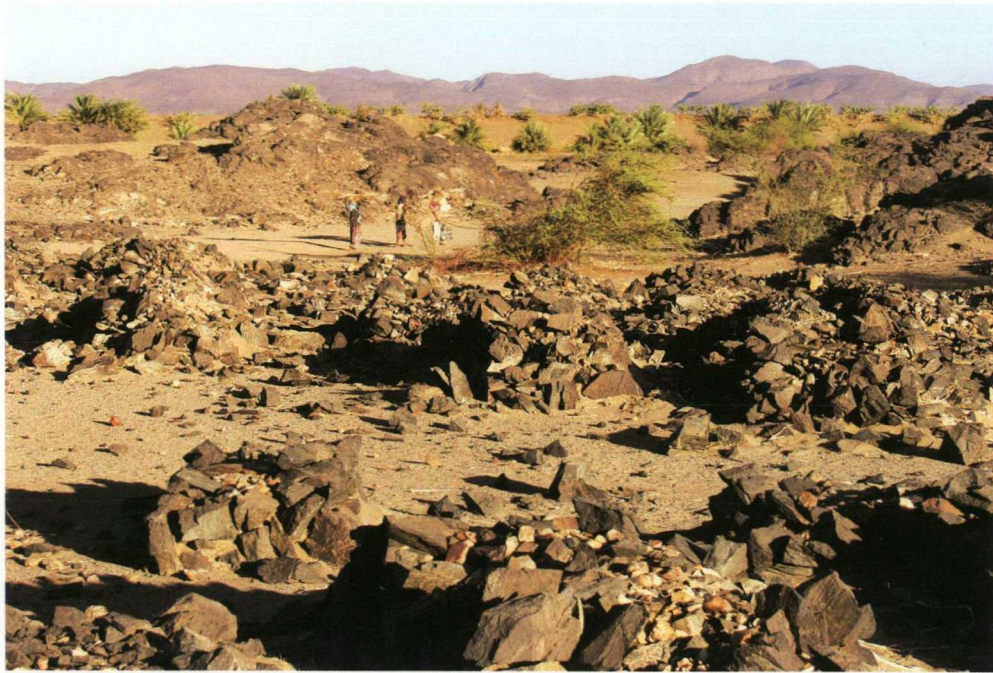


A stone thumb ring  
(for use with a bow)  
from grave no. 17  
in the Shemkhiya  
5 cemetery



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Christian cemetery in the village of El-Ar. Centuries ago nearby mighty strongholds protected the largest groups of Christians in the vicinity



Bogdan Żurawski

The presence in the graves of perfume bottles balsamaria, the lack of animal offerings and characteristic pottery found in the graves suggest that these people had previously lived on the outskirts of the great Meroe civilization, which was always open to the influence of Mediterranean culture. Traces of these settlers are found at a number of cemeteries in Shemkhiya, including the cemetery denoted Shemkhiya 5.

In fifteen graves excavated, we found twelve burials of women and children and only two male graves. Why such a disproportion? It is most likely associated with traditional male roles in society - men would travel away with caravans to ports on the Red Sea, to Egypt, or southward, where the Meroe civilization was then in decline.

A bit later Shemkhiya was reached by groups of much less civilized nomads. Many traces of healed or unhealed wounds, broken bones, and head injuries among the dead buried in Shemkhiya 5 indicate that relations between the two groups were rather hostile.

### Christians from Shenkir

Such was the situation in the region of Shenkir/Shemkhiya when Christianity arrived there. The location of the bishopric is not very clear - it was presumably situated in one of fortified settlements on Nile.

Judging by the sizes of the nearby cemeteries, most Christians lived in the fortresses near the present-day villages of El-Ar and El-Meghera. There are still approximately 1,000 stone tombs in the cemetery near El-Ar. They are still covered with layers of round white stones, placed on the graves during funerals.

Gold-abundant Shemkhiya was very carefully guarded, the next fortress being situated 5.5 km upriver in El-Meghera. Judging by the pottery found inside its walls, we can conclude that it was erected in the 6th/7th century AD, though subsequently rebuilt several times. During the period when the Shaigiya tribe dominated the region, musket openings were added to the fortress and it was probably then that a mosque was constructed inside, replacing the church.

The local cemetery contains the earliest Christian graves in the area, situated next to the barrows of Shemkhiya's last pagans. ■

#### Further reading:

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