



METAMORPHOSIS HIDDEN IN THE SAND



Dorota Dzierzbicka and Lorenzo de Lellis discuss the expansion of excavation work.

Dr. Artur Obłuski of the University of Warsaw tells us about research into political, social, and religious transformations in Sudan in the Middle Ages, the present-day importance of archaeological discoveries, and the meaning of the word “UMMA.”

Artur Obłuski, PhD

is a scholar of late antiquity and the medieval period in the Nile Valley and a Nubiologist. President of the International Society for Nubian Studies (ISNS), acting director of the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology (PCMA) at the University of Warsaw, and director of the PCMA Research Centre in Cairo, Egypt. His interests include the rise and fall of states, settlement systems in antiquity and the medieval period, and the functioning and planning of ancient and medieval cities. In 2017, he received a Starting Grant funded by the European Research Council (ERC).
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ACADEMIA: You continue the great tradition of Polish excavations at Dongola in Sudan, represented by several generations of Polish archaeologists: Prof. Kazimierz Michałowski and Dr. Stefan Jakobielski. Is that a burden or an encouragement?

ARTUR OBLUSKI: Definitely an encouragement. I think that I'm in an easier situation, because such prominent individuals have paved the way for me. Their success certainly encourages one to work hard. Of course, it would be great to reach the level of Dr. Stefan Jakobielski, who conducted excavations at Dongola for over forty years. He has been nicknamed "Mr. Old Dongola" in the international community. Above all, he made great discoveries, for example the monastery on Kom H, which was probably called the Monastery of St. Anthony the Great by Nubians. The paintings from the monastery are undoubtedly something that can't be found anywhere else in the world. This discovery will be one of the main arguments in favor of the Dongola archaeological site being listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in the near future. All this thanks to a Polish scholar – it's impossible not to take pride in that.

Today's archaeology differs from the archaeology of the 1960s, back when Stefan Jakobielski started his excavations. How has the field changed?

Today, we face completely different challenges than we did back when there were only several granite columns of a church sticking out of the ground. Back then, there was a small group of "madmen" prepared to spend several months off in Africa, isolated from the world. Today, excavations are conducted by huge interdisciplinary teams. This January, I'm taking thirty-one people there: archaeobotanists, archaeozoologists, wood specialists, conservators, and so on. In addition, we need – and want – to work with the local

community. In order to make sure that the site is safe and the local authorities also look after it, we need to engage in dialogue and make the local community aware of the importance of what they have. The people out there must realize that this is their great heritage, and it may prove useful to them. Unfortunately, that's not common knowledge yet.

Dr. Jakobielski discovered and examined places of worship. The team you lead will examine their transformation from Christian places of worship into Muslim ones. Is that the purpose of your project?

Yes. It's the first excavation season as part of the project titled "Urban Metamorphosis of the community of a Medieval African capital city," or UMMA, funded by an ERC grant. It pertains to the transition period that usually occurs between cycles of civilization: after an initial period of formation, a state or civilization usually enters its heyday, traditionally referred to as its golden age, and then ultimately heads towards decline. But the demise of one state paves the way for the beginning of new states, just like the fall of the Western Roman Empire marked the emergence of states in medieval Europe. We will study the period between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries. We know from historical sources that between 1364 and 1366 the king of Makuria decided to leave the capital and moved with the royal court to a place called Daw, which should be identified with Gebel Adda – a fortified settlement once situated near Faras, also excavated by Polish archeologists. The move resulted from the royal family's strong links to the tribe Banu Kanz, which controlled the territory of Lower Nubia.

Another account related to Old Dongola comes from the beginning of the sixteenth century. According to Leo Africanus, it was a very well-developed city inhabited by 10,000 families. That number is probably exaggerated. When we interpret historical sources, we must remember that a number cited in the thousands generally means "a lot," rather than a specific number. Nevertheless, it must have been inhabited by several thousand people, and the city flourished thanks to very intensive trade contacts with the whole of the world. There are sources saying that Venetian merchants actually maintained a trading post in Old Dongola. As part of my research, I'd like to find an answer to the question of how the local community in Old Dongola managed when the king's court left the city and moved elsewhere. Were social bonds retained when such a great part or even the whole of the elite left or were they replaced by a new network of bonds? What caused the city to flourish again after 100-150 years? The moment also coincided with a change of religion – the inhabitants' conversion from Christianity to Islam, under the influence of missionaries from the Arabian Peninsula who came to the territory of today's



Sudan. One of them was Ghulam Allah, who set up a Quranic school in Dongola at the beginning of the fifteenth century. Thanks to him, we know that Dongola became an important Islamic religious center.

Are there any written documents left that you can analyze?

Yes. They also say that this was more or less when Arab tribes migrated to areas near Dongola or even to Dongola. Those tribes may have been one of the reasons why the king and the court moved north. That's what historical sources say, but archaeology has the advantage of being able to corroborate or refute such claims. We want to see if there was indeed any great movement of people, because migration theories are a very popular way to explain every political change, but they are not necessarily true. Also, we intend to examine the course and pace of the change of religion in the Dongola region.

How do you intend to examine this?

Above all by exploring residential architecture. If a state adopts or converts to a religion, this means that it is adopted in the first place by the elite, the royal court. That is visible in the political history of kingdoms also in Europe, for example in Poland. At a certain point, a king decided to become a Christian monarch, because he wanted to enter the sphere of contacts, knowledge, power, and authority on the whole of the Continent, otherwise he would always be treated as worse. However, that does not mean that entire societies automatically converted to Christianity

Therefore, I've hypothesized that we will know that people actually converted to Islam once we see evidence of the change of religion at the level of house-

holds in Dongola. For example, if we discover fragments of the Quran or what are now very popular talismans in the form of small leather cases called *hijbat*. They were used in the period of the dominance of both religions. In the Islamic period, however, people would put pieces of paper with Quranic verses inside those talismans. Of course, we will also look for other evidence to prove that people converted to a different religion. We would like to pin down that moment and examine the course of that change.

Has the residential district been already unearthed?

The site looks as follows: there is an around five-hectare citadel surrounded by huge walls, now completely buried, and the whole of agglomeration is, by my estimate, around 200 hectares. This was a city that emerged in the sixth century and was several times larger than large European cities of the time, definitely larger than Polish cities, even in the late Middle Ages.

Excavations have been made in various parts, but I estimate that they have covered a mere 2 percent of that agglomeration. For example, in the 1960s, before Stefan Jakobielski managed to explore the churches, he had to dig through later layers, and those layers already included houses from the period we will be now studying.

We're in for a lot of work, so we have set up as many as four archaeological teams for this purpose. They consist of young researchers interested in Nubian studies who are now writing their doctoral dissertations. I am particularly proud of those people, I have yet to see a more hardworking and better coordinated team, despite the fact that it consists of researchers from seven countries. We will be trying to uncover as

Remnants of Dongola's urban fabric from the eighteenth century.



Maciej Wyzgoł during exploration.

much of the city as possible to have as much data as possible to either prove or disprove the hypotheses we stated at the beginning of our project. For example, the animal bones we find will give us certain grounds for saying whether a change of religion occurred, and if so, then when.

On what basis?

We know that it's forbidden to eat pork in Islam. So if we see that swine disappeared at a certain point, we will be able to assume that the people became Muslims, and Islam was rooted in their awareness. If people follow religious practices, this means they already believe in them, otherwise their conversion may be superficial.

What researchers are included in the team?

The core is formed by the staff from the University of Warsaw's Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, because the ERC grant has made it possible to employ them for at least five years. But we also have researchers from abroad, including Salima Ikram, a Pakistani scholar who lectures at the American University in Cairo, one of the most prominent authorities on archaeozoology elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, whose members include all American Nobel Prize winners. A large and important part of the team is formed by Italian archaeologists like Lorenzo de Lellis, a gem of an archaeologist found thanks to an open search. Archaeobotany will be the responsibility of Menna el-Dorry, who is Egyptian. The fieldwork team is coordinated by Dorota Dzierzbicka, one of the best if not the best emerging star archeologists in Poland, if we can use such an expression in science.

Archaeobotany means the study of ancient plants?

Yes. Its inclusion is absolutely necessary, because, as I said, a change of religion is accompanied by a social change, for example in dietary habits. That's the new archaeology, in which we can piece together a very detailed picture of the past. Previously, archaeology focused only on spectacular things: temples and palaces.

Will you also explore cemeteries?

Exploration of Muslim graves is a very delicate issue, and we respect the position of our Sudanese colleagues. However, the matter is not set in stone, we are holding talks. For example, we expect burials from the transition period, and it is unclear in what religion those ceremonies were performed. The same holds true for graves from the transition period between Paganism and Christianity. From this period, we know graves with graves goods that were absent from Christian graves, but there also was a cross drawn on the wall of such graves. If we receive a permit, we would like to explore the oldest graves. If not, we will focus on the exploration of cemeteries – the latest Christian graves to study the decline of that culture.

I understand that your work is based on an agreement with the government of Sudan. Is there a chance that interesting discoveries or objects will be shown in the Polish National Museum?

Of course. The PCMA has an agreement with Sudan's National Corporation of Antiquities and Museums. It grants us the right to conduct excavations at a given site. All excavation directors sign such agreements every year. It's very likely that such monuments will be shown in Poland, because, unlike other nations, the Sudanese promote their own culture by organizing exhibitions in foreign museums and galleries, so loaning exhibits does not pose a great difficulty. Another advantage is that the International Society for Nubian Studies has granted the University of Warsaw the right to organize the International Conference for Nubian Studies in 2022, a major event that will attract the most prominent experts from all around the world. We also want to use the Conference as an opportunity to organize an exhibition or even a series of exhibitions showing the whole of Polish excavation work in Sudan, not only the excavations conducted by the University of Warsaw but also those conducted by the Institute of Mediterranean and Oriental Cultures of the Polish Academy of Sciences and archaeological museums from Poznań and Gdańsk, because all those institutions have also made great discoveries and achieved great successes.

What is the amount of funding you have received for your project from the ERC? Will it be enough to cover all the costs?

DR. ARTUR OBŁUSKI

The ERC Starting Grants equal 1.5 million euros, a not inconsiderable amount. With such a large site, however, we could use an amount three times as large. In addition to the grant, I would like to stress a very good policy on the part of the Polish Ministry of Science. ERC grants are mobile, which means they can be transferred to different universities in Europe during the implementation of the project. The Ministry adds additional funding to this 1.5 million euros in order to keep the head of the project and his/her team in Poland. In addition, it is very important that I have huge support from the university's governing bodies. So it looks like we will manage.

Was the application process difficult? Did you receive any support?

Starting Grants are individual grants, so I had to write the application alone. But the University helped me a lot to prepare for the interview in Brussels later on. I had two test panels, during which I was questioned intensively by recognized Polish scientists, and this was indeed useful, because I changed my presentation three times. I also know that there is a special unit at the PAS that helps apply for grants, because I was also on the other side – this time, I was the person who asked questions to applicants. In my opinion, the most important thing is the concept of research, its attractiveness and consistency with international scientific trends, plus the applicant's accomplishments.

What convinced the ERC to fund the UMMA project?

The main argument is that we are laying the foundations for new research, we are in fact creating a new

discipline. In principle, almost no one has been interested in the period we are studying. It was initially believed that this was a period of decline, of diminished culture, no longer the golden age. But the project is about social transformation. Another argument that may have tipped the scales is related to the fact that we, the European civilization, are currently on the threshold of a great social transformation as well.

What factors prove problematic when you are out on location?

The weather. We conduct excavations in the desert, so there are considerable temperature amplitudes. In January and February, the temperatures may be around 0 degrees, whereas in October, when we started our work, they exceeded 40 degrees. There also flies, similar to our fruit flies, called *nimitti*, which move in large numbers. In January and February, it is impossible to work without special nets, so we look like beekeepers. But if you love what you do, you don't pay too much attention to such unpleasant circumstances.

What kind of new year's wishes would be best for archeologists?

I could say – a bit maliciously in the context of the whole of our community – that we should hope to actually publish as much as possible based on what we've excavated. That is currently a big problem for us. There is plenty of material, yet publications presenting research analyses and findings are written with great difficulty.

INTERVIEW BY ANNA ZAWADZKA

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MATEUSZ REKLAJTIS



Dorota Dzierzbicka during exploration.