

Discoveries by Polish archaeologists on Tankazi island and the Nile's right bank

Caravan to Selib



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Polish researchers are studying remnants of a great culture from over a millennium ago in the central Nile valley

Selib is a multicultural archaeological site, strewn with exquisite Meroic ceramics from the 1st-3rd century CE. It was a major manufacturing and trading centre, a farming and craft settlement, and a caravanserai, located in part on the Tankazi island – one of the largest and most fertile on the Nile – and on the river's right bank.

Kingdom of Makuria

I first visited Selib with a Canadian mission in 1985, and returned in 1998 leading a Polish visit. We conducted surface studies and took a series of aerial photographs using a kite, revealing many similarities between Selib and Banganarti, two settlements separated by just 7.5 km. However, it was discovered in 2008 that the resemblance was superficial: the main difference between the two sites is the former's regular layout, extensive plumbing, and relatively sparse density of buildings within the walls. These are features typical of late Roman and early Byzantine caravanserais, called *hydreumata*: manned and fortified watering holes and feeding stations along caravan routes.

The similarity of the Selib site to Roman and Byzantine caravan stations is no coincidence. It suggests that during the period between late 4th and early 6th centuries the area was home to a well-organized state, operating a well-developed trading system. There can be no doubt that this state was the Kingdom of Makuria with its capital at Old Dongola.

History of Old Dongola

The most fascinating discovery in Selib in 2008 was a large Meroic settlement dating back to the 1st-4th centuries, centered on a massive trading storehouse. It was also the first settlement site from the Meroic period to be dis-

covered in this area. It fundamentally changed our views on the history of Old Dongola, a Dongolese state prior to the introduction of Christianity.

In 2010 we revealed the entire external façade of a wall surrounding the rectangular settlement, in several sections reaching as far as the foundations, and a gate with a stone threshold with an unusual outline, widening at both ends. We also discovered the shaft of a Meroic column, indicating that a temple building was located nearby. Information gathered from the eldest inhabitants of Selib in 1985 suggested that this temple may be located nearby, just 500m towards the Nile, inside a great *kom* (hill), for some reason known in the area as Kom el-Kenissa (temple hill).

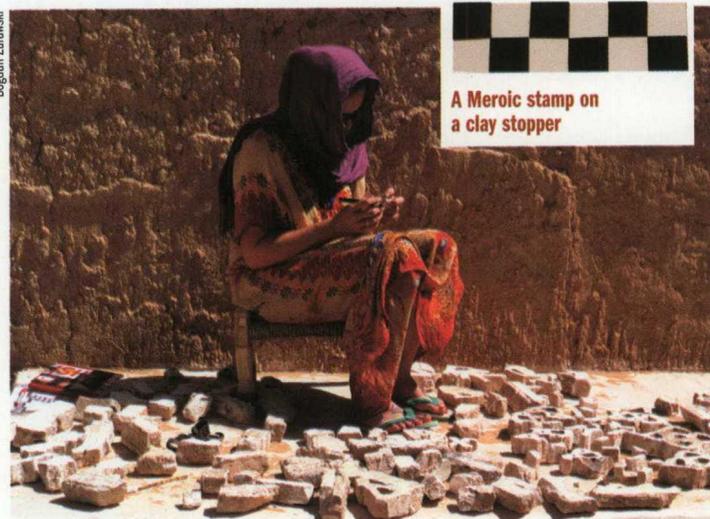
Four temples

Many secrets of Selib have been revealed by the excavations carried out during the most recent season, which finished in March 2011. Above all they have allowed us to determine that the first church in Selib (known as the Old Church) is also one of the oldest Christian temples in the central Nile valley. Its creation may have been preceded by the official Baptism of the Kingdom of Makuria, traditionally marked as the third year of the reign of Emperor Justin II (567). This early date – for the first church, confirmed by dating of the ceramics found at the site, changes the nature of the inscription discovered at Selib a year earlier. It mentions a King Zachariah, one of four



A Meroic stamp on a clay stopper

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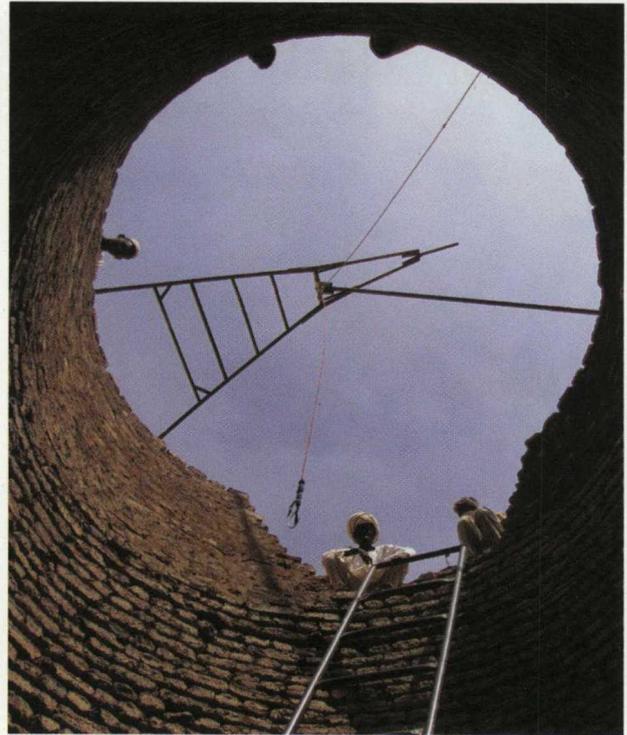
The archaeologist Ewa Skowrońska during the mission to Selib, shown working on window gratings

to bear the name, likely to have ruled during the first half of the 9th century; the dedication itself refers to another church, covered by a roof supported on stone columns.

The main aim of the research work carried out in Selib in 2011 was to determine the chronology of the four churches that were built there between the 6th-13th centuries, each on the ruins of its predecessor. The oldest was constructed using archaic technology dating back to the Meroic era.

A treasure in pieces

Excavations at church sites do not usually turn up a wealth of findings. In terms of ceramics, all that was discovered inside this church were a few very high grade oil lamps from the 5th and 6th centuries. However, a large collection of ceramics was discovered on a dumping ground outside the church. A goblet decorated with a repeated motif of an animal, which archaeologists suspect to be a fennec fox, is one of the unique finds at the site. The third church was built out of materials left behind after its predecessors were demolished. And yet this seemingly ordinary site, bearing all the signs of a collapse in ceramic craftsmanship, yielded an extraordinary treasure: a deep leaf-shaped tray, most likely used to bless the gifts of the earth, found in four pieces on the



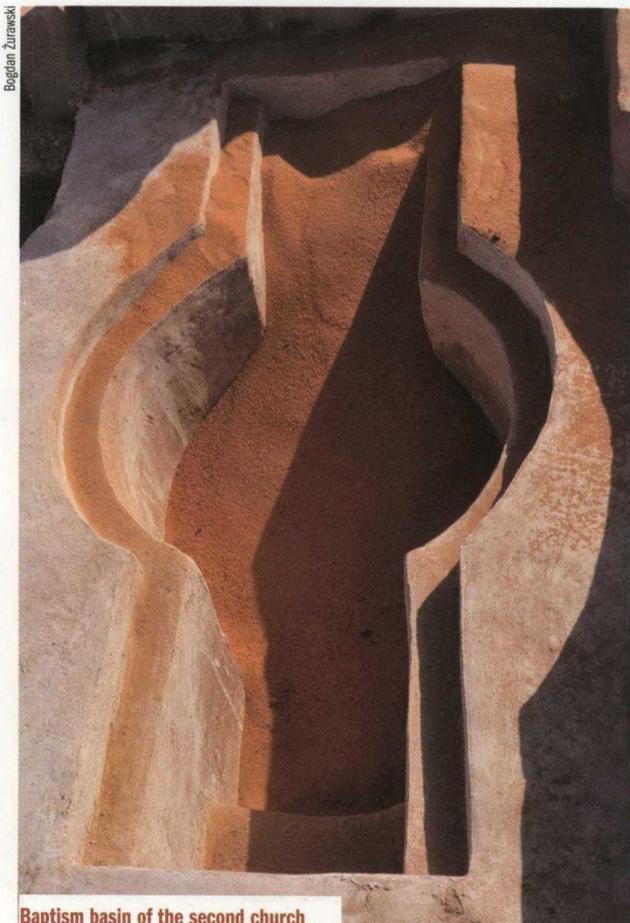
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View from the well located to the east of the church at Selib

northern side of the church. The dish was usually kept with other liturgical paraphernalia in the northern sacristy. The deep section of the tray was likely to have been used to bless liquids (olive oil or wine); the top edge of the depression is worn by extensive use. Such blessings were usually held on the eves of major festivities towards the end of all-night vigil services during litya. Offerings were divided among the faithful, and taken to the homes of the sick.

A surprise down a well

To the east of the church is a well and a related Persian water wheel (sakia) unit. How deep the Selib well extends remains unknown. Our excavations revealed a surprise at a depth of five meters: the regular ceramic brick motif of alternating front and side panels has been replaced by an ornamental, broken line made of overburned bricks. It is reminiscent of similar patterns found on the walls of mediaeval castles (for example the 13th-century Teutonic Knights' castle in Radzyń Chełmiński in Poland). At the bottom the sand is moist, which indicates that there is water directly below. This is another important piece of the puzzle, since it indicates that despite popular belief, levels of ground water during the Middle Ages were no higher than they are today. It is likely that the Church of St. Menas was deliberately built next to the well, since group baptisms of adults in the 6th and 7th centuries required large volumes of water (the water was changed in the basin after each baptism).



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Baptism basin of the second church

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Church at Selib, view from 2011

Ritual or secular?

The discovery of the well in Selib naturally raised the question of what was done with the water drawn from it. A second purpose of the well was hinted at by massive blocks of 12cm thick waterproof lime plaster. These are likely remnants of some construction used to collect water; we suspected that it was baths. And so we decided to search for those baths at the site of the greatest magnetic anomalies that had been registered during geophysical studies carried out in 2008 under the leadership of Tomek Herbich from the PAS Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology. After just an hour of excavation work, we discovered something spectacular: a wall covered with waterproof plaster on the inside, followed by a few steps. The whole formed a pool measuring 3x3m, which could be entered down a monumental staircase. Since the Selib church was dedicated to St. Menas since at least the 9th century, we could reasonably expect to find material evidence for cults similar to those known from his sanctuary near Alexandria. Does that mean that the pool discovered in 2011 had a ritualistic purpose? Not necessarily; it could have performed a perfectly secular function. After all, throughout the existence of the Churches of St. Menas, Selib was visited by merchants and pilgrims, who needed water for themselves and their animals.

A grand kom

Four hundred meters southwest there is an archaeological site which could be the most important among the three that have been discovered in Selib so far. It is a grand kom towering over a plateau strewn with Meroic ceramics. On the top, among broken 6th and 7th century pieces, there are fragments of archers' rings, typical of an earlier period. Excavations in 2010 revealed an early Christian abode constructed on a layer of blown-in sand, indicating that it was built a long time after the site was abandoned. Underneath there are layers of a settlement protruding through to the surface around the periphery of the kom. The size of this artificial hill and the quality of the ceramic artifacts found here suggest a long history of settlement at the site. The coming excavation season should provide answers to the questions of when and why people originally settled here. ■

Further reading:

- Żurawski B. (2003). Survey and Excavations between Old Dongola and Ez-Zuma - Sudan and Nubia. *The Sudan Archaeological Research Society Bulletin*, 6, 73-85.
- Godlewski W., Łajtar A. [Eds.] (2008). *Between the Cataracts*. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego.