

## 5.2. Case Study on Old Dongola in Sudan

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Old Dongola in Sudan is described in the World Heritage Centre database as “the capital of the Christian Kingdom of Makouria (7th - 14th century). The site contains many churches, places, houses and mosques. The wall of some buildings are decorated with very fine frescoes” (accessed 19.11.2021)<sup>13</sup>. This case-study on Old Dongola illustrates how new heritage approaches and dialogues between archaeologists, heritage authorities and local communities can lead towards both a redefinition of heritage values and a broadening of the scope of interpretation narratives as part of a collaborative effort to reinvigorate a nomination process, on the one hand, and contribute towards empowering local communities and supporting local development, on the other. Spearheaded by archaeologists from the University of Warsaw in cooperation with the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums (NCAM), the inclusive approach to heritage interpretation displayed in this case-study is integral to a new approach for World Heritage based on the principles of sustainable development (Larsen 2021).

**Description of the site.** Situated beside the Nile River some 350km north of Khartoum, Old Dongola (known as Dongola al Ajuz in Arabic) is on the National List of Scheduled Monuments of Sudan. It has also been on the Tentative List of the UNESCO World Heritage Convention since 1994. The current Tentative List description, quoted at the start of this section, stresses the medieval Christian period and attributes, building on the cumulative research by NCAM and the Polish mission<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> This case study is based on research supported by following article: Larsen, Peter Bille 2021 ‘From development displacement and salvage archaeology in Nubia to inclusive sustainable heritage and development crafting in Old Dongola’, *Sudan & Nubia*: 25: 82-94.

<sup>14</sup> <https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/652/>, accessed 1/8/21.



Figure 1: Location of Old Dongola (Courtesy of map: UMMA)

Located in the Northern State, the site is considered particularly significant both for its attributes from the Makurian period (5th–14th century AD) and for its attributes from the following Funj period (15th–18th century AD). The site was the capital of the Kingdom of Makuria, converting to Christianity in the 6th century and transitioning to Islam in the 14th century.

One two-storey building served for over 450 years as a throne hall for the Makurian kings, before being transformed in 1317 into a mosque (considered one of the oldest in the entire country). The citadel and urban structures are surrounded by housing and cemeteries and were gradually

abandoned in the late 19th and early 20th centuries with the main mosque closed for public use in 1969 leaving what is today known as an 'abandoned village'.

**Analysis of the site's current heritage interpretation.** Christian medieval layers in Old Dongola have shaped and given direction to both archaeological practice and the main interpretation framework that shaped the site's tentative listing and national recognition. This has arguably led to a certain heritage emphasis on pre-Islamic attributes in terms of research and documentation, but also conservation efforts. The site's tentative listing and the underlying narrative derived from six decades of excavations revealing frescoes, churches and monasteries have to some extent rendered the later Islamic heritage values invisible in the World Heritage gaze. Whereas local communities were actively employed in the excavation during the digging seasons, the main voices solicited for presenting the site to schools, tourists and visitors have been the archaeologists. While this has, on the one hand, helped uncover and document the extraordinary medieval layers, such as the unique collection of frescoes, it has also over the years produced a series of challenges and misunderstandings. One challenge involved local fears that excavation and restoration efforts were part of an effort to re-erect churches and Christianize the Nubian population. This had led to periodic eruptions of tensions with some local community members despite longstanding relationships of trust and confidence. It also revealed how the heritage domain was mainly shaped by archaeologists and other experts, with historically limited engagement with local communities apart from their role as hosts, friends and labourers.

Secondly, the heritage emphasis on medieval layers implied, indirectly at least, discontinuity with contemporary communities and Islamic heritage despite a thriving living heritage space embedded in a unique cultural landscape. Heritage maps of excavation areas and important sites classified the village space as "abandoned" with core and buffer zones designed with a focus on the medieval layers.

Thirdly, as mentioned above, the narrow value and interpretative gaze led to some level of

invisibilization of Islamic heritage values and attributes despite their significance for local, national and even global perspectives. Islamic cemeteries while prominent in the landscape and actively used, did not for a long time receive attention.

**New interpretation.** The case illustrates the importance of inclusive interpretative frameworks for heritage as vehicles for community engagement, conflict resolution and the adoption of people-centred approaches. New archaeological gazes with a focus on transition and context have emerged in parallel with new approaches to interpretation in the Old Dongola context. For one, there have been increasing attempts by both heritage authorities and archaeologists to situate the site's medieval layers in the context of the long-distance trade and communications at the time (Fushiya 2021). Secondly, consultations soon revealed long-standing community claims to what was rather erroneously known as the 'abandoned village'. Interviews in 2019 and 2020 with surrounding villagers revealed the continued cultural significance within and adjacent to areas where the excavations took place, both in terms of individual family histories as well as the portrayals of the koranic schools, spaces, paths and Islamic cemeteries still visible in the landscape. This prompted the need for alternative narratives and local voices to reinforce interpretation.



(photo: Peter Larsen, 2019),

This was part of a cultural geography tying the medieval layers to contemporary communities in a landscape where the *Qubbat* epitomized connections to centuries-old histories and the spread of Islam in Sudan and beyond. The area arguably played a central role in the arrival and spread of Islam in the northern part of Sudan, testifying to its significance not only from a local value perspective, but from a broader global and regional value perspective in terms of history, transition and the co-existence and spread of Islam in Africa and even the United States (see below). By applying principles of inclusive heritage interpretation, a new space for dialogue and exchange was established mobilizing oral histories and community dialogues, alongside findings from historical and archaeological analysis. The relationship is proving mutually reinforcing by establishing continuities between layers and landscape attributes.

**Summary: What lessons can others take from this case?** Whereas the focus on Christian layers from the medieval period was the starting point for the archaeological work, as well as remaining central to the Outstanding Universal Value and the tentative listing of the area, it was increasingly clear from the new interpretative gaze that a cultural landscape perspective with a different narrative could enable a more inclusive interpretation approach for the ensemble of heritage values and attributes, which tie together a sequence of periods, layers and wider tangible and intangible attributes, through a mode of continuity maintained to this day. The landscape approach, in this sense, would offer opportunities to connect medieval layers with Islamic heritage and contemporary practices as living heritage that make up contemporary Nubian practices. Such an inclusive notion of heritage interpretation, which acknowledges the mutually reinforcing values of both tangible and intangible forms of heritage in the Old Dongola area, following and taking into account prior historical periods and attributes, potentially has numerous advantages not least by presenting a more holistic view of heritage tied into everyday community life and its future. Clearly,

this was also something that made sense to local communities, who are easily distanced from a more narrow heritage gaze.

Overall, there is much to gain from an integral heritage vision both in terms of connecting periods and layers, also in terms of connecting with people and the wider riverine landscape. The local population maintains a strong and vibrant connection to *Dongola al Ajuz* in historical, religious, agricultural and identity terms. Some also underline the importance of their Nubian identity.

Local, national, and international stakeholders have recently signed up to the *Nafeer*, a Sudanese approach for a collective effort to build something new together (see Larsen, 2021). In this case, the commitment is to build a future for Old Dongola where heritage values are an integral part of the sustainable development path. The *Nafeer* stresses the values of heritage for development, cultural landscape planning, local participation and co-management, community rights and tenure security, community-based tourism and local entrepreneurship, and women's empowerment. Heritage interpretation is not simply a matter of perspective, it offers vehicles for stimulating dialogue on how to deal with social, material and economic complexities of contemporary Sudanese society.