

The Kushite temple in Soniyat after the 2016 season

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Abstract: Archaeological fieldwork in the Kushite temple in Soniyat (Tergis 40) was conducted from 1997 to 2001 with an additional short season in 2013. A team supervised by Bogdan Żurawski returned to the site in 2016 to continue the excavation of the southern section of the complex. Remains of substantial mud-brick architecture were discovered together with large quantities of small finds (potsherds and objects made of metal, stone and faience) and faunal remains. A compact layer of Nile alluvial deposits, about 0.10 m thick, covering the remains represented evidence most probably of a flood. A single stone column was visible at that level. The spatial distribution of the discovered architectural features matches the temple orientation; they can be interpreted as the remains of a pylon with an entrance flanked by columns.

Keywords: Kushite temple, Kushite architecture, Meroitic period, Napatan period, Soniyat, Sudan, Middle Nile, archaeological excavations

Soniyat is a hamlet in the Southern Dongola Reach, located on the right bank of the Nile, between the villages of Abkur and Affad (18°1'55.73"N/31°5'57.82"E). First mentioned by Lord Prudhoe (1829: 47), it failed however to be marked on the 1:250,000 Sudan Survey Maps. The name in local Arabic dialect means "plenty of sandstone", which suggests potential archaeological remains in the area (Żurawski 2003: 83). This led Bogdan Żurawski to visit briefly in 1991, guided there by the villagers from Abkur. He identified the remains of a stone temple in a sandy plain to the south of the hamlet. In 1997, he returned with a team (Żurawski 1998b). The site was coded

Tergis 40 in the Southern Dongola Reach Survey. The surface was cleaned and trial pits dug (Żurawski 2003: 83–84). A cache of bronze, stone and faience figures, natural pebbles and ferruginous stones of bizarre shape was discovered next to the southeastern door jamb flanking the entrance to the pronaos. Fieldwork was continued in 1998 (Żurawski 1999: 154–159), 1999 (Żurawski 2000: 216–219) and 2001, yielding more finds that are today in the collection of the Poznań Archaeological Museum (Żurawski 2002: 217–220; 2003: 89, 91–92; Chłodnicki 2015: 145, 164–172, 204–205).

The northern part of the temple was built of stone blocks and was in

a much better state of preservation than the southern mud-brick section, which has suffered from modern agricultural activities. The northern part of the temple was documented in detail, whereas the much eroded southern part was tested only summarily. Many issues concerning the architectural layout of this part of the complex thus remained unexplained. Pottery analysis indicated that the temple was built in the Napatan period and was in use in Meroitic time (Orzechowska 2003: 442–443). It then fell into ruin and was occupied by squatters in medieval and post-medieval times (Żurawski 2003: 246, 248).

Faunal remains from the northern, stone-built part of the temple consisted mostly of cattle and sheep/goat leg bones and crania. The osteological remains from the southern section were less homogeneous, including additionally fish, pigs and mollusks (Osypińska 2003: 492). It was difficult to say whether these differences resulted from different religious practices in the different parts of the temple or from later occupation of the southern part.

At least two architectural phases were distinguished. The Napatan-period temple

had a naos consisting of three chambers, a transverse pronaos and a small transverse hypostyle hall with four columns. It was a typical small, multi-roomed temple (Wenig 1984: 392–394; Wolf 2006: 244). The only baffling element was a small room opening onto the central chamber, which effectively encroached on one of the side chambers. The Meroitic-period temple incorporated earlier architecture, adding two corridor-like chambers on either side of the naos and pronaos to enlarge the sacral space and expanding the hypostyle hall to 16 columns. On the south, the space was limited by a large pylon entrance built of mud brick and stone blocks (Żurawski 2002: 218–219).

Żurawski took up Karl-Heinze Priese's (1973) identification of the site, situated in the *mantiga* (district) of Tergis, with the Tergedum known from the itinerary of the Neronian expedition to the sources of the Nile and suggested that the temple and its surroundings might have been the place visited by Roman centurions in the 1st century AD (Żurawski 1998a: 79).

The temple is not the only man-made structure visible on the surface of the site. Two large stone blocks located

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approximately 100 m northwest of the temple and oriented same as the sanctuary were tested in 1998 (Żurawski 2003: 246). They were thought of as remains of a temenos wall with a gate leading either to the temple or to the ruins of another sacral building possibly of Napatan date (Żurawski 2002: 220). A geophysical survey in the area in 2001 confirmed the presence of another building or buildings instead of a wall (Misiewicz 2003: 521) and in 2013, a second magnetic survey revealed detailed traces of a large (at least 82 m latitudinally) and regular building with multiple spaces. The shape and size resembled Kushite palaces (Grzyski 2008: 233–236; Maillot 2014: Fig. 4; 2016). Traces of architecture were also recorded to the south of the edifice and to the west of the temple. Additionally, two paleochannels cutting the site were distinguishable on the magnetic map: a bigger one to the south of the temple and a second much smaller to the north, between the temple and the edifice. Building remains cut through the northern channel suggesting that it is an older feature. Large stones visible on the surface were most probably incorporated into

the walls of the edifice, which was otherwise built of mud brick (Żurawski 2015: 378–379). A new question emerged. Were these stones and mud-brick walls of the same phase as the edifice?

Earlier research at Soniyat had demonstrated its potential interest for the Kushite history of the region. The site is complex and covers a large area. Many issues are still unresolved, like the question of the entrance to the temple which should have been located in the southern part of the complex. Żurawski had suggested a pylon of mudbrick with a stone facing, hypothesizing that it was a later addition in the Meroitic period; he published a visualization of the entrance decorated with motifs common in Kushite religious architecture (Żurawski 2002: Fig. 2). The southern side where the entrance to the temple would have been located was never investigated because of agricultural cultivation in this part of the site. By 2016, however, the fields had been abandoned and were covered with windblown sand. Consultation with the villagers opened the way to scheduling excavation of the temple entrance, which verified in detail the nature of this architectural feature.

METHODOLOGY AND FIELDWORK

The first trench (1A), 7.50 m by 6.50 m, located the southern edge of the area excavated earlier under the archaeological dump from that work. This artificial mound was removed with heavy equipment, after which the exploration was continued manually, assuming a modern agricultural fence as a reference for trench alignment due to difficult weather conditions — most of the time a strong winter wind carrying large volumes of sand was blowing and

it was impossible to align with the main temple axis. The southern edge of trench 1A ran along the fence [Figs 1, 2].

The first layer in trench 1A, approximately one meter thick, consisted of yellow sand with small artifacts. Underlying this were hard mud deposits which created a smooth surface that descended slightly toward the south. It was similar to alluvial mud observed on the river bank, suggesting that flood waters from the

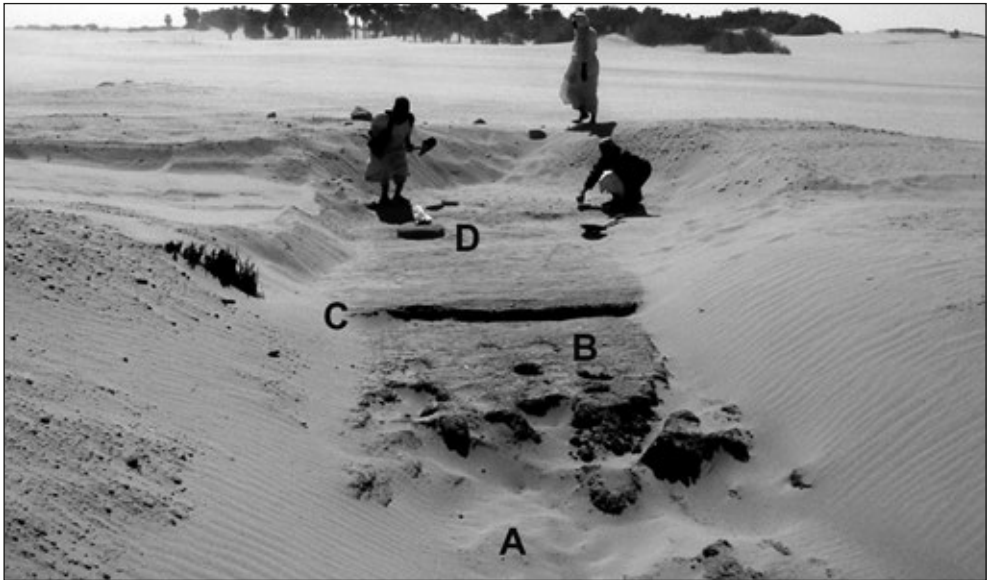


Fig. 1. Excavations in progress: A – area excavated in earlier seasons; B – circular openings in the alluvial surface; C – remains of a fence; D – stone column (Soniyat Project/photo M. Drzewiecki)

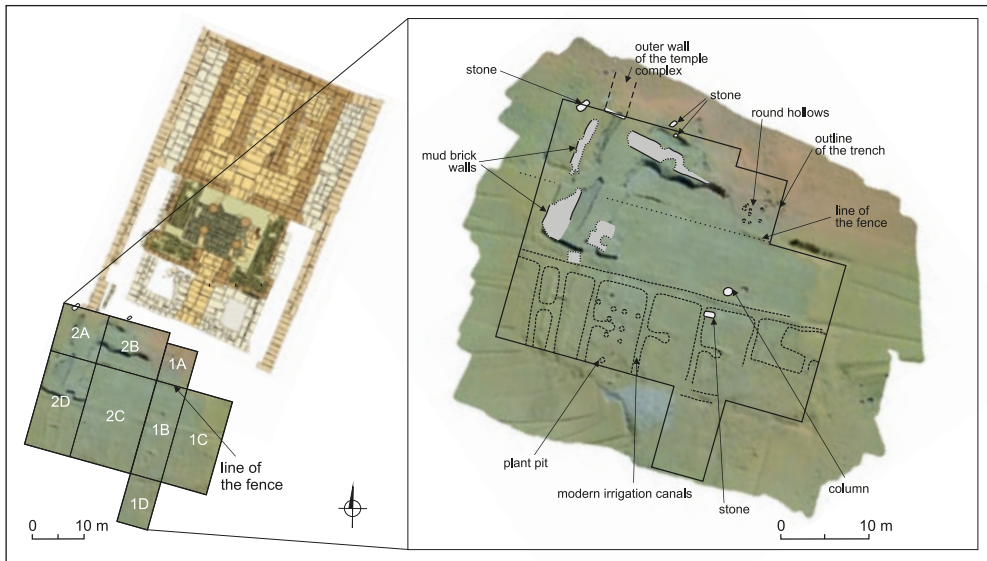


Fig. 2. The temple at Soniyat: left, plan of the temple and location of trenches dug in the 2016 season; inset, orthophoto of the area under excavation with the main features (Soniyat Project/plan after Żurawski 2002: Fig. 1; orthophoto and processing M. Drzewiecki)

Nile had reached Soniyat on at least one occasion. They may even have dissolved parts of the mud-brick structures, adding to the compact layer recorded during

excavations. The surface of this level was cleaned (collecting finds from this level as a separate context), uncovering eight circular features [see Fig. 2 inset] cutting



Fig. 3. Northern section of the area under excavations: A to E – mud-brick walls; F – stone column (Soniyat Project/photo M. Drzewiecki)



Fig. 4. Eastern section of the area under excavations: A to E – mud-brick walls (Soniyat Project/photo M. Drzewiecki)

into the layer. They were of different diameter extending from 100 mm to 250 mm and reaching from 30 mm to 180 mm in depth. They can be interpreted as postholes, evidencing a light, wooden(?) structure in this spot.

The next trench immediately to the south [1B; see *Fig. 2* left] was located already in the abandoned fields. It was 18 m by 6.50 m and was positioned on the site of the potential entrance and approach to the complex. The first layer again consisted of yellow sand, accumulated over a packed layer of water-accumulated alluvial deposits brought from the Nile. Surface cleaning revealed long, linear hollows, about 50–150 mm deep, as well as a single standing stone column (0.45 m in diameter) projecting up to about 0.10 m from the packed surface [see *Fig. 1*]. The column seemed to be connected with the temple, being located on line with the main axis [see *Fig. 6*]. An eroded stone block was recorded next to the column [*Fig. 2* inset]. Trenches 1C, 1D and 2C were opened in search of other columns and blocks, but failed to locate any architectural elements down to the top of the alluvial deposits. Linear hollows were recorded in all of the trenches, forming a regular pattern, most probably a ghost outline of the irrigation

system, most probably of recent date [see *Fig. 2* inset]. The conclusion from this observation is that all traces observed in the alluvial surface are modern remains, with the exception of the column and the stone block.

Trench 2A in the southwestern corner of the complex was opened in the old archaeological dig and was later extended east (2B) and south (2D) [see *Fig. 2*]. It aimed to explore the partly excavated mud-brick structure interpreted as the side of a temple pylon. Cutting through the alluvial deposits, the excavation revealed faint traces of mud-brick walls just below the packed surface [see *Figs 3, 4*]. The layer surrounding the walls consisted of grey sand mixed with lumps of mud and stones, as well as large quantities of potsherds. The mud-brick walls were from 1 m to 2.50 m thick. The best preserved architecture was recorded in trench 2A, where it reached a height up to 0.40 m maximum, that is, three rows of bricks. Moving southward, the state of preservation declined to a single row of bricks and about 0.10 m of height. All of the walls were founded on the same level, suggesting that they may have been built at the same time or even as one architectural project.

SMALL FINDS AND FAUNAL REMAINS

Archaeological material was collected from three stratigraphic layers with the exception of trench 2A, which was opened in an old archaeological trench [*Fig. 5*]. The first from the top was a layer of yellow, windblown sand (up to 1 m thick) which was superimposed upon Nile alluvial deposits about 0.10 m thick. Finds from the surface of these deposits

were collected as one context (the deposits themselves were void of any artifacts). Below this was a layer consisting of grey sand mixed with mud lumps and stones (up to 0.50 m thick). Remains of mud-brick walls were recorded in this layer in trenches 2B and 2D. Due to time constraints, exploration was stopped about 0.20 m below the wall foundation,

just when a new layer of gravel and stones had started to emerge.

Altogether 1979 potsherds were collected and inventoried (they are stored in a new storage facility constructed at the site of Selib). Other small finds included eight stone objects, eight shells, four small pieces of unidentified metal artifacts (most probably copper alloy) and three faience objects, including a 70 mm high, symbolic representation of a feather (Inv. No. SON/25/2016), which may have been part of a headdress of an anthropomorphic(?) figurine. Faunal

remains were also recorded (altogether 90 fragments of bone).

Statistically, the lowest explored layer (only in trenches 2B and 2D) yielded relatively the largest number of finds: 55 bone fragments, 789 potsherds, all the shells, four stone objects and one metal artifact (but no faience). They may be associated with the mud-brick architecture and the following periods, sealed by the alluvial deposit. Further studies and geomorphological research should be conducted to estimate the date of the potential flood event.

TRENCH 1	TRENCH 2	TRENCH 2A
Layer 1 thickness 0.5 - 1 m yellow sand	Layer 1 thickness 0.5 - 1 m yellow sand	Layer 1 thickness 0.5 - 1.5 m yellow sand (yellow sand, previous archaeological dig)
Layer 2 thickness c. 0.10 m Nile mud + yellow sand artifacts from compacted mud layer cleaning	Layer 2 thickness c. 0.10 m Nile mud + yellow sand artifacts from compacted mud layer cleaning	
compacted mud layer (not explored)	compacted mud layer - no artifacts recorded (thickness c. 0.10 m)	
	Layer 3 thickness c. 0.40 m grey sand + mud lumps + stones layer in which mud brick walls have been recorded	Layer 2 grey sand + stones
	gravel and stones (layer not explored)	gravel and stones (layer not explored)

Fig. 5. Stratigraphy in the area under excavations

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

Remains of mud-brick architecture were recorded in trenches 2A, 2B and 2D where exploration reached below the layer of Nile alluvial deposits. The state of preservation of these remains varied. The re-excavated architecture in trench 2A had suffered considerable decay since its discovery in the 1990s [walls in green at bottom left in Fig. 6], but was still in the

best condition. Walls in trench 2B were preserved to a maximum height of about 0.40 m, but were damaged by digging, modern from the west and possibly older from the north and south (the latter may have preceded the flood event as no traces could be discerned when cleaning the Nile alluvial surface). Walls in trench 2D were of massive thickness (up to 2.50 m),

and were preserved to about 0.10 m in height; they had also been disturbed by old digging.

The walls were not connected, but were oriented in a similar way with the exception of wall E [see *Fig. 4*], which was much thinner and recorded in a small section. Moreover, the walls were founded on the same level, suggesting that they were raised as one architectural project. The gaps between them could be the result of the poor state of preservation. The orientation was in line with the direction of the main axis of the temple, suggesting a relation between them. Could these be the remains of the southern part of the temple complex? The pylon perhaps? If yes, then it must have been much bigger than expected and was furnished with an 8 m wide empty space inside, which may have been a chamber(?) or a large staircase(?) [*Fig. 6*].

The idea of pylons with chambers inside was not a common feature of Kushite and Egyptian temples, but examples are known. A direct parallel can be made with temple C at Tabo, where a space 6–7 m wide was recorded within the pylons (Jacquet-Gordon 1999: *Fig. 1*). There are many examples where staircases were built into the pylon structures, for example, in temple M.6 at Meroe, where there was a space about one meter wide opening into the pylon passage. Although no remains of stairs were recorded, László Török suggested that it could have been a staircase (Török, Hofmann, and Nagy 1997/I: 47; 1997/II: *Fig. 11*). Other Kushite temples had staircases built into the structure of pylons, but they were accessible usually from the courtyard, for example, the first and the second pylon in the Amun Temple at Jebel Barkal (Dunham 1970: *Plan V*).

Some of the great Egyptian temples had chambers as well as staircases within the pylons, for example the temple in Edfu (Cauville 1984: *Plan 2*; Fauerbach 2004: *Fig. 1*) and the temple at Philae (Sauneron and Stierlin 1975: 142).

Considering the layout of blocks in the northern corner of the Soniyat pylon, Żurawski had suggested an additional facing with stone blocks. Only one block discovered in 2016 [see *Fig. 2* inset] could be interpreted as possible remains of such an outer surface of the pylon.

The column discovered in trench 2B was in line with the possible pylon as well as with the entrances to the naos and pronaos. This suggested that the column was part of the temple complex. However, it is not clear whether it should be connected

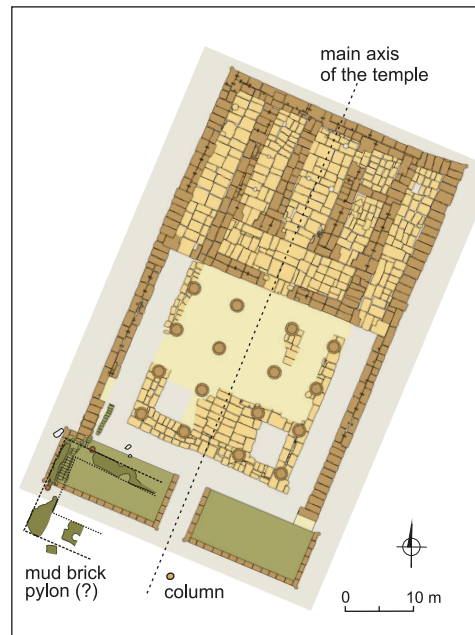


Fig. 6. Location of the pylon (Soniyat project/ drawing M. Drzewiecki; temple plan after Żurawski 2002: Fig. 1)

with the Meroitic mud-brick pylon. The location of the stone facing block not far from the column might confirm to some extent that the column was an integral part of the pylon. It could have flanked the entrance. However, it may be older, as the lower section of the column was not reached during the present excavations due to time constraints. The entrances to the naos and pronaos, built in line with the column, originate from the Napatan phase. The column may have been placed in position during the Napatan period and would indicate a much bigger temple, explaining the presence of the Kushite royal edifice next to it. This hypothesis

needs further research and additional data.

To summarize, the 2016 excavation in front of the temple at Soniyat demonstrated that the mud-brick pylon with stone facing was much bigger than previously expected and that it may have comprised a passage within its gate flanked by stone columns. It may also be theorized, based on the positioning of the column, that the temple from the Napatan phase was much bigger. The southern part of the temple suffered from at least one flood event, which left a deposit of Nile alluvia about 0.10 m thick covering all of the remains.

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