

## Filling in the gaps. Excavations on the site of Selib (1<sup>st</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> century)

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In 2010, during the 12<sup>th</sup> Conference for Nubian Studies held at the British Museum, I had a pleasure to present a brief report on the first season of excavation at the multicultural site of Selib (Żurawski 2014, 889-900). Since then, six seasons of fieldwork were carried out at Selib as a sideline activity pursued in addition to the Mission's regular dig at Banganarti. Since the excavations on two of the three Selib sites are finished now is a good time to summarise the results, to answer some questions asked in 2010 and to justify some hypotheses formulated since then.

Selib lies 7½km upriver from Banganarti, where the nearest medieval church site is located and 15km from Old Dongola where the Kingdom of Makuria had its capital. Economically both sites, Selib and Banganarti, were dependent on the cultivation of the fertile islands of Baros and Tanqasi as well as another island which, according to Griffith's informant in 1910, existed between Tanqasi Island and the right bank. The modern hamlet of Selib belongs to the oldest villages in the region. It is marked on Rüppel's map (Rüppel 1829, pl. 10). The toponym in pure (unvocalised) transliteration reveals a similarity with Soleb, between the Third and Second Cataract, and the Arabic noun for cross (*salib*). On the first British maps of the ed-Debba district made in 1898 and 1900, it was rendered as *Solb* or *Soleb* (Żurawski 2012, 140-141, figs 19 and 20).

Desertward from the modern village, on a sandy plain sloping gently to the river there are three archaeological sites of importance:<sup>1</sup> a medieval enclosure labeled Selib 1 (known locally as *murabba* i.e. Arabic for square, although its perimeter wall makes a rectangle; a rhomboid to be more precise); Meroitic settlement Selib 2, lying 800m to the north from Selib 1 and the multicultural Meroitic/Post-Meroitic/Medieval site coded Selib 3, located half a kilometre towards the river from Selib 1 (Plate 1).

The three sites at Selib span, in one ecological context, the epoch of the decline and fall of the Kushite Empire and the formative period of the Kingdom of Makuria. Excavations at Selib, which started as a rescue project in 2010, provided the Mission, hitherto involved in an excavation of the predominantly Late Christian site of Banganarti, with an opportunity to study the uninterrupted chronological sequence between the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD and the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>1</sup> The right bank opposite Selib was surveyed in 1998-2000 and 25 sites were registered, (cf. Żurawski 2003, 164-170).



Plate 1. The three sites at Selib, airborne orthophoto done in 2016 (photos and rendering: Bogdan Żurawski).

### Selib 1

The site first appeared in the record due to Francis Lewellyn Griffith's visit to the region in 1910. He described Selib as "a church within a stone enclosure" and left this information in an envelope titled "various notes on antiquities in Northern Province" (kept in the Griffith Institute, University of Oxford). He also noted an important oral testimony obtained from the local elders that the Nile flowed past the Selib enclosure a hundred years before 1910 (now it flows 800m further to the south). In 1998 when I took the first kite photographs of the Selib enclosure, this Nile palaeochannel was clearly discernible due to the conspicuous vegetation belt (Plate 2). Also, the Sudan Survey Department aerial photograph from the year 1988 shows that, during the record floods of that year, the river entered this palaeochannel (Żurawski 2003, 164, fig. 1).

Seventy-four years after Griffith's visit, the site was sur-



Plate 2. *Murabba at Selib, airborne (kite) photograph taken in 1998 (photo: Bogdan Żurawski).*

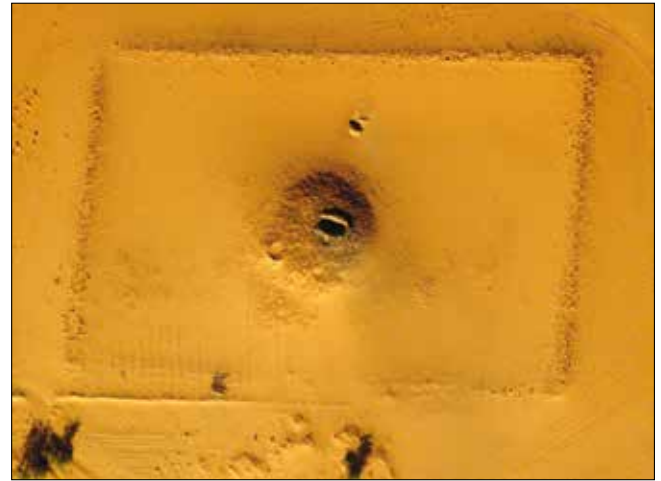


Plate 3. *Airborne (kite) photograph of Selib 1 site taken in 2008 (photo: Bogdan Żurawski).*

veyed by the team directed by Krzysztof Grzyski. I had the pleasure to be a staff member of the Mission which in 1984 registered two sites at Selib on behalf of the Royal Ontario Museum as ROM 100 and ROM 101 (Grzyski 1987, 9-10). I had an even greater pleasure to return to Selib in 1998, at the head of the Southern Dongola Reach Mission organized by the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology (Żurawski 2003, 167-168; fig. 2).

A turning point in the modern history of Selib was the year 2008 when the village was linked by a *radmiya* to the Kareima-Nawa highway and connected to the electricity grid. During construction of the power transmission line the outline of a rectangular mud-brick structure covering some 500m<sup>2</sup> and a couple of smaller units c. 100m<sup>2</sup> each, all well oriented on the cardinal points were spotted on the flat terrain on the left side of a new road leading to the village. The Mission working then at Banganarti was summoned to the site and after surface clearing and pottery study the cultural definition of the site was determined (Bagińska 2015, 249).

In the same year, we obtained an NCAM permit to dig three trial pits at Selib and to conduct a geophysical survey within the rectangular enclosure which we used to call the outer *peribolos* until 2015 when we finally managed to determine the original character of the site.<sup>2</sup>

Geophysical soundings carried out within the *murabba* assisted little in the choice of a location for a trial pit. However, since all diagnostic features of church buildings are in their eastern part we decided to dig a trial pit on the eastern slope of the *kom*, assuming, after Griffith, that a church was buried there (Plate 3). Luckily, the sondage sunk on top of the *kom* hit the southern sacristy and part of an apse of the church. The evidence of a thin ceramic scatter on the surface dated the latest church on site to the 11<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century (Żurawski 2014, 891-895).

A brief reconnaissance carried out in 2008 at Selib and in its neighbourhood raised many questions, the most important concerned the chronology of the rectangular enclosure

and the reasons behind the creation of the enclosure and its maintenance. The answers to some of these fundamental questions were provided only in December 2015.

In 2010 we could only say that the bigger *peribolos* at Selib, being almost empty inside (with the exception of the church), resembled some forts upriver from the Fourth Cataract and the square enclosures in the Wadi Abu Dom.

Since the defensive character of the Selib enclosure was unlikely due to the thinness of its walls and lack of towers, more or less bizarre hypotheses had been formulated at the very beginning of our research. One considered the Selib *murabba* to be a pilgrimage center where pilgrims gathered *en masse* on the patron saint's festivals.

The question of the site's nature and characteristics was definitively solved during the 2015/2016 season which was dedicated to the study of the area adjacent to the enclosure wall and the wall itself. The research was started with a narrow trench dug along its inner and outer face. In three places huge sections of the mud-brick wall were found overturned. (Plate 4). It appeared that the bigger *peribolos* in its upper section was made of mud brick and was at least 6m high. In its lower section, with an average width of 1.3m, made of unworked stone blocks there were plenty of stones set vertically in a manner resembling Roman *opus spicatum*. Dug in the sand close to the wall corners, there were rectangular and circular holes lined inside with red brick (Figure 1). They resemble the so-called trebuchet sockets known from Banganarti, Suegi West, Shofein, Haraz and Usheir fortifications (Żurawski 2013b, 133; 2016b, 373-378).

This was the first surprise, the second came with the discovery of eight double stairways built into the inner face of the *peribolos* (Figure 2). Originally there were probably 16 pairs of them or more. It means that the communication with the parapet walk on the wall top was provided by 32 or more flights of stairs of a type known for example from the fortresses of Marakul. The research of 2015/2016 provided conclusive proof that the Selib enclosure walls were, in fact, a defensive design skillfully built and equipped with

<sup>2</sup> In fact there were two *periboloi* the bigger one surrounding the site and the smaller one fencing off the church.



Figure 1. Plans of the north-eastern corner of the Selib 1 enclosure (drawing: Bogdan Żurawski).

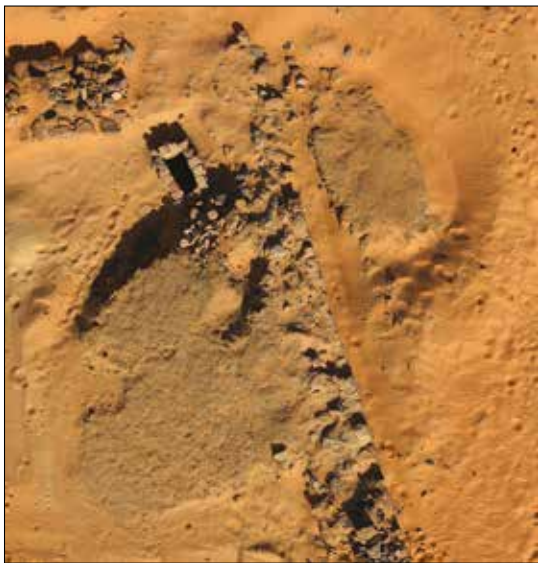


Plate 4. Airborne orthophoto of the north-eastern corner of the Selib 1 enclosure (photo: Bogdan Żurawski).

defensive walls, the well and the church. The well provided water necessary during a prolonged siege while the church delivered the sacred patronage and protection of the divine.

Before the end of the season, we also became aware of the fact that the stairs were not built into the riverine wall which included a gate equipped with a heavy stone threshold. It came as no surprise because the riverine walls in Nubian fortresses were occasionally of lighter construction, if any was provided at all.

All in all, the outcome of the last season totally changed our understanding of the Selib enclosure. There is no doubt

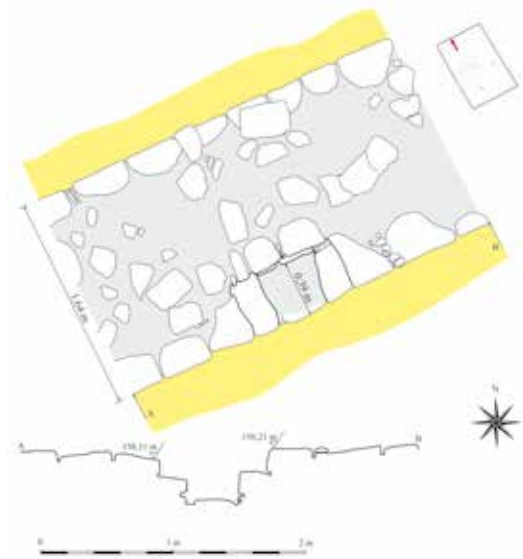


Figure 2. Plan of the two symmetrical flights of stairs made into the north-western curtain (drawing: Mariusz Drzewiecki).

now that the site was a refuge fort which served the medieval villages scattered along the right bank of the river down- and upstream from Selib as place of retreat in time of danger. It stood on the river bank, therefore, it could be supplied by the navy (cf. Żurawski 2013b, 115-117). Needless to say, it was not permanently inhabited. The local population would only seek refuge there in cases of external threat. In times of peace people probably visited the *intra muros* church. At the time of an attack by the desert dwellers (the fort was incapable of resisting any attack by a stronger force) they moved in together with their livestock. It is perhaps worth mentioning at this point that King Tokiltoeton's inscription commemorating the foundation of Ikhmindī says that it was built "for the protection of men and beasts" (Donadoni 1959, 462; Deichmann and Grossmann 1988, 83). Refuge forts are well known in Byzantine world e.g. from Byzantine Greece in 6<sup>th</sup> - 10<sup>th</sup> centuries (Koder 2005, 170).

Selib was probably supported by a well-developed early warning system. The enemy could be spotted from nearby Gebel el-Alim (where what may have been a *skopelos* (watch-tower) was found (Żurawski 2003, 156-157). The population warned of the approaching enemy could seek refuge either in Selib or in the fortress on Tanqasi Island seen by Evliya Çelebi, referred to by Waddington and Hanbury and drawn by John Gardiner Wilkinson (Prokosch 1994, 154-155; Waddington and Hanbury 1822, 66; Żurawski 2003, 50, fig. 12).

Provided with the church, the well and perhaps the basin for watering flocks Selib is a model refuge fort. In this respect it likens the Fourth Cataract forts in which, apart from a church, hardly any substantial building was found. Knowing the character of the terrain, access to the fields *etc.* it is perfectly understandable that the people preferred to live in the open settlements close to their fields and to seek refuge in the specialised defensive structures in the days of trouble.

A brief history of the excavations at Selib 1 follows:



- The earliest phase of the inner *peribolos* with the church inside was totally exposed in 2014. In the same year the excavations in the *matara* (*saqia* well) east from the church were terminated at a depth of 11m below the modern ground surface. A year before the Early Christian chapel south of the church was unearthed together with a row of standardised rooms along the western wall of the inner *peribolos*.

- The exploration of the lime-plastered basin approached by the flight of stairs, spotted earlier south of the church during geophysical prospection of the site, was finished in January 2012 (Plate 5).



Plate 5. Selib 1 site in 2011, airborne orthophoto (photos and rendering: Bogdan Żurawski).

- The latest (fifth) phase of the church was exposed in 2010 (Plate 6). It was noted two years earlier when the three small trial pits were sunk within the inner *peribolos* (Plate 3).



Plate 6. Selib 1 site in 2010, airborne orthophoto (photos and rendering: Bogdan Żurawski).

The above schedule shows that the excavations on the central *kom* within the Selib *murabba* revealed the sequence of five churches built one atop the ruins of its predecessor. They provide clear evidence for the development of Nubian church architecture in the region from the 6<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

The Selib church was dedicated to St Menas. There is a particularly solid basis for such a claim. The most important argument for it is the dedicatory inscription in Greek cut on one of the columns lying on the sandstone pavement along the northern wall of the church (Żurawski 2014, 892-893; pls 8 and 9). It records, in abbreviated form: *Zacharias basileus Mena hagios*. Both the saint's and king's names are preceded by a cross. The inscription was written when the 7<sup>th</sup>-century columns were brought from another church and installed in St Menas Church at Selib when it was rebuilt after the destruction of its predecessor. Accordingly with the tenor of the inscription the reconstruction of the Selib church was commissioned by King Zacharias in mid-9<sup>th</sup> century. St Menas was also invoked in four other inscriptions written on the northern wall of the first church built on the site. Two of them, measuring 2m and 3m respectively have been preserved completely (Deptula 2015, 127-132, 133-135). They belong to the earliest Christian inscriptions known from the territory of the medieval Nubian kingdoms and contain the earliest attestations of the office of *epideacon* and *protoeparch* in Nubia and, by induction, that of the eparch in Nubia (Deptula 2015, 131). It is worth mentioning that St Menas is addressed in the Selib texts as *trismakarios*, the thrice blessed (Deptula 2015, 126, 133). The latter epithet translated into visual language could be rendered as three martyr crowns in the illustration from the Nubian manuscript from Edfu showing a mounted St Menas (Lübcke 1996, fig. 264).

The oldest church on site (Phase I Church) datable to the 6<sup>th</sup> century was provided with a shallow rectangular apse (Plate 7). Its walls were built with a mud-brick core lined on both sides with red brick. Such a technique with Meroitic parallels was encountered in the so-called Mosaic Church at el-Ghaddar (Żurawski 1997, 186).<sup>3</sup> In the *diakonikon* there was a keyhole-shaped baptismal font accessed by a single flight of steps.

The spatial layout of this church is dominated by an unusual arrangement of the columns supporting the roof. The places in which they once stood are marked in Plate 7 by the corresponding foundation stones. The pattern of these stones suggests that the first church at Selib was provided with both western and eastern return aisles (cf. Grossmann 2002, 19 nos 9 -11, 20, 26). It is an arrangement found in a couple of early Egyptian basilicas among them one in Abu Mena (Grossmann 2002, 19 n. 10). Two entrances in the southern wall are paralleled by an antithetic northern entrance and a niche. The ambo was set in between the two middle column of the northern aisle.

The small diameters of some openings in the pavement left after removal of the columns suggests that there were very narrow roof supports. Although a fragment of a stone column of matching diameter was found, it is more plausible that wooden posts were used.

<sup>3</sup> The walls in el-Ghaddar church were composed of two vertical sections, the outer one was made of red brick, the inner one of mud brick (Żurawski 1997, 182).

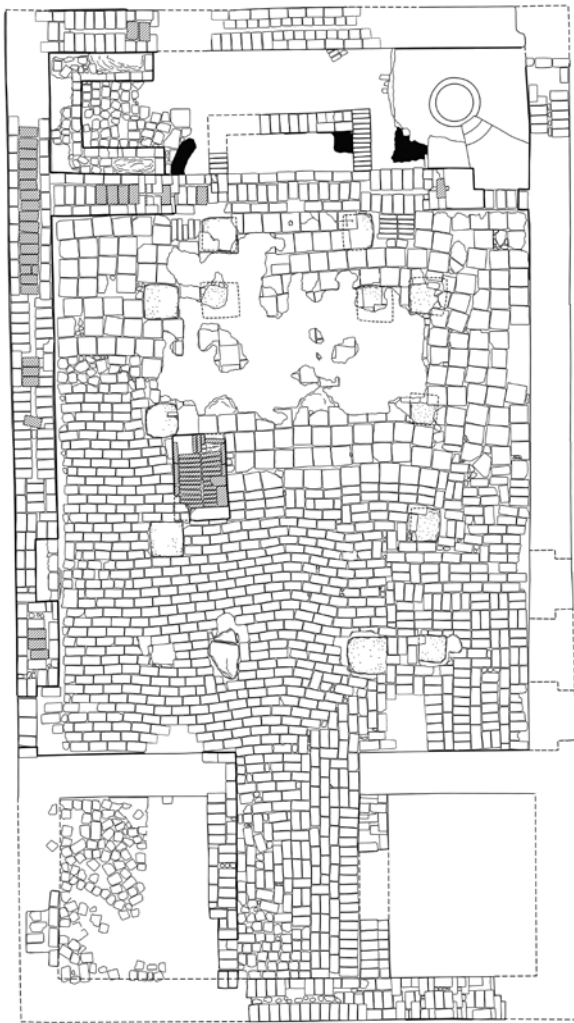


Figure 3. Plan of the Phase I Church (drawing: Aneta Cedro).

The earliest ceramics from Selib church are the white-slipped bowls, saucers and beakers made of kaolin clay or Nile silt burnt in an oxidising atmosphere. The repertoire of decorative motives is varied. Some designs are apparently derived from Meroitic imagery (Plate 8).

The 7<sup>th</sup>-century pottery collection retrieved from the



Plate 8. Sixth century bowl (WSEL 1/26/2011) found in the fill of the earliest church at Selib (photo: Aneta Cedro).



Plate 7. Airborne orthophoto of the Phase I Church (photos and rendering: Bogdan Żurawski).

fill of the earliest church is dominated by the typical Early Christian metoped Red Ware bowls and some Orange Ware specimens. To the category of the liturgical vessels such as chalices and patens, belong also small ewers which in Selib, Old Dongola and Banganarti are totally unknown from contemporary domestic assemblages. To the Selib ceramic curiosities belongs what might be the arm of a cross (?) made of terracotta (Plate 9). Some of the oil lamps found in the fill of the Phase I church were imported from Aswan, some were produced locally. Most of the earliest lamps were found in the *bema* of the earliest church (Plate 10).

The provenance of the two lamps (one seen on Plate 11) is not certain. They were made in a mould, as the Lower Nubian and Egyptian exemplars, but the quality of execution is much inferior to their northern counterparts. They could be a local product. Altogether during the excavations of the five phases of the St Menas Church, 42 complete or nearly complete

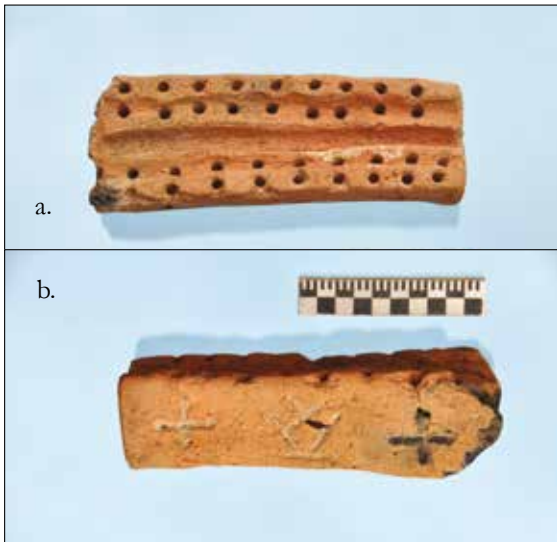


Plate 9. a. Fragment of a ceramic cross (?), inv. no. WSEL1/03/2014. b. the same but in side view (photos: Aneta Cedro).

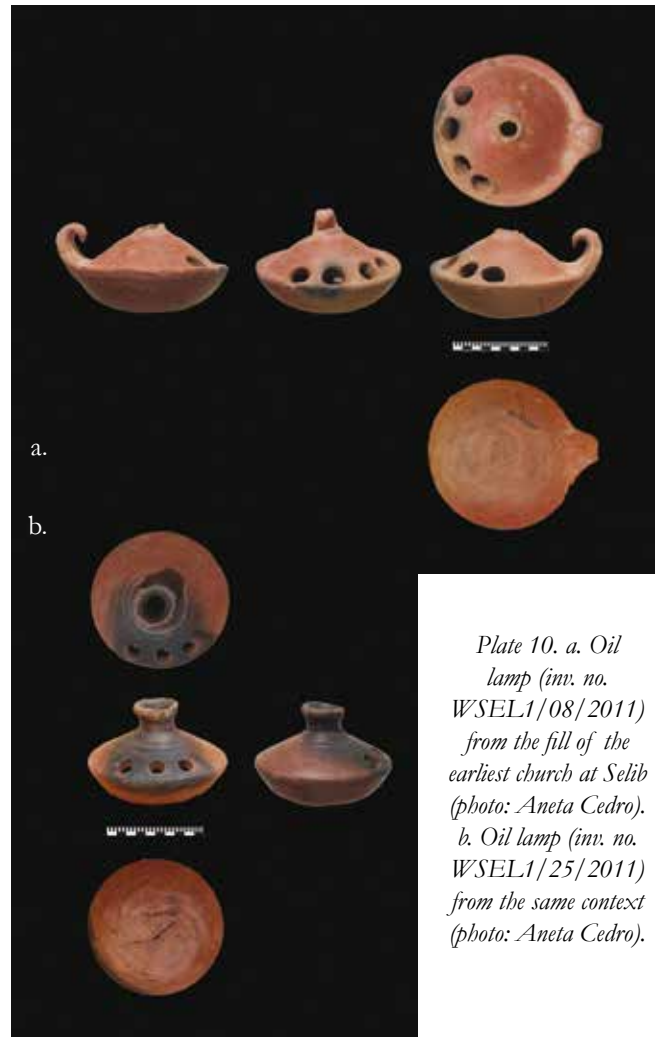


Plate 10. a. Oil lamp (inv. no. WSEL1/08/2011) from the fill of the earliest church at Selib (photo: Aneta Cedro). b. Oil lamp (inv. no. WSEL1/25/2011) from the same context (photo: Aneta Cedro).

lamps were discovered, together with 116 lamp fragments.

The excavations in Selib have brought to light a plethora of objects used in the liturgical practices performed in the local church in the earliest phase of Christianity in the region. Some are unique. Among a dozen or so fragmentarily preserved chalices, juglets and patens, there is a terracotta roundel provided with a circular aperture in the upper side. Made of pinkish red clay, it is decorated with a repeated stamped motif of a haloed orant figure shown *en face* with arms held parallel to the upper body. It is accompanied by figures of animals set in profile.

When the first two fragments of the object seen on Plate 12 were found it looked like the orant figure in the metope was St Menas. The iconography of the saint and the findspot, near the Menas church allowed such an identification. In 2015, the object was supplemented by two larger fragments found in a debris layer outside the eastern wall of the smaller *peribolos vis à vis* a huge cruciform tomb. After reconstruction they appeared to be part of a roundel of 350mm in diameter, of which two-thirds was preserved (Plate 12). I ventured to identify it as a sort of tabernacle known in Coptic liturgy as *kursi el-kas*, that is a *throne of the chalice* (Żurawski 2016a, 217-219). It is the earliest object of its kind known predating the next *karasi el-kas* by at least 400 years. It is the earliest tabernacle known so far and is firmly dated to the 7<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century at the latest.

The newly fitted fragments allowed the reconstruction of the metoped decoration on the side wall. The putative St Menas in orant posture turned out to be St Thecla. The realistically rendered lionesses which played an important role in Thecla's martyrdom at Antioch in Pisidia, impressed on both sides of the orant saint, gave a very solid basis for such an identification (Figure 4).

The cult of St Thecla was much associated with that of St



Plate 11. Moulded lamp (inv. no. WSEL1/01/2013) from the Selib church (photo: Aneta Cedro).

Menas. On a dozen or so ampullae she is represented on one side, while St Menas is depicted on the other (Davis 1998, 335- 339). St Thecla's sanctuary was somewhere in Mareotis very close to Abu Mena (Davis 1998, 314-315).



Plate 12. *Selib tabernacle* (inv. no. WSEL1/145/2011-2012) (photo: Aneta Cedro).



Figure 4. Tracing of the decoration on the side wall of the *Selib tabernacle* (drawing: Aneta Cedro).

These Menas-Thecla associations made us reconsider the character of the red-brick chapel found south of the St. Menas Church (Figure 5). It was in the outer, reconstructed wall of this chapel where the first fragment of our *kursi el-keas* was found. Judging from the stratigraphy and materials used it is one of the earliest structures raised within the Selib enclosure. It was originally provided with a sort of a porch made of reused Meroitic column drums.

This putative sanctuary of St Thecla reveals features very

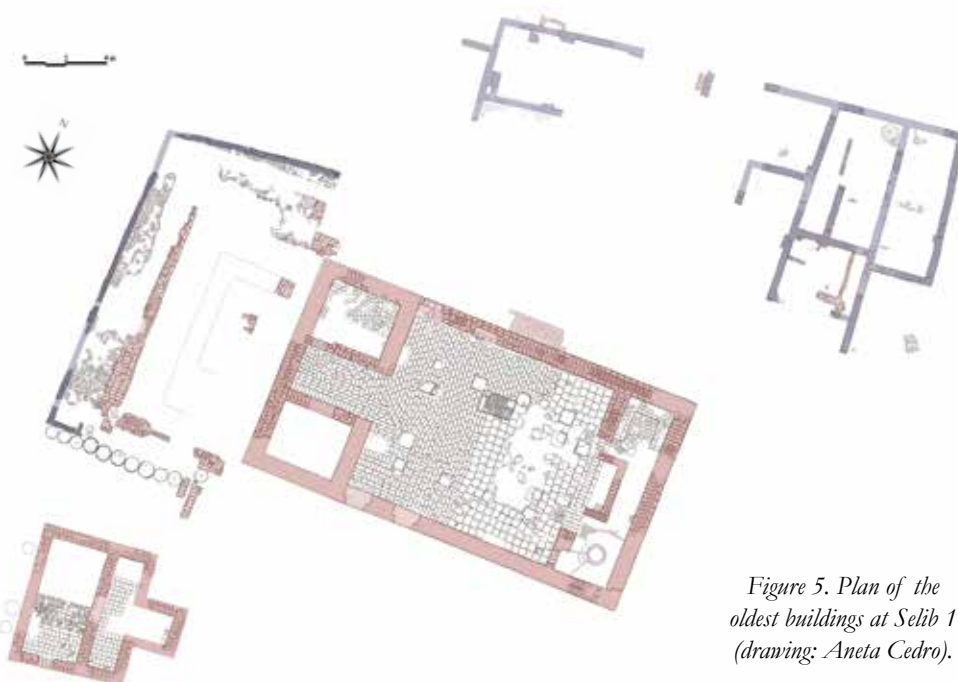


Figure 5. Plan of the oldest buildings at *Selib 1* (drawing: Aneta Cedro).

rarely encountered in church architecture in Egypt and almost unknown in the Middle Nile region. First of all, it is a building of reversed proportions, i.e. its width is greater than its length. It is also provided with an exterior apse protruding beyond the eastern wall. The only Nubian churches with a projecting apse are the early church on *Kom D* in Old Dongola, the North Church at Tamit and the first phase of the Central Church in Ikhmindī (Dobrowolski 1988, Adams 2009, II, 139-140; Deichmann and Grossmann 1988, 17-18).

The plan of the earliest structures at Selib appear on Figure 5. Apart from St Menas's Church and the putative chapel of St Thecla there was only one structure of a domestic/residential character. The so-called Northern Building was raised on the northern side of St Menas's Church. The walls of its main room (situated in the western part) are covered with a thin coating of lime plaster (Figure 6). The pilasters suggest the presence of vaults in this room but these would be hardly possible on the walls one brick thick. Both exits from the Northern Building opened towards the St Menas Church. Its mode of construction looks

more akin to the neighbouring Meroitic settlement than to any known early Christian dwellings in the region. Although its manner of construction resembles Meroitic architectural practices it is soundly dated to the Early Christian period by multiple pottery fragments.

The Phase II Church, marked in yellow on Figure 7, datable to the 7<sup>th</sup> century (?) shared with its predecessor the side walls only. Its inner space was much bigger because of a spacious exonarthex built probably to accommodate the growing number of Christian converts in the region. A similar extension of the western part was observed in the contemporary Mosaic Church in el-Ghaddar near Old Dongola (Żurawski 1997, fig. 6). The Selib exonarthex was abutted by a *mas-taba*-like buttress in which column drums from a Meroitic temple were used. This temple should be somewhere nearby because the amount of spolia used in the church construction and the excess found in excavations was huge.

The reliefs on the drums are much worn by the action of the elements, however, it is possible to decipher the general character of some scenes (Plate 13).

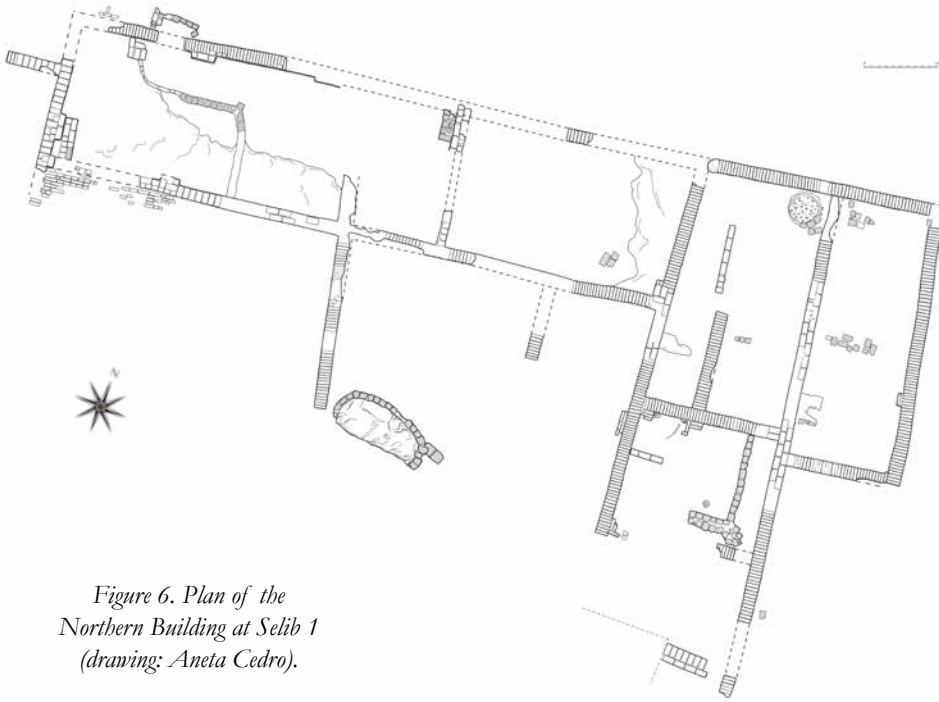


Figure 6. Plan of the Northern Building at Selib 1 (drawing: Aneia Cedro).

The typical baptismal tank was found in the southern sacristy (Fig. 8) of the Phase III Church that can be tentatively dated to the 8<sup>th</sup> century.

The Phase III Church was also provided with an oven which due to its location within the inner sacral precinct (inner *peribolos*) could be tentatively interpreted as the *Bet lehem* (a house of bread), the place where the Eucharistic bread is prepared.

The diagnostic feature of the Phase III Church however, was not its liturgical installations but the way its roof was supported. It is the only Nubian church in which the vertical supports bearing the roof beams were made of wood. That this is the correct interpretation of the observed remains cannot be in doubt. Circular hollows were made at regular intervals in the two longitudinal, continuous

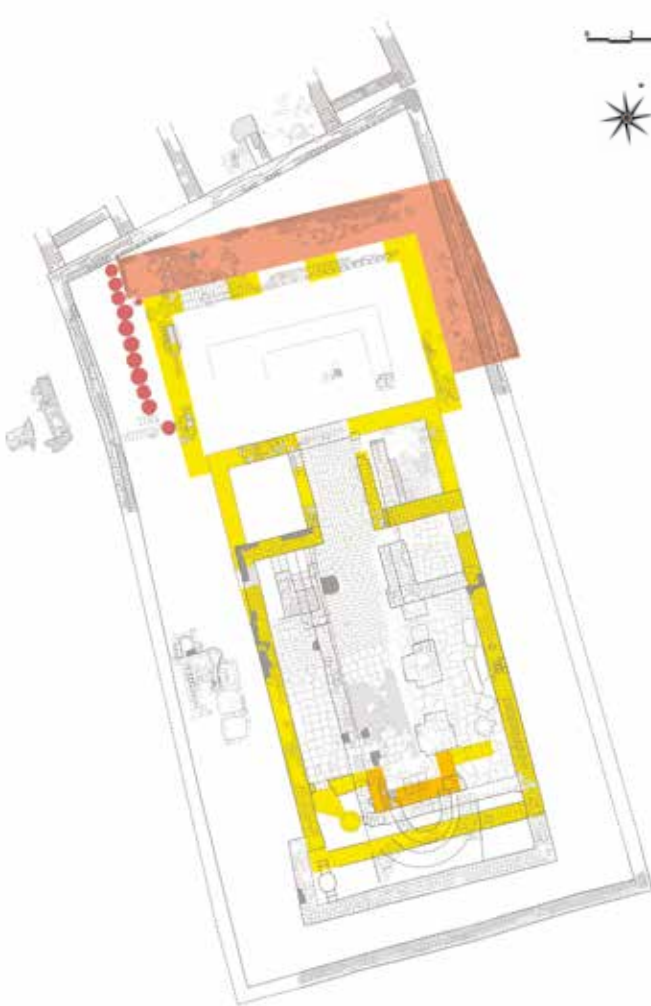


Figure 7. Phase II Church (marked in yellow) the mastaba-abutment marked in red (drawing: Bartos $\acute{z}$  Wojciechowski).

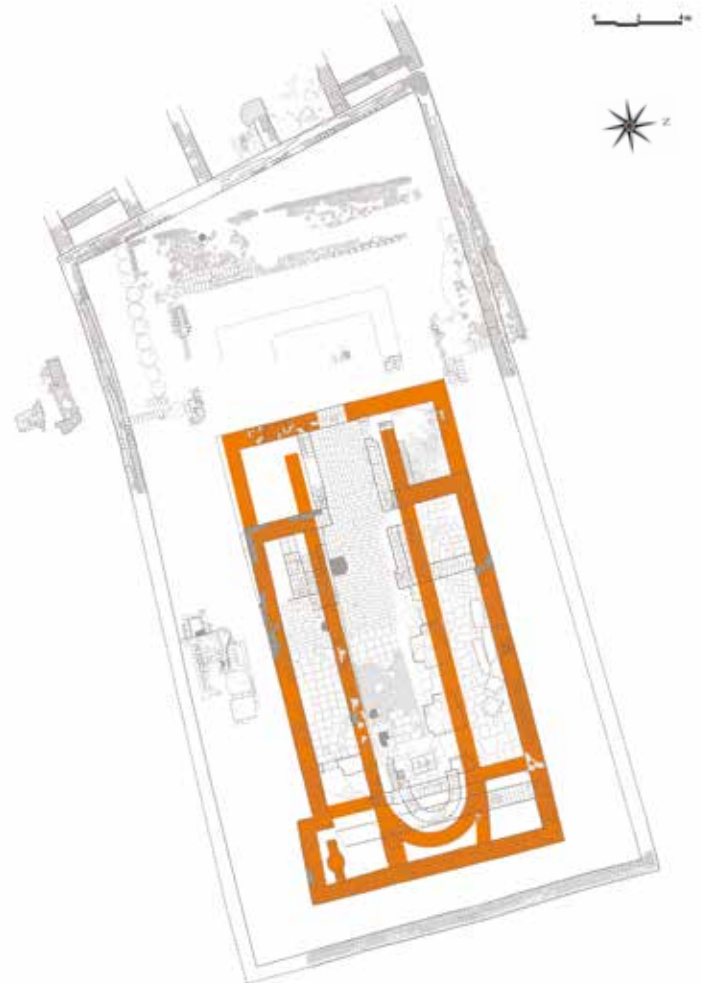


Figure 8. Phase III Church (marked in red) (drawing: Bartos $\acute{z}$  Wojciechowski).





Plate 13. A Meroitic column drum reused in the mastaba – abutment of the western part of Phase II Church (photo: Bogdan Żurawski).

footings, and in some of these hollows, fragments of wooden post remained (Plate 14).

The Phase IV Church was raised in the mid-9<sup>th</sup> century by King Zacharias almost exclusively from spolia originating from at least two sacral buildings. For sure the columns and capitals were taken from a church that was built at least 150 years earlier.



Plate 14. Foundation of the Phase III Church with fragment wooden pier still in situ (photo: Bogdan Żurawski).

The Phase IV and Phase V churches differed only in the way of supporting the roof. In the earlier building it was carried on the columns, in the later one, the vaults rested on brick piers.

In both of latest churches there was a rectangular compartment in the south-east corner where in the typical Early Christian church in Nubia a baptistery is to be expected (cf. Plate 15). It lacks the diagnostics of a typical baptismal font but, being covered inside and outside with a heavy crust of

lime plaster, it could have served as a place for baptism by aspersion (?).

The nave of the two youngest phases of the church was paved with ferruginous sandstone slabs robbed from another building, possibly a Meroitic temple, in the 9<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century (during excavations, more *spolia* of Meroitic provenance were found) (Plate 15). The chancel was paved with terracotta tiles, some bearing traces of relief decoration.



Plate 15. Phase V Church (of St Menas) under excavations of 2010 (kite photo: Bogdan Żurawski).

The amount of ceramics from excavations in the late churches is usually small and St Menas Church is no exception to the rule. Apart from a handful of potsherds and some window-grille fragments the latest phases of St Menas Church yielded five flat-bottomed pottery vessels that were sunk into the pavement around the altar. They were found empty, nevertheless, their purpose as the containers for the elements used during services, or for the liturgical vessels seems to be certain.

Among the pottery fragments datable to the Late Christian period there was, however, one masterpiece that hardly finds an analogy among late medieval Nubian ceramics. It was found broken into two pieces outside the northern entrance to the church in a layer composed mostly of the brick debris from the destruction of the latest church on the site.

Its discovery was one of the highlights of the second season of excavations in Selib. It is an earthenware tray with



an external diameter of 800mm, made of rather soft, porous clay, with a conspicuous carbon core streak. The depression in the centre of the bottom adds 90mm to the 200mm height of the main body (Żurawski 2013a, 774).

The closest known parallel to the Selib tray was found by Shinnie and Chittick outside the northern wall of the *katholikon* of the el-Ghazali monastery. Its eight-lobed form, of which only three survived, and the depression in the centre provide the main points of similarity (Shinnie and Chittick 1961, 28, pl. XIIa). The el-Ghazali tray is, however, smaller (dia. 500mm, height 105mm); and its upper rim is covered with an inscription in Greek. Moreover, the lobe terminations are decorated with incised sketches of a human face, alternately of a man and a woman.

I published the Selib tray in 2013 (Żurawski 2013a) suggesting it was a paten (Greek *diskos*, Arabic *sinjyal*). A peculiar paten in fact, combining the function of chalice and the paten itself that was plausibly used for Communion by intinction. Its lobed compartments were used to hold the Holy Bread whereas the central depression was intended to contain the Eucharistic Wine. Both elements were administered jointly to the laity by intinction during the Holy Communion. The officiating priest took the morsel of the Holy Bread and steeped it in the Wine in order to enable the communicant to receive the two elements conjointly.

In 2013 it was a hypothesis, in 2014 it was taken for granted because of the discovery of another piece belonging to the object (Plate 16). The missing piece was a fragment of an asterisk (*asteriskos* in Greek, in Arabic *gubbal*) i.e. a sort of dome consisting of two half hoops crossed at right angle placed above the paten to prevent the paten veil (Coptic *mappa*, Arabic *lifafah*) from touching the Holy Elements. The

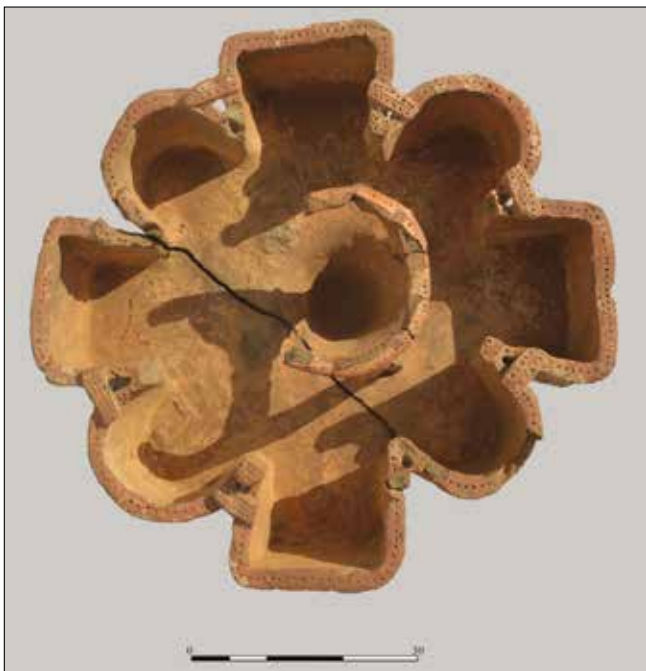


Plate 16. Pottery paten (inv. no. WSEL1/117/2011) with asteriskos fragment glued in place (photo: Aneta Cedro).

11<sup>th</sup> century Byzantine mosaic from St Sophia in Kiev shows the paten and *asteriskos* lying separately on the altar (Logvin 1971, fig. 52).

The Selib and el-Ghazali patens are dated to the 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century, i.e. to the period which witnessed the introduction and consolidation of the Communion by intinction in the Byzantine rite (cf. Żurawski 2013a, 781).

The discovery in Selib, to the south of Old Dongola, of the 11<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> century paten inspired by the contemporary Byzantine ritual proves Nubia's close contacts with the Byzantine world at this time.

The Selib paten is a heavy object which because of the nodule on the bottom side required a special, hollowed support. In Selib church, it probably stood not far from the place it was found. The sandstone capital with a circular hollow in the middle of its upper surface found near the northern entrance to the church made an ideal stand for it (cf. Plate 15). That was also the best place for communicating the people leaving the church.

All the window grilles discovered in Selib were made of terracotta (Plate 17). The moulded window grilles made of lime plaster known from the Upper Church in Banganarti became popular in the region after the last Selib church was built.

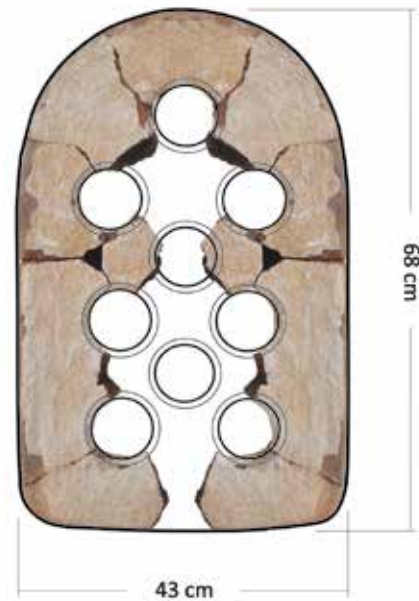


Plate 17. Ceramic window grille from the St Menas Church (photo and reconstruction: Aneta Cedro).

The *saqia* complex installed east of the St Menas Church belong to the Early Christian period. The uppermost ring of the red-brick well casing was in 2008 covered with a layer of sand a metre or so thick. Therefore, it was beyond the reach of the Fluxgate magnetometer which was used by Tomasz Herbich's team for a geomagnetic survey of the site. Luckily enough a bricked circular enclosure in which the horizontal cogwheel driven by animals engaged the vertical one was registered (because it was situated higher in the stratigraphy of the site).

At the depth of 11m, water appeared in the well. The salt incrustations, which appeared 1.5m above, mark the original ground water level when the well was dug. With the use of a pump, we managed to dig 1.5m beneath the modern water level. The well's casing, however, and the layer of mud within (containing abundant sherds of *qamadis*) continued downwards.

At the depth of 4.5m below the modern surface the regular brick pattern in the well is disturbed by a zig-zag band of overfired bricks set within two rows of bricks laid in rowlock course (Plate 18). Beneath there is another disconnected pattern of triangles also made of overfired brick. Why the builders took an effort to decorate the interior of the well



Plate 18. The zig-zag pattern made of overfired brick within the well at Selib 1 (photo: Bogdan Żurawski).

where the light hardly penetrates, because of the cover made of *dom* palm logs, remains an enigma. There is little alternative but to accept a purely aesthetic reason.

The water drawn from the well was discharged towards an area that on a chart of geomagnetic anomalies looked like five parallel rows of rounded objects (the geophysicists did not preclude a hypostyle hall). I must say we were a little bit disappointed with the results of archaeological testing which proved that the putative hypostyle hall was a garden and the would-be columns were lenses of mud in the sand.

The water from the *saqia* was also directed to the red-brick basin plastered inside with lime. It was accessed by a broad flight of stairs (Plates 19 and 20). Its purpose is a matter of debate. It was thought to be the Epiphany tank, one of these early specimens which according to the textual evidence were quite big, or a *lustrum* that is an ablution tank. After the discoveries of the last season, I would rather see there a place where the animals could be watered during the temporary inhabitation of the refuge fort. Some water pipes that could be used for conducting the water from the *saqia* to the tank were found but none of them *in situ*.

The discovery of the 6<sup>th</sup>/7<sup>th</sup> century *saqia* occasioned the Qatar-Sudan Archaeological Project titled *mathaf es-saqia* (*Saqia* museum in Selib). As a partial realisation of the project,



Plate 19. Beginning of the excavation in the red-brick basin (photo: Katarzyna Solarska).



Plate 20. The red brick basin after excavation (photo: Katarzyna Solarska).

two complete historic *sawaqi* were purchased. Among them the famous Artigasha *saqia* which in 2013 was filmed by the Sudan TV as the last *saqia* in the Sudan. In 2014, however, it was found dismantled and abandoned on the shore. After signing the notarial act of purchase the Artigasha *saqia* was brought to Selib together with 25 *qamadis*, one *qadus* was broken during fierce bargaining with the owner (Plate 21). The *saqia* reconstruction began as the latest episode in the process of creating the archaeological zone and local museum. The latter activities were sponsored by the QSAP. In February 2016 the *saqia* was prepared for mounting the cogwheels (Plate 22).

In the 2015/2016 season the Mission also managed to build a 350m<sup>2</sup> storeroom with a large museum hall where the history of *saqia* in the Middle Nile will be illustrated by posters and objects (Plate 23). It is well protected against the



Plate 21. Transporting the bigger cogwheel of the Artigasha saqia to Selib (photo: Aneta Cedro).



Plate 22. Reconstructing the Selib saqia in 2016 (photo: Bogdan Żurawski).

rainwater floods by a dyke built after the dramatic climatic event of 2014 which caused serious flooding. The church was filled with sand and prepared for reinstatement of the stone pavement, dismantled in 2010 and stored north of the church.

A hindrance to the excavations in Selib were the Christian graves *intra muros*. They were concentrated in the western part of the inner *peribolos* and in the upper layers of the Northern Building. The most imposing tomb in Selib (labelled Eastern Tomb) was raised in the middle of the eastern wall of the smaller *peribolos* (Plate 24). Originally it was provided with a stone epitaph which survived in several tiny fragments containing only two letters. Beneath, two individuals, a man and woman, were buried in two parallel crypts. A burial of a child was found dug into the grave superstructure. No grave goods were found. The reasons for the strong purple discoloration of the skeleton buried in the northern crypt remains an enigma at the moment.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup>The same type of staining particularly on the joints on Christian period bodies was found in the cemetery at 3-J-23 in the Fourth Cataract at



Plate 23. Oblique kite photograph of the Selib 1 site in 2016 (photo: Bogdan Żurawski).

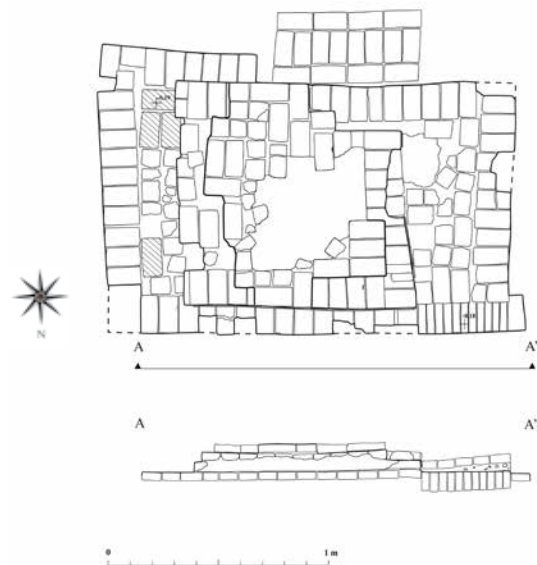


Figure 9. Plan and side view of the Eastern Tomb (drawing: Aneta Cedro).

## Selib 2

Eight hundred metres to the north from the Selib *murabba* there is a Meroitic settlement coded Selib 2 (cf. Plate 1). The first buildings, the so-called storeroom, two houses south east of it and three other smaller houses had been cleared already in 2008. More were traced by Fluxgate magnetometer dur-

et-Tereif (D. A. Welsby pers. comm.). I also owe to Dr Welsby an important reference to the forthcoming report by R. Whiting, in which such purple stains are attributed to Phosphatidate Phosphatase, an enzyme excreted by some fungi (Garrard Cole and Tony Waldron, UCL, pers. comms in Whiting forth., 124).



Plate 24. Oblique view of the Eastern Tomb  
(photo: Bogdan Żurawski).



Plate 25. Airborne orthophoto of the Selib 2 site with the houses hitherto excavated marked on it (photos and rendering: Bogdan Żurawski).

ing the same season. The excavations started two years later (Plate 25). Altogether eight houses, a storeroom and a small subsidiary building coded S2.03/12 on the plan (Plate 25), were explored during the 2010, 2011/2012 and 2015 seasons (cf. Hajduga 2013). The first assessment of the surface ceramics from Selib 2 site was undertaken by Dobiesława Bagińska (Bagińska 2015, *passim*).

The first structure to be excavated was a mud-brick storeroom, coded Building 1. Within its partly collapsed walls six almost complete storage jars and a collection of



Plate 26. Stamped jar sealing (inv. no. WSEL2/30/2011)  
(photo: Rokšana Hajduga).

120 stamped jar stoppers were found (Plate 26). A ceramic tamper to wedge clay and 30 stone burnishers found in one space suggest pottery making in the Meroitic village. Such a domestic context for manufacturing large jars pottery in which the vessels were formed and dried in the village (in a dwelling) and then transported 200m to the place where they were fired, was observed in Jabaruna village on the left bank of the Nile in December 2015.

Three copper-alloy rings and a faience scarab were also found on the surface within the outer walls of the storeroom and in its immediate vicinity. All the houses located south east from the storeroom are quite uniformly built of mud brick. Their walls are, as a rule, one brick thick.

The vertical holes in the walls suggest the presence of *rakuba* like shelters among the mud-brick houses, however, these holes could be also used for fastening the frames of vertical looms. It is all the more possible because these two holes were found in the wall close to the greatest concentration of the loom weights on site (in the house coded S2.02/12 (cf. Plate 25) explored during the 2011/2012 season when a collection of 162 loom weights was unearthed.

The buildings grouped together on the south side of the storeroom made a sort of industrial district. People who inhabited the maze of rooms adjacent to the storeroom were involved in various activities such as spinning, weaving and pottery making. Two spinning bowls, which were found in two separate places, suggest flax cultivation in the area around Selib in the 1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> century AD (Figure 10). The Selib spinning bowls belong to the latest exemplars of the tradition that can be traced back to the Neolithic. In Europe, the earliest spinning bowls were found in Diakowo in western Bulgaria, datable for the mid-fifth millennium BC (Krauß 2001, 142, 144). The Selib bowls are the youngest exemplars of this tradition known from the Middle Nile.

The best-preserved building within the settlement excavated so far was explored during the 2011/2012 season (coded S2.01/12 on Plate 25, cf. Hajduga and Solaraska, 2015). Its walls survived up to 1.4m above the foundation course. Among the gorgeous collection of objects found within there were 33 complete or nearly complete pottery vessels. The association of the house with the process of weaving is attested

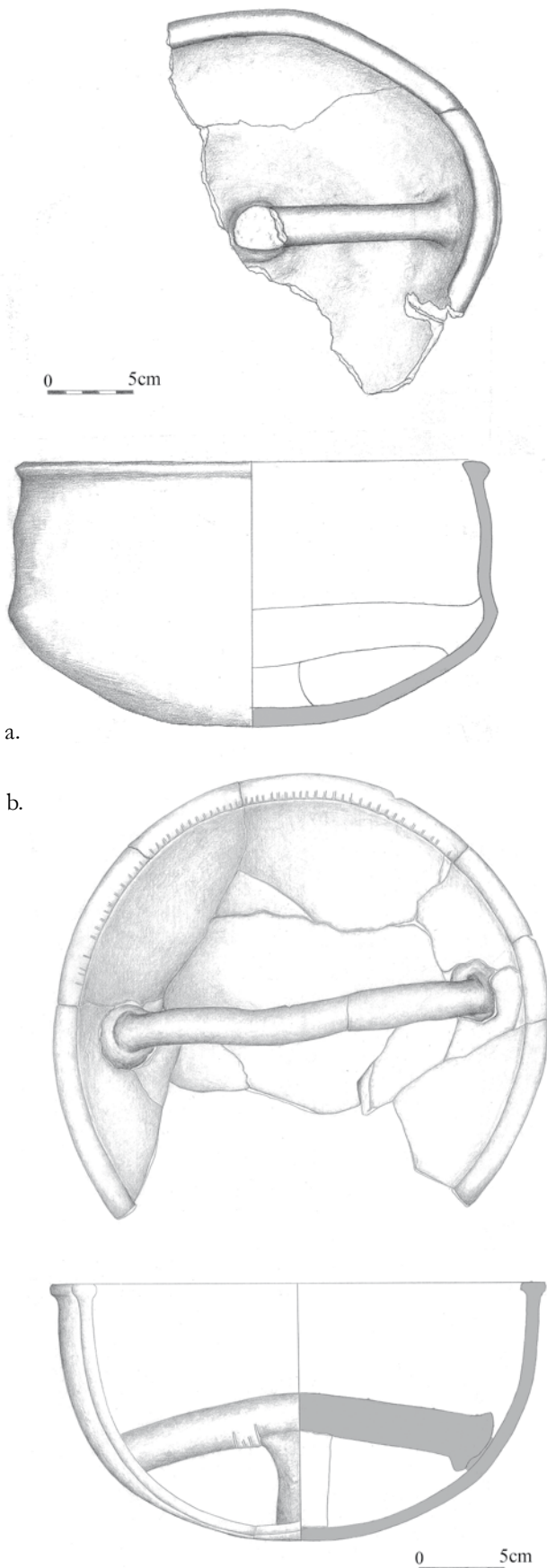


Figure 10. a. Spinning bowl (inv.no. SEL2/42/2011) (drawing: Katarzyna Molga). b. Spinning bowl (inv. no. SEL2/63/2011), (drawing: Roksana Hajduga). Scale 1:4.

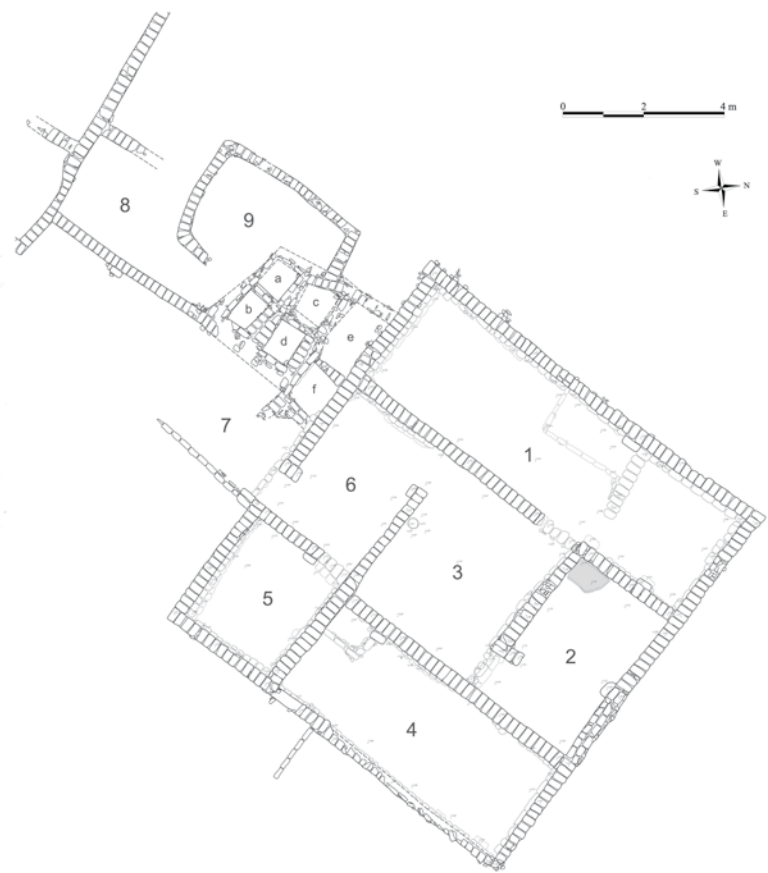


Figure 11. Plan of House 1 excavated in the season 2011/2012 (drawing: Roksana Hajduga & Bartosz Wojciechowski).

by 95 loom weights found inside. A kitchen was probably located outside in Space number 9 (Figure 11). Some storage vessels were found inverted with bottom parts cut off. Better quality tableware, the eggshell cup included, was found in the room 6 situated near the entrance (cf. Figure 11). Two



Plate 27. A lid (inv. no. WSEL2/88/2011-2012) (photo: Aneta Cedro).

lids found there were provided with axial ventilation hole (Plates 27 and 28). The vessel (inv. no. WSEL2.199/11-12) preserved only in a tiny fragment was made of kaolin clay (Plate 29). Originally it was c. 140mm in diameter and had vertical walls. The fragment preserved shows a naked woman holding a bunch of round fruits attached to the twig.

Exploration of the Meroitic settlement at Selib was re-



Plate 28. A lid (inv. no. WSEL2/109/2011-2012) (photo: Aneta Cedro).



Plate 29. Fragment of a vessel made of kaolin clay (inv. no. WSEL2/199/2011-2012) (photo: Aneta Cedro).

sumed in 2015. The excavations were preceded by geophysical soundings carried out in 2013. Altogether four houses were explored between January and March 2015 (cf. Plate 25). Although they are part of the same settlement they substantially differ from their neighbours excavated in 2011/2012. First of all their orientation is different and the house layouts are less regular.

The location of House 5, in the north-eastern part of the settlement beneath House 4 qualifies it among the earliest structures on site (the western corner of House 4 overlapped the eastern wall of House 5). Therefore it was explored first.

It was hoped that the exploration of the sequence of two superimposed buildings would provide data on the stratigraphy of the site. House 5 (Plate 30) is a two-roomed structure consisted of two similar rooms, of which the northern one is divided into two compartments by a low divider. Both houses were raised without foundation, with walls (as a rule)

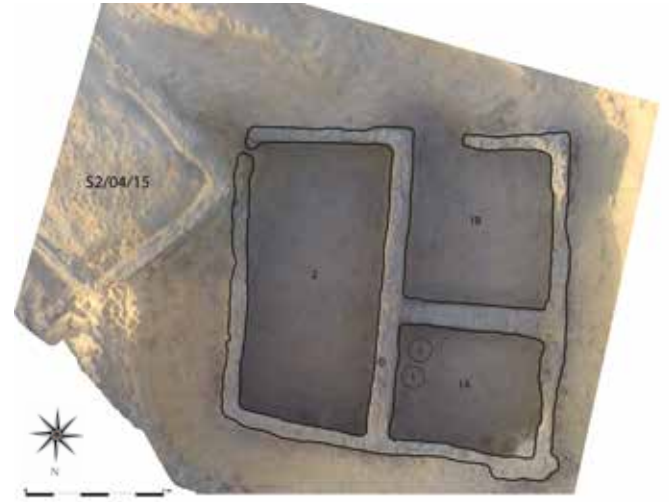


Plate 30. Orthophotograph of House 5 on Selib 2 (photos and rendering: Roksana Hajduga).

one brick thick. Inside House 5 two vessels were found, both filled with sand mixed with charcoals, *dom* palm fruits, goat droppings, ash and some animal bones. A large painted jar with tapering neck, datable to the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD or even earlier, was found inverted in the layer of ash and organic debris, with the bottom part intentionally cut off.

This jar and a deep bowl found next to it were certainly used in the process of preparing food on charcoal put into the vessel sunk into the sand as it is still practised in the region by the Sudanese Arabs. During ethnological research conducted in December 2015, the following testimony was obtained from the Mission's cook Mrs Attiyat Djadu Mansur in an interview on 12<sup>th</sup> December. Atiyat described in detail the method used by the Arabs for baking a kind of crumpets called *malel*:

*for their preparation, a variety of sorghum called mariq is used. The cut plant beads are dried for several days, then pounded on a stone, and crushed in a mortar to obtain a flour which, after the addition of some salt is mixed with water. Oblong cakes formed of the dough are called malel. They are baked in a pit dug in the sand, on the bottom of which are lit some charcoals. The glowing charcoals are covered with a layer of sand, and the crumpets are put on it. Then the pit is buried with sand. After a specified time which depends on the amount of charcoals and the outside temperature the cakes are taken out, wiped of sand and consumed.*

(noted by A. Leligowicz)

The above description explains the archaeological evidence registered during the excavation of Selib 2 in a dozen or so cases where large bowls or ceramic containers (amphorae or huge jars) with the bottom cut off were buried inverted in



the sand. Inside apart from ash, charcoal, goat droppings etc. were found. They were probably used as ovens.

The vertical holes in the walls of House 4 could serve for planting the legs of the loom (Plate 31). House 6 was a trapezoid-shaped building (Plate 32). The rectangular House 7, partially excavated, was added to its southern wall at the later date. In Room 5 of House 6 there was a concentration of nine vessels sunk inverted into the mud floor. Two of them



Plate 31. Orthophotograph of House 4 (photos and rendering: Roksana Hajduga).

were found filled with ash, charcoal and burned *dom* palm fruits. House 8 S2/08/15, occupied an area of c. 100m<sup>2</sup> (Plate 33). It is a multiphase unit, which, at least in its latest phase, was entered from above. In its present form, it resembles two houses built one into another.

The nearest known cemetery which chronologically overlaps with Selib 2 lies 1.2km to the north west. It was accidentally found by Ayman Sir al-Khatim a local resident while he levelled the ground for fields. During the rescue excavation of the plundered graves four incomplete, co-mingled adult skeletons and the naturally mummified body of a child were found (Plate 34). In the area around the graves, four gilded glass beads and a copper-alloy ring were found. No trace of

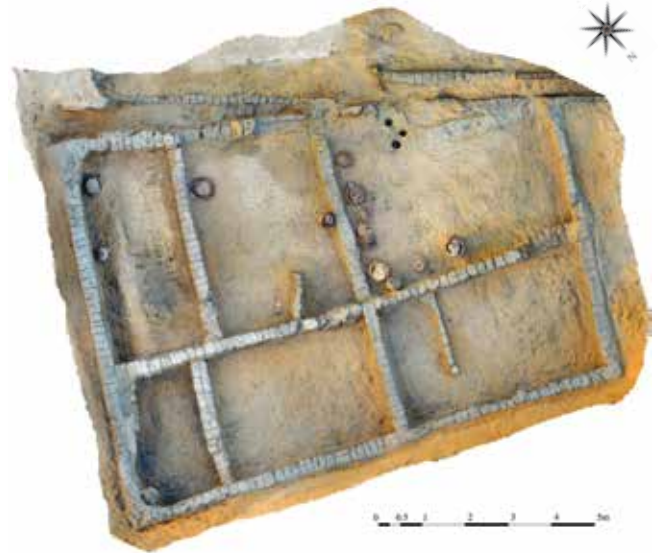


Plate 32. Orthophotograph of House 6 (photos and rendering: Roksana Hajduga).



Plate 33. Orthophotograph of House 8 (photos and rendering: Roksana Hajduga).

the grave superstructure was noticed (the sepulchres may have been marked on the surface by tumuli which were levelled when the area was taken over for cultivation).

### Selib 3

Site Selib 3, an elevated *kom* (Plate 1), lies on the same side of the Nile palaeochannel as Selib 2. The distance between the palaeochannel and Selib 1 and Selib 2 is roughly the same. In 2010 we decided to dig a sondage on top of the *kom* having in mind the local oral testimony recorded in 1984 by Grzymiski (Grzymiski 1987, 9). The local elders claimed that



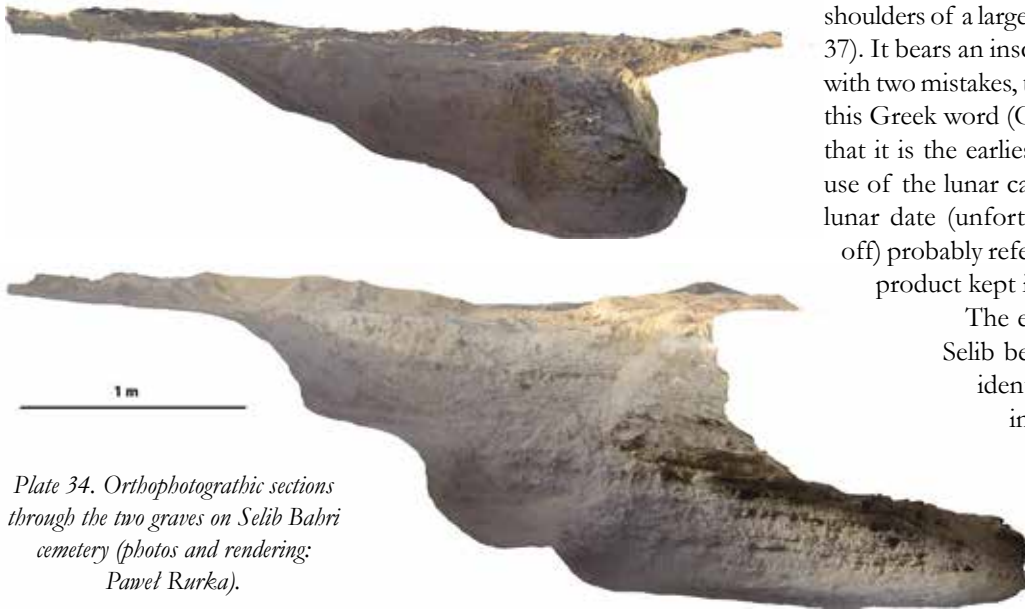


Plate 34. Orthophotographic sections through the two graves on Selib Babri cemetery (photos and rendering: Paweł Rurka).

worked stone blocks were extracted from this *kom* in the past. We started excavations hoping to find the missing Meroitic temple, part of which we had already found in Selib 1. Two archer's thumb rings found on the surface and the mud-brick house of unusual construction on top of the *kom*, which was probably used by the first Christian squatters in Selib, consolidated our hopes. The *kom* turned out to be a natural elevation made of clear aeolian sand. The archers' thumb rings were the only stone objects found on the site. However, we were compensated for the failed attempt by the discovery of a multicultural settlement spanning the late Meroitic and early Christian period, at the foot of the *kom*. It does not look very impressive on the plot of geomagnetic anomalies but it provided some interesting discoveries. First of all it yielded data on the everyday life of the pre-Christian population living there in two-roomed houses using vessels almost identical with those used in Meroitic settlement nearby.

This phase of the Selib 3 site was almost totally destroyed either by the Nile or by rainwater floods. The subsequent settlement built in the Transitional/Early Christian period shared the fate of its predecessor – it was also swept away. The only house that survived the flood or floods was located in a commanding position on a prominent elevation (Figure 12, Plate 35). Of the short-lived Early Christian occupation of Selib 3 remained a huge midden in the riverward part of the site. It had accumulated throughout the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries. On the magnetic anomalies chart, it is marked as a long line at the foot of the *kom*. It is composed of ash, animal bones and a multitude of potsherds.

Among the mass of the earliest Christian ceramics here were thin walled bowls made of kaolin clay, stamped inside and outside. They were mixed with regular red ware metoped bowls known from Old Dongola and the neighbouring Selib 1 site (Plate 36).

Among a huge collection of the 6<sup>th</sup>/7<sup>th</sup> century ceramics obtained from the Selib 3 midden, there were the neck and

shoulders of a large wide-mouthed storage jar (Plate 37). It bears an inscription in Greek: *Sellene* written with two mistakes, typical for Nubian renderings of this Greek word (Ochala 2011, 308-309). It seems that it is the earliest of the 36 attestations of the use of the lunar calendar in Christian Nubia. The lunar date (unfortunately the numeral is broken off) probably refers to the production date of the product kept inside the jar (?).

The exploration of the three sites at Selib between 2008 and 2016 failed to identify the Post-Meroitic interlude in the cultural continuum spanning the Late Meroitic and Early Christian horizons. This situation is to some extent similar to that observed on the Fourth Cataract site 3-J-11 where the later Meroitic

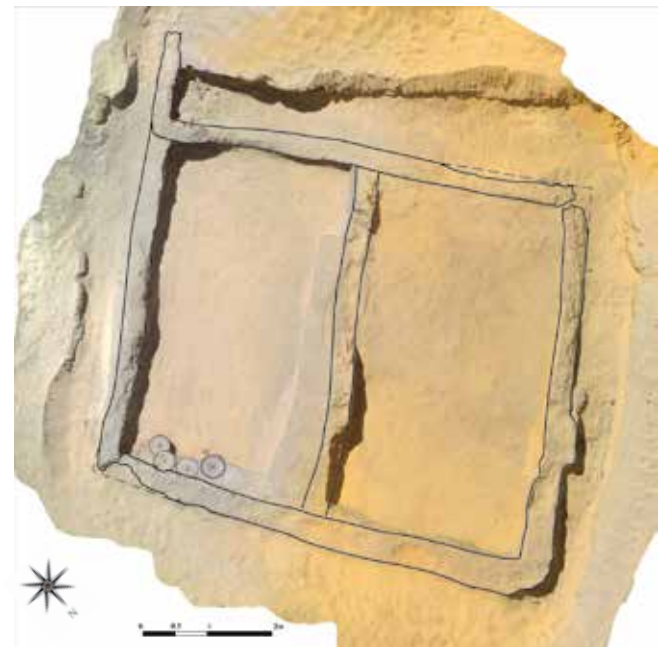


Plate 35. Houses on Selib 3 site: orthophotograph of Late Meroitic (?) house coded H.9/2015 (photos and rendering: Aneta Cedro).

ic burials were succeeded by Christian burials without the intervening Post-Meroitic phase (Welsby 2016, 616).

The lacuna in chronological classification of the Selib ceramics goes in hand with the survival of Meroitic motifs found on the earliest ceramics in the St Menas Church (Plate 8), and in the continuation of Meroitic building techniques in the Northern Building near the St Menas Church, and in the church itself. Theoretically, it is possible that the Late Meroitic population could have left their habitat along the Nile's palaeochannel due to a catastrophic flood or an attack by the desert dwellers. They could also have resettled the area after building a refuge fort protecting them against further assaults. But why the abandoned settlements, favourably

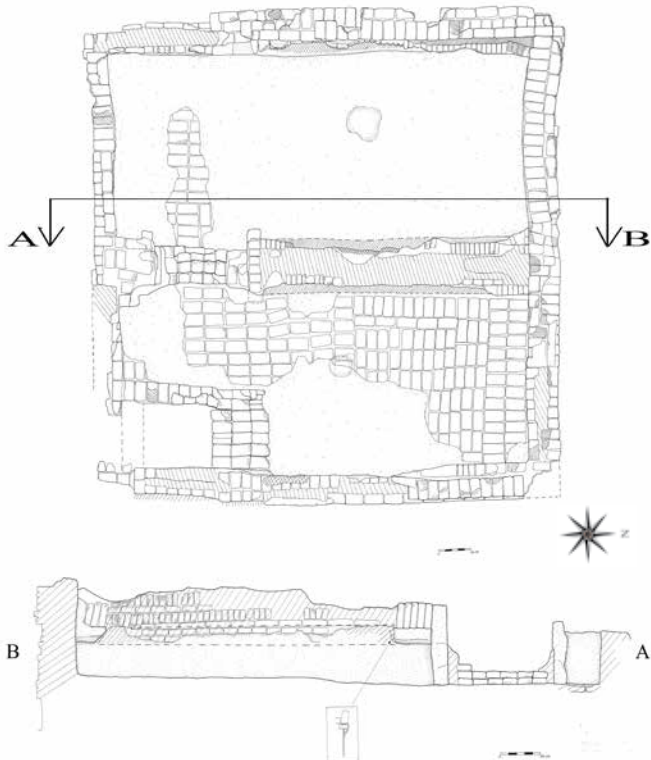


Figure 12. Houses on Selib 3 site: plan and section of Early Christian (?) house explored in 2010 (drawing: Katarzyna Molga).

situated at the river bank, stayed empty until they were resettled in the mid-6<sup>th</sup> century or later? In any event, the total lack of typical Post-Meroitic wares among the multitude of Selib ceramics datable to the 1<sup>st</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> century AD, is strange. To some extent, it can be explained by the late arrival of the people who buried their dead in the Jebel el-Aalim tumuli (between AD 450 and 550, according to the estimation by Mahmoud el-Tayeb, who studied the Jebel el-Aalim ceramics and tomb plans).

The abundant use of spolia originating from the Meroitic temple(s) in the medieval structures on Selib 1 suggests that Selib 2 (the most plausible source of this material) was more than a rural settlement grouped around a large storeroom. The excavations hitherto conducted hint at flax cultivation in the region and demonstrates the strength of the Meroitic provincial economy based on trade exchange and local manufacturing of goods.

The gaps in the local cultural sequence between the decline and fall of the Kushite Empire and the formative years of the Christian Kingdom of Makuria are far from being filled. Future exploration in the region is badly needed. The excavations on settlement sites should be coupled with the research on contemporary cemeteries and synchronised with extensive DNA studies.



Plate 36. Ceramic sample from Selib 3 midden (photo: Aneta Cedro).



Plate 37. Sellene inscription on a shoulder of a jar inv. no. SEL3/178/2015 (photo: Aneta Cedro).

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