

# SUDAN & NUBIA

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Front cover. Stone slab A3 used as a paving slab in Temple 4, Qasr Ibrim, showing Taharqa and Amun (photograph courtesy of F. Aldsworth).

Above. Frontal scan of lion head, Naga (Kroeper and Perzlmeier 2022, fig. 21, © Naga Project, 3-D scans by TrigonArt BauerPraus GbR).

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# Living on the remains of a medieval capital. Intermingled past and present at Soba

Maciej Kurcz and Mariusz Drzewiecki

The land covered by the remains of the medieval city of Soba is currently part of a rapidly developing suburb of Khartoum. The people who live in the region now do not consider the inhabitants of the medieval kingdom as their ancestors. However, in the course of the fieldwork conducted in 2019-2020 and 2021-2022, the complex world of attitudes towards the remains has been explored through interviews (qualitative approach). Legends, anecdotes, life stories and the analysis of shared breakthrough events are elements of memory where the historical Soba is often present and in various roles. Modern Soba has an extensive and rich folklore, firmly connected with the archaeological site. The results of this research will be used to develop community archaeology projects in the region.

## Introduction

This paper focuses on the study and documentation of cultural heritage connected with Soba, the capital of the medieval kingdom of Alwa (6<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> century AD). It presents results of the initial research and should be considered preliminary. The study brings new insights into the issue of the relations between modern people and the remains of the past, since the remains of the medieval city are part of a rapidly developing suburb of the capital of Sudan - Khartoum. The long-term aim of the study is to develop sustainable protection strategies for archaeological heritage in the region by searching for ways to engage local communities.

For the modern Sudanese, the term Soba has essentially two meanings. The first refers to the former capital of the medieval Nubian kingdom of Alwa ('Past Soba'). The second refers to the suburban area of the Khartoum agglomeration ('Modern Soba'). 'Past Soba' and 'Modern Soba' (hereinafter, without quotation marks) are two intertwined space-time continuums, whose 'relations' are complex. The first impression is that due to accelerating urbanisation processes, the attitude of the residents of Modern Soba towards the remains of medieval Soba is antagonistic. People who live in the region now do not consider the inhabitants of medieval Alwa their ancestors. However, at the same time Past Soba occupies a place in the local residents' cultural memory. Legends, anecdotes, life stories and analyses of shared key events are elements of memory stored by many local families. Moreover, many of the inhabitants of modern Soba have direct contact with the antiquities on a daily basis. During everyday activities in the fields and around their houses, they come across pottery sherds, stone tools and ruined buildings, as well as animal and human remains. This has an impact on the way they see and understand the place and its history. The experience is pushing them to develop their own way of thinking about the past and present. For the residents who have lived there the longest, memories of Soba and the material evidence of its being inhabited have acquired additional meaning, moving the narration towards a symbol and becoming a source of pride.

The review presented on the following pages aims to understand the rich world of local folklore, stories, legends and events shaping the attitude of the modern inhabitants towards the antiquities. At the end of the paper, we discuss how local communities can be attracted to and included in the research and protection of Soba's heritage.

## Study area

The modern town of Soba lies on both banks of the Blue Nile, approximately 20km from the centre of

Khartoum. It is divided into Soba East and Soba West, with a bridge connecting the two since 2012. The remains of the medieval capital are located on the eastern bank (Figure 1). The medieval site has been estimated as 240–275ha, making it one of the largest archaeological sites in Sudan.

The kingdom of Alwa (6<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> century AD), according to the 10<sup>th</sup> century traveller-diplomat Ibn-Selim Al-Aswani, was the most powerful Nubian kingdom. Its capital at Soba had churches furnished with gold, great monasteries, a district for Arab merchants, beautiful gardens, and well-built houses. According to the Funj Chronicle (Holt 1999) and the Abdallab tradition (Penn 1934), both written down in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, the capital was destroyed in 1504 and its inhabitants fled (Chittick 1950). The city never regained its previous status and was abandoned for years. Throughout the post-medieval period, the area was scarcely populated. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the presence of the nomadic camel-owning herders of Moghárba is confirmed by the biography of ‘Abdulla Wad Ḥasóba el Moghrabi who was a prominent Sufi master and buried at Soba (MacMichael 1922, I, 318).

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Soba was largely uninhabited (Trimingham 1965, 74-75). However, at that time, just a few kilometres upriver, at the confluence of the Niles, a new capital was founded by the Turkish authorities. Thus, Khartoum started to develop. The remains of the medieval red brick buildings at Soba started to be dismantled and the building materials were shipped to the new capital. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the first years of the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium, the area was sparsely inhabited, mainly by Rufá’a, Moghárba, Mahas, and Mesallamia (see MacMichael 1922, fold-out map).

Soba was the first place in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan where a government rest house was established (Ward 1905, 141). It was built to develop tourism in the region at the time when Colonel E. A. Stanton was Governor of Khartoum (1900-1905). Soba became a recreational space for nearby Khartoum, mainly related to hunting - the *numerus primus* entertainment in colonial Sudan (Collins 1972, 293-303).



Figure 1. Map of the region in 2020. The polygon marks the archaeological site at Soba.

In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, people started to settle at Soba, creating gardens, orchards, fields, developing suburban residences next to the existing small villages on both banks of the Blue Nile. Sir Laurence Kirwan (1991, xviii) wrote about the inhabitants of Soba: ‘They were intensely proud of Soba’s fame as the capital of the kingdom of Alwa. The legend of Soba seemed to be very much alive in all the towns and villages along the Blue Nile in the Sudan.’

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, medieval Soba was nothing more than a vast area where large numbers of artificial mounds covered with debris could be spotted. The highest (Mounds A and B) have been partly excavated, providing a great deal of information on the medieval settlement and well-preserved mud brick remains. All excavated red brick buildings were, however, in a poor state due to the massive extraction of bricks that began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Archaeological research at Soba has been conducted by various archaeologists and over a long period. The largest projects were organised in the 1950s by Peter Lewis Shinnie (1955) and in the 1980s and 1990s by Derek Welsby (Welsby and Daniels 1991; Welsby 1998).

In the 1950s, the first guard (*gafir*) for the site was appointed. It is an office funded by the Sudanese government and its duties have been passed on within one family. In 2019, the third generation *gafir* of Soba was interviewed. He began his work in the 1990s when the region started to undergo major changes. At that time and for a few years following, a second *gafir* was initially appointed by Derek Welsby (Isabella Welsby Sjostrom 2020, personal communication).

In the 1990s, with the building of a tarmac road across the site, the area witnessed a burst in urbanisation and the region developed fast. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Greater Khartoum megalopolis reached a population of more than five million (Zerboni *et al.* 2020, 2). In 2020, from the 275ha area of the medieval city, approximately 53ha were relatively intact. Other parts were overbuilt or transformed into farmland. Since 2015 the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums Sudan (NCAM), in cooperation with Section Française de la Direction des Antiquités du Soudan (SFDAS), has started a programme to fence the remaining part of the archaeological site (Poudroux 2020, personal communication). The programme is ongoing, currently within the framework of the Sudan Archaeological Heritage Protection Project (<https://sudanheritageproject.wordpress.com/> (accessed 6.11.2020)).

During the last 30 years, a considerable part of the previously deserted area has become inhabited (Figure 2). At present a tarmac road is the axis of settlement in this area. On both sides a public marketplace (open seven days a week) has been established, as well as several public offices. A petrol station is the central point. Contemporary Soba is a suburban area of the Khartoum agglomeration, whose existence results, on the one hand, from the uncontrolled settlement developing from the colonial times on the

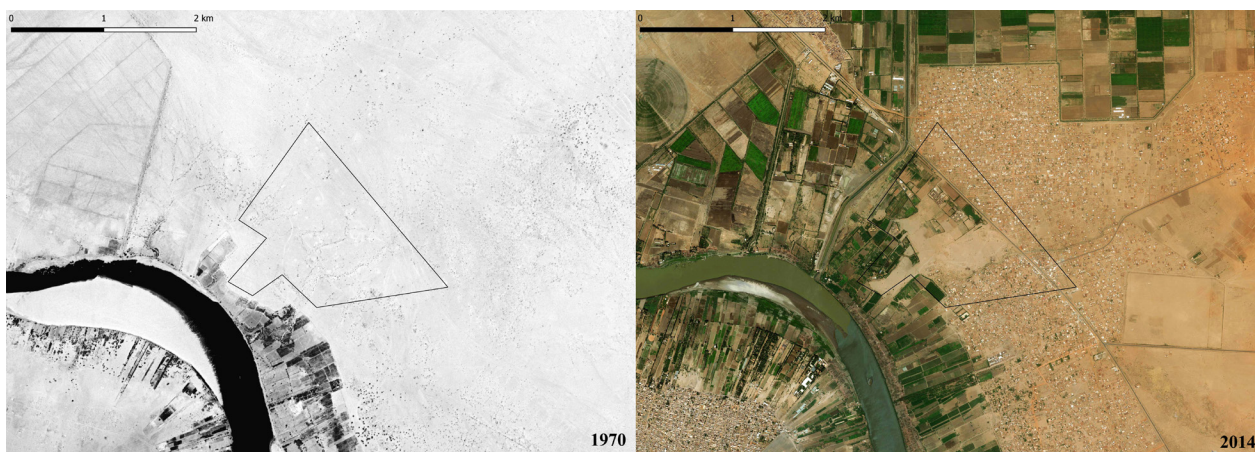


Figure 2. Optical imagery of the area. Corona satellite photo from 1970 on the left and Bing Aerial from 2014 on the right.

outskirts (suburbs) of the Khartoum agglomeration – the so-called *duyum* – and on the other hand the policies of the present authorities trying to relocate Khartoum citizens to new plots, which are more spacious and have the necessary infrastructure (Pantuliano et al. 2011). It is worth noting that together with settlement, transformation of the area closest to the river into arable land took place, and at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, farmers – large owners above all – got hold of new plots surrounding the largest mounds. Part of the site was purchased (contrary to the monument protection legislation), and some farmers were granted a use permit, provided no ancient remains were present. Others took land for cultivation using the *fait accompli* method. Brick pillars, and then wire fencing, appeared at the boundaries of the arable land. They started, however, to be moved, a metre or two every year. Fields are cultivated with tractors and intensively irrigated. As a consequence, the once undulating terrain has become flat and any archaeological material cleared from the surface.

Today the part of the site that remains relatively intact (53ha) is the only area where mounds can be seen, including one with overturned stone columns and capitals. All over the site countless ceramic sherds can be seen, as well as periodic water streams (*khors*), single, low acacias (*acacia nilotica*) with semi-wild dogs in their shade, tufts of dried grass, heaps of rubbish and excrement, a small police station amongst other buildings, a car passing from time to time, information boards, cast iron fencing separating the site from the tarmac road, and a prayer area in a charming garden – these are all images making up the modern landscape of ‘historical Soba’.

### **Our approach and methods**

In November 2019, research started at Soba to investigate the spatial organisation of the medieval city (Drzewiecki and Ryndziejewicz 2019; Drzewiecki *et al.* 2020; Drzewiecki *et al.* 2021). The team included researchers from Poland, antiquities inspectors from Sudan and archaeology graduates in training from Al-Neelain University (Sudan) and the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums Sudan (NCAM). Most of the fieldwork was concentrated around large-scale geophysical prospection and excavation.<sup>1</sup>

This raised the interest of the local community and brought the subject of antiquities and land use to the fore. It was a suitable time to interview the residents and observe how they treat the antiquities. During November and December ethnographic research was inaugurated. Due to the nature of the data that we wanted to obtain (i.e. individual experience of the past), our research was more qualitative than quantitative in nature. Apart from observations, individual and group interviews based on categorised questionnaires were the main source of information elicited with the support of a local interpreter (see Appendix). The research was conducted at Soba-Gen`ab – a residential area adjacent to the archaeological zone. The majority of the population lead an urban life, often having professional ties to neighbouring Khartoum. They were all Muslims. The information provided by the interviewees cannot be traced back to them in accordance with the Ethical Guidelines for Good Research Practice issued by the Association of Social Anthropologists ([https://www.theasa.org/downloads/ethics/Ethical\\_guidelines.pdf](https://www.theasa.org/downloads/ethics/Ethical_guidelines.pdf) (accessed 19.08.2021)).

Research on folk history, including local understanding of archaeological heritage, has been conducted throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century in various regions of riverine Sudan by ethnographers, language specialists and archaeologists as well as colonial administration officials and travellers (e.g. MacMichael, Crowfoot, Clarke, Osman, Żurawski, Maliński, Kurcz). In recent years, ethnological studies have been used and developed in Sudan aiming to engage local communities in archaeological research and heritage management (Tully 2014; 2015; Bradshaw 2017; Fushiya and Radziwiłko 2019). Compared to these, the site of Soba is unique. Soba is a suburban region and has experienced significant population growth (over the last 30 years). As a result, most of the inhabitants of modern Soba are new settlers.

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<sup>1</sup>The project is funded by the National Science Centre (Poland) based on agreement no UMO-2018/29/B/HS3/02533.

## Results

When asked, the majority of the citizens of Soba stated that living with the archaeological remains is a fact of life for them. This is the consequence of building houses within the archaeological site. Nearly all interlocutors had had some contact with the remains - most frequently during construction work (e.g. digging foundations, wells or toilets). The rainy season, especially when there are destructive floods, is when accidental finds occur. The interviewees were aware of the true size of the archaeological area, which goes far beyond the boundaries of today's archaeological zone and includes the market area at the main road and Gen`ab as well as the Marabiya quarters.

The attitude of the residents to this archaeological heritage varies. 'Alua', 'Asar' or 'Kusha' - these are the names most frequently used to refer to the archaeological site. People connected with agriculture and breeding refer to the site as *Masra al Kurdi* ('Kurdi's farm') - the largest in the area. All are examples of metonymy and express a certain specific attitude to 'old Soba'. For many it is also a place where antiquities exist ('asar'); it has the status of a protected area, defined boundaries and is guarded by the police. This is also a deserted space, full of rubbish ('kusha'), literally and symbolically impure. Finally, for many interviewees, it is still a mysterious and uncanny place where transgressive practices take place.

When building houses, the ancient remains are a problem that must be discretely resolved. The situation is similar with bone material, with the difference that human remains are sometimes exhumed. Perhaps the practice of treating monuments as rubbish should also be read metaphorically. As we know, in many cultures graves are a meaningful sign, demonstrating the ownership of a given territory. Therefore, their removal or profanation can be considered as an action symbolising the final change of the area's use.

It is a paradox that at the same time, stories of finding ancient artefacts constitute a part of the history of any household and are eagerly told. From talking with the residents it is clear, however, that historical objects have not always been disposed of, at least not all. The characteristic large red bricks are still easily recognised. The bricks from Soba were commonly used to build parts of, or even entire buildings, as far away as Khartoum. For many inhabitants it is a source of pride that the most important historical buildings in the capital - as is widely said - were built from material from Soba. In this sense an artefact is treated as material. Since, however, modern building material became readily available, the re-use of medieval bricks has become rare. Many of them can be found at nearby cemeteries (Figure 3). There, bricks are used to outline graves and as stelae (particularly at the nearby Wad Tarafa cemetery or at Wad Ḥasoba cemetery in Tureab).

Undoubtedly, a brick is an object of an 'ethnic' character - in the eyes of our interlocutors, it symbolises 'historical Soba'. It is interesting that 'a Christian brick' exists as evidence of the people who once lived here, because the same building techniques are still used by the inhabitants today.

Some artefacts, mainly due to their similarity to equipment still used in the province, are brought back to life. This is the case, for example, with grindstones of various sizes - such as *murhaga* (a large concave stone in the form of a trough, i.e. a grinding base, used for grinding grains into coarse flour). The decision to preserve these objects may be sentimental, and these artefacts should be treated metaphorically as a link between the past and present generations through which memory is materialised. The studies by Rebecca Bradshaw (2017) reveal the great importance of material culture in defining the traditional way of life. This attitude contributes to the interviewees' sense of identity and connection to their heritage. It seems to also apply to people living in Soba. Older residents - women in the majority of cases - claimed that the grinding stones reminded them of their family home from before they moved to Soba. It is not, therefore, their original use that matters, but rather their mnemonic role, or what they symbolise. For some, they 'speak' as a legacy of past generations - evidence of the specificity of the people who once lived there: signs of the past, cultural origins, mythical peoples ... in brief, they fit within the notion of



Figure 3. Christian bricks found in the local cemetery.

cultural heritage (Figure 4). We should, therefore, treat them both as archaeological and anthropological traces - since tangible, ethnographic stories have been condensed into them. This has enormous potential for involving the local population and drawing the attention of residents to research conducted in their neighbourhood. This is probably why the idea of a 'museum on the sand' emerged during the discussions with inhabitants. The idea would be to present objects from the excavations with those which show the 'traditional' culture side by side.

In many houses, medieval pottery can also be found. Broken pieces of vessels are used to fill holes in various structures. However, decorated ceramics are treated differently, especially those with painted decoration, which, like the characteristic bricks, are treated as an 'ethnic' object in essence. These ceramic vessels or fragments are treated as curiosities and displayed in living rooms or courtyards. This may be associated with an understanding of the item as an object with aesthetic qualities.

Finally, remains of the past can be sacred objects and have spiritual power. These can be various types of coin, ceramic fragments of beads used as talismans (e.g. coins attached to a wedding skirt, a ceremonial mortar, a *jirtig* necklace used during rites of passage). It is different with human bones - these are treated with fear and thrown away or moved to another place. They may be the object of magical practices - this, however, requires further research.

The remains of 'historical Soba' are still a mysterious and extraordinary place. They form part of the religious folklore deeply rooted in the rural community of the Soba residents. It is a space 'in-between' (an ethnologist would say 'liminal'). In the case of an archaeological site, the mythological value of the opposition between what is foreign, empty and what is ours, inhabited, the desert and the house is





Figure 4. A group of men showing an old grinding stone.

revealed. It is also the site of transgressive practices, ranging from magical rituals to the consumption of forbidden substances. The connotations of death turn out to be important as well. The archaeological site was defined in the first place by many interlocutors as a space of death. For many residents, it is entirely a cemetery, which is why it remained uninhabited for centuries. It belongs to a different world. This image is grounded in countless, even accidental, discoveries of human remains and the stories related to them. It is also possible that the area of historical Soba played the role of a burial place (with an undefined status) until more recent times. However, this must be confirmed by further archaeological and ethnographic research. The beliefs connected to the archaeological site are centred on demonology.

When, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, permanent residents re-appeared at Soba, the medieval ruins underwent folklorisation through the same mechanisms previously seen in Northern Sudan. It is still believed

that, like other deserted settlements in Sudan (Salih 1992, 31-35), the ruins of Soba are a place where supernatural forces operate. They guard the secrets of the remains from robbers. Their common denominator is the space-time of the night - the liminal times: dusk, midnight or a time just before dawn. Belief in a phenomenon called *ablemba*, that is 'light' or 'lamp' is common, which leads people astray from their homes and off the beaten track. Equally popular is a belief in meeting mysterious spectres - female, in particular - which, however, disappear as quickly as they appear. Some mentioned that those spirits are of a Christian origin ('Christian devils and supernatural beings' as people would say). The fight against them is particularly difficult as they do not obey the words of the Holy Quran.

The ruins also have a mythical guardian. It is a one-eyed jinn who 'never turns its back'. That is why he has everything within sight. Other residents mentioned also a large snake that emits light (a 'lamp' motif) and thus attracts its victims. Within the ruins there are other jinns that may be useful. In order to make contact, a certain type of magic, the so-called '*amal*, must be used (cf. Trimmingham 1965, 168-169). People also believe in a magical entrance located in one of the mounds. It is a place only vaguely specified, through which one can enter a different world. However, those who enter the passage never return, or find themselves in a totally different place and lose their wits.

Mythical motifs concerning gold and hidden treasures also appear. Based on the interviews, it is possible to say that in actuality any archaeological works on site become part of stories about gold, always built following the same scenario: foreigners - exploration - mystery - taking the treasure away.

'Scary stories' are a separate genre of local folklore. Their setting is a village. Within the 'tamed' area are places considered dangerous, such as garbage dumps or deserted houses. These are also places on the

verge of development. Any neighbourhood has such spaces. At night, they are absolutely to be avoided. For some of our interlocutors the entire village is a potentially dangerous place since construction works are thought to be accompanied by strange events interpreted as interference by supernatural forces.

The cultural memory of the present residents seems to be fairly short. It is associated with 'intimate' and 'kinship' bonds. This is a memory of ancestors, family or tribal leaders, saintly men, migrations or ecological changes. Initially it could seem that historical Soba does not occupy any significant place in the collective memory. It is a deserted place, rubble of the *harab* category. Unlike in Northern Sudan, at Soba the creators of the Nubian kingdom are not considered real ancestors (the ancestors of the oldest group - the Moghárba Arabs - settled at Soba as late as the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century). Unlike, for example, Old Dongola, Abkur, el-Khandaq or other deserted settlement areas in northern Sudan, it is not a place where rituals of memory are considered important to the local community. According to the residents, 'historical Soba' is a city of brick churches; it was conquered in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century by a coalition of the Abdallab and Funj, who initiated a completely new era in Sudan. In this case, we can speak rather of 'oblivion' (in the sense of a lack of material or institutional basis, through which people can relate to the past).

Interviewees recall particularly destructive floods at the site (1946, 1988, 2013). These are important dividing lines referred to in intimate kinship stories, full of suffering, but heroism as well. In addition, past archaeological campaigns occupy a worthy place within the structure of memory. These are stories about foreigners: daily contacts, including friendships, fair employment and benefits associated with them (e.g. purchase of consumer goods).

Soba is not only a place with archaeological remains. Unofficial stories of people living there are inherently connected with it. Migration to the city, attempts to find accommodation, the arrangement of a living space are all factors of social and political changeability - the elements of being part of a community, which are captured by ethnographic research. In our studies we came across a distilled version of recent history, with a fear of social and political instability in particular, signaling a crisis in an urban life, as well as attempts to overcome it. One of the most striking facts, particularly among the representatives of elite groups (former traditional leaders and intelligentsia) among the settled inhabitants, was that we can talk about pride in the place. For example, one of the local schools is named 'The Kingdom of Soba'. A source of pride is that contemporary Soba is located on the site of the former capital of the Nubian kingdom. It is strengthened by regular contact with the archaeological remains. Monuments found every day are evidence of power and wealth, but also for some of community with the former residents.

For some residents, the Soba ruins belong to them, but in a mythical sense, outside historical reality - since they were Nubians (often referred to as '*Anaj*' in the region, see Crowfoot 1907, 5-6) and also Christians. Historical Soba was, therefore, selectively incorporated into the collective memory of Moghárba Arabs in particular, full of glorious deeds, a noble foreign origin (according to their own tradition they came from the neighbourhood of Fez 'some five hundred years ago' or 'in the days of Soba' (MacMichael 1922, 318)) and in their opinion their inherent, high status, especially from the 16<sup>th</sup> century till the end of the colonial era. In all this Soba plays the role of a starting point, the beginning of history, a kind of genesis.

An example of this type of reference to the past is a legend about Ajoba, a woman who caused Soba to collapse. In the cultural memory, every end (of a civilisation, dynasty, or an epoch) is usually associated with an extraordinary story. Often it takes a form of a legend woven around the figure(s) who directly led the 'old world' to destruction, thus assuming the role of a mythical scapegoat. The fall of the medieval Christian kingdom of Alwa had a dramatic ending and was basically connected with one person - a woman named Ajoba. Ajoba was the queen of Soba (according to other versions, a witch or simply an ordinary woman sent to the city on a secret mission by Arab tribesmen). All, however, agree that she had a beautiful

daughter named Tayiba. Many local kings sought her hand in marriage (some claim they were ministers or noblemen). Her mother, however, was greedy and treacherous. She demanded dowries in gold from every suitor, and that each new admirer kill the previous contender. Many men supposedly died in this way, and chaos prevailed in the country. Finally, however, someone revealed the queen's secret practice and the local tribes, led by the Funj and Abdallab united and attacked the city, and this was how Soba was destroyed.

We do not know when this story appeared. The interviewees stressed unanimously that it was very old, and that they knew it from their grandparents, parents or holy men. The source of popularity of the legend of Ajoba is also the contemporary school or popular culture, which made Ajoba almost a historical figure, referring to the start of Islam in Sudan. Ajoba - like many other fairy-tale female characters - belongs to an archaic world, from before the final victory of Islam; it stands in opposition to the present and civilisation. She is a figure symbolising ancient, archaic times when the royal houses were organised on matrilineal descent. This could explain why marrying her daughter was key to succession as the royal title would pass through her to her daughters, with sons being politically active as 'mother's brothers' to their sisters' children. The story aims to show society before the coming of Islam to Sudan. However, it should not be understood as a historical reference but as a folk story and oral tradition. The story also brings to mind the theory of the fall and emergence of the civilizations by Ibn Khaldun, very popular in the Islamic world in the Middle Ages (Bielawski 2000). He believed that one of the reasons behind successful state-building was a sense of group solidarity called *asabiya* (after Arab nomads) - and its absence, by analogy, one of the reasons for the collapse of entire political organisations. Ajoba's activities sparked an internal crisis (group solidarity) in Soba, which paved the way for the victory of a better organised coalition, largely made up of pastoral nomads. The killing of Ajoba and the conquest of Soba can be, therefore, understood also as 'the end of wilderness', the end of the times of the 'tyranny of women'.

Archaeological (and ethnographic) research has 'revived' the legend of Ajoba. This character has become synonymous with the ruins of medieval Soba. 'Old Soba' is 'Ajoba's kingdom' and the finding of Ajoba's 'castle' or 'a tomb', in the locals' opinion, should be the main objective of archaeological research. The attempts to reinterpret the story in the context of protests following the November 2021 coup are interesting. This element should, without any doubt, be added to the panoramic picture of Ajoba. On the tide of the 2019 revolution, at least among the younger generation, Ajoba was reduced to a pop culture figure similar to 'kandake' - a leader, built on the experience of political protests at the end of Omar al Bashir's rule.

## Discussion

The archaeological and ethnographic research at Soba is associated with a series of challenges. The most fundamental question from the point of view of the continuation of the project is to what extent this seemingly pointless space that disrupts the 'experience of the city as a whole' (Munn 2013), can be seen as something needed or valuable in its present form.

During the research we established that the status of the archaeological site is unclear. 'Historical Soba' belongs more to the past than the future. In fact, it does not relate to any current affairs. A surprisingly alien character of the past is a result of the pace of urbanisation. Much of what seemed to be known and invariable was sunk into oblivion. It must be remarked here, however, that it is a process that has not definitely come to an end. For many residents, who seem to be strongly rooted in a rural environment or have recently settled at Soba, the past is still not a different land where everything was done differently. A good illustration of this is the different reactions to excavated artefacts. For some, they are evidence of the specificity of the people who used to live there, but they also evoke nostalgic memories of their family

home, rural life or the time before migration to Soba. Painted ceramics, large fired bricks or other sorts of objects of daily use are all heterogeneous symbols, silent evidence of the past which, however, 'appeal' to people.

Archaeological research has energised this process. Artefacts are important, because they stimulate reflection and discussion about the life of ancestors and the objects they used. For some residents, they are 'objects of memory' that refer to the past and trigger memories. We should, therefore, treat them both as archaeological and anthropological traces - since intangible, ethnographic stories have been condensed into them. It is an enormous potential that can be channeled into activities aimed at involving the local population in the research and protection of the site. Excavations are associated with cultural change, so archaeological fieldwork can feed such memories. This is an opportunity that should be used as the Sudanese mnemonic is based on the 'spatialisation' of memory.

Space plays an important role in cultivating the memory of deceased ancestors or historic heroes (Strehlow 1970). In such an approach, the culture of memory makes its mark within a natural space. According to Jan Assmann (2015, 31), even entire landscapes can serve as a medium of cultural memory, not by placing marks in them (monuments), but elevating the whole to the rank of a mark, i.e. by semantisation.

Do the ruins of Soba play the role of such a landscape? For centuries, it was an area protected by legend, belonging rather to the supernatural world instead of people. In this way, people probably expressed a more 'universal' respect in Sudan for all the dead than referred to by 'intimate' or 'kinship' stories. On the basis of discussions with the residents, it can be assumed that the ruins of Soba played the role of a place of memory about the dead, preserving traces of past generations.

This was a magical space. Today the status and perception of this place is gradually undergoing change. This is the result of urbanisation. For this reason, for many inhabitants, an archaeological site is a kind of 'disruption', 'anomaly' or 'thing left behind', which is inevitably doomed to oblivion and destruction. Nevertheless, it is not difficult to see that it is still a space 'in between' (liminal). It is also still a place of transgressive practices (magical, ludic, illegal etc.). These, however, have been reproduced in a new, urban context. The modern transgressive phenomena include, for example, piles of garbage, but also collectors looking for things that can be re-used (this is a practice well known within Khartoum associated with the poorest social groups). Yet another are the youths, who at night, take control of this space. An archaeological site as some sort of 'no man's land' has become an economically attractive area, both in housing and business terms. In this respect, an archaeological site can be interpreted as an 'internal frontier' (according to Igor Kopytoff 1987), theoretically an empty zone, located on the outskirts of settlements and attractive to various types of visitors.

In the case of Soba, these are migrants from the Sudanese countryside, with no chance of finding accommodation in more convenient locations; but also landowners or various businessmen (as rumour has it, these people are often linked to the former regime of Omar al Bashir, and have received land grants in the area for their 'services'), who, in this relatively vast and still undeveloped area on the outskirts of the capital, see great potential for developing agricultural business. While for some individuals this 'zone of ambivalence' (a phrase by Jean and John Comaroff 2012) may become a source of considerable profit, it seems more problematic for the local community. It is evident from interviews with residents that in a strongly urbanising 'Soba present' there should be no room for spaces belonging to the past, particularly belonging to a culturally and historically distant world ('Christians', 'Anaj', 'Africans from the interior').

For some long-time residents, the archaeological site is a source of legal restrictions, ecological problems (floods, draughts, sandstorms) or lack of security already mentioned. From this perspective the authors suggest, the archaeological site may be, in certain respects, illustrated with a metaphor such as

that of a 'scapegoat'. Historically, a traditional 'scapegoat' was sought in all types of outsiders or minority groups. In the case of contemporary Soba, this role seems to have been played by 'historical Soba' in recent decades. It has been encompassed by symbolism and defined by means of opposition. For many of the interviewees, it is now 'a barren land', which literally means a desert, and symbolically a spiritual wilderness, as it belonged to a different conceptual order that has fallen into ruins. The start of the destruction was committed by the first colonisers around the site, and the local community only finalised the act of destruction by building their homes within that area. Historical Soba, metaphorically speaking, is a victim of physical partition carried out by all. Thanks to this nearly two-century long tradition, contemporary residents may excuse and justify not only individual acts of destruction, but also their own claims to the area. It could seem that the ruins of Soba no longer have any future today, that they should disappear as a result of land deficit in the rapidly gentrifying urban area.

The material and symbolic 'deconstruction' of 'historical Soba' has become the seed of contemporary Soba, some of whose inhabitants at least try to relate to the heritage of the past whilst searching for roots in their new home. Since Soba is not associated with the past of any particular group and therefore not monopolised by anyone in this respect, it can constitute a platform for broader identification. This gives rise to greater hopes as the memory of the city's past among the contemporary residents is reconstructed and maintained, for example by means of the legend of Ajoba. Due to the lack of 'authentic' memories, this form of narration has become familiar, and new threads have been woven into it. The fall of the city happened in the absence of the present residents' ancestors; Ajoba thus plays a role of the 'figure of memory' (according to Jan Assmann 2015) and refers back to the establishment of Islam. In a sense, this is a story about the primeval beginning not only of the local community, but of the entire nation. This makes it even more accessible and universal. This phenomenon will probably gain pace and may have a positive impact on the reception of archaeological work carried out at the site in the future.

With this in mind, it is vital that we cultivate contacts with the local population. The discussions about the region's past and the archaeological remains are an essential tool in the fight to protect Soba's archaeological heritage. Just as local authorities should not allow the site to be destroyed by settlement or business activity, so they should not permit the total separation of the archaeological zone from the inhabited areas, as this will be an obstacle in building links to the legacy of former generations, the beginnings of which we grasped in conversations with residents. Enclosing the site (for example by building a solid wall) would be an effective preventive measure against people who are profit-driven in the first instance, but at the same time it would make life more difficult for ordinary residents and further imbue them with a sense of distance to the material traces of the past. Our activity must, therefore, face the facts regarding economic interest, as well as anxiety among the residents. In such a context, actions are necessary to increase people's interest in the past and make the site accessible. The best solution would be to create an open archaeological park. However, when we take a closer look at the suburban organisation of space in Sudan (excluding districts designed by colonial era authorities), the concept of a park does not exist. Open areas take the form of squares, located usually next to a mosque. These plots are used for larger local events, serve as playgrounds for kids and are accessible to the entire community. Cemeteries are a different kind of open area, a clearly demarcated space with boundaries such as walls, but at the same time open to the people. The cemeteries relate to the past and trigger memories connected to the life of relatives and well-known people, such as sheikhs who have passed away. It seems that for an archaeological zone to survive and be functional within the local community it would need to fit into these categories, probably sharing their properties.

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