

SUDAN & NUBIA

The Sudan Archaeological Research Society



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Front cover: Excavations in progress in the *Kerma Ancien* cemetery at site H29 in the Northern Dongola Reach (photo D. A. Welsby).

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The forts of Hisn al-Bab and the First Cataract Frontier from the 5th to 12th centuries AD

Alison L. Gascoigne and Pamela J. Rose¹

The site of Hisn al-Bab lies on the east bank of the Nile in the area of the First Cataract between the High and the Low Dams at Aswan, just south of the island that was the original site of Philae (Figure 1). The importance of this area as a frontier or zone of contact between Egypt and Nubia is obvious, and military regulation of the region was essential from ancient times. The fortifications of Hisn al-Bab, situated on a rocky slope and plateau some distance above the river, were clearly sited to control the main branch of the Nile, which flowed close to the foot of the cliff, through the cataract region.

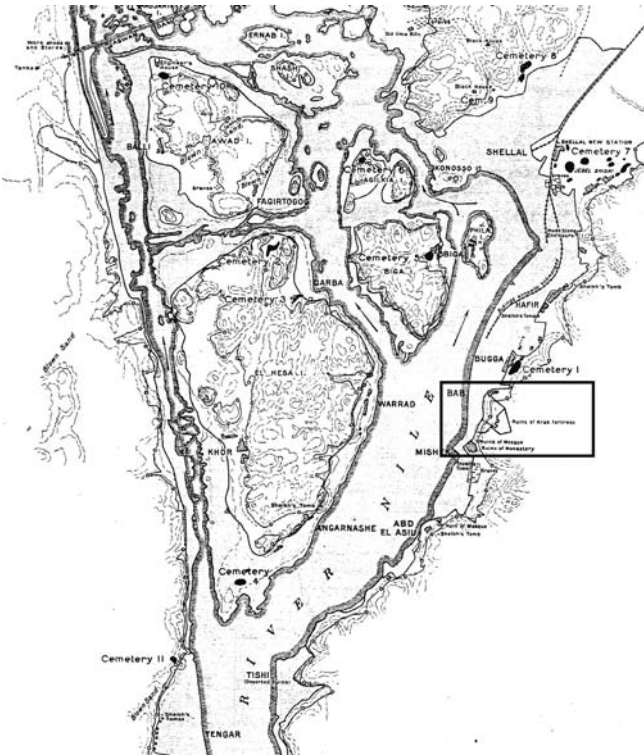


Figure 1. Map showing the location of Hisn al-Bab (after Reisner 1910, vol 1.2, plan II).

Despite past archaeological work in the area, Hisn al-Bab has been largely ignored. The fortifications visible from the river were noted in passing early last century during the first Nubian archaeological survey resulting from the creation of the Low Dam, but they were dismissed as “Arab” (Reisner 1910, vol. 1.2, plan II). Little more attention was paid to them

¹ This paper was presented at the conference *The First Cataract: One Region, Various Perspectives*, held in Berlin on 3rd-5th September 2007, and was intended to have been included in the proceedings of that event. However, due to delays in the production of this work, and in the interests of more rapid dissemination, the paper is published here instead.

during the archaeological survey of 1928-34, undertaken in response to the proposed heightening of the dam, although Monneret de Villard described the remains as “*un castello arabo*” in his survey of the medieval monuments of Nubia, carried out in conjunction with this campaign (Monneret de Villard 1935-1957, vol. 1, 17; for pictures, see vol. 2, tav. 8). Since then, no further work has taken place, and at least one authority referring to the fortifications in the 1980s declared them to be underwater (Vantini 1981, 69-70).

Textual sources

Monneret de Villard was the first author to suggest that the fortifications should be identified with a fortress well known from medieval Arabic accounts, al-Qasr (Monneret de Villard 1935-1957, vol. 1, 17; for a full compilation of the Arabic sources, see Vantini 1975). Latjar made the same identification drawing on both Greek and Arabic written sources, and furthermore suggested the identification of Hisn al-Bab and al-Qasr with a “camp of the Moors” mentioned in a 6th-/7th-century papyrus (Latjar 1997). Al-Qasr is described in the Arabic accounts as lying on the east bank, one mile south of Philae (*Bilaq*) and four or five miles south of Aswan, which fits the location of Hisn al-Bab reasonably well. Al-Qasr was said to mark the beginning of Nubian territory. Thus, al-Maqrizi (1364-1442), quoting Ibn Salim al-Aswani (writing c. 960), stated that “The first village (*balad*) of the Nūba is the village (*qarya*) of al-Qasr, five miles from Aswan. The last stronghold (*hisn*) of the Moslems is an island called Bilāq, one mile away from the (first) village of the Nuba, situated on the Nubian river bank [...] In this village there is an armed garrison (*musallaha*) and a gate leading to the country of the Nuba” (Vantini 1975, 601; all translations cited here are taken from Vantini’s sourcebook; the intermittent transliteration is also his).

The actual status and affiliation of al-Qasr seems to have been rather more complicated. Despite its identification as Nubian, it housed a Muslim garrison in the earlier 9th century (c. 836). This is evidenced by al-Maqrizi, again quoting Ibn Salim, who reports that the Nubian King George requested the ‘Abbasid Caliph al-Mu’tasim in Baghdad to remove his men because they were on Nubian soil (Vantini 1975, 646). Furthermore, two famous mosques, built around the mid-11th century immediately south of the fortress, were under Egyptian control, although the church on top of which one of the mosques was said to have been built was reportedly under Nubian authority. Al-Bakri’s account of c. 1069 mentions a mosque, probably to be associated with one of those next to Hisn al-Bab, which was “the last post dependent on Aswan and a station for the horses (*ribā*) of Aswan” (Vantini 1975, 243).²

² The mosque and church are noted in the *History of the Churches and Monasteries of Egypt* (HCME): see Vantini 1975, 336. HCME is attributed by Vantini to Abu Salih al-Armani; however, see Den Heijer 1996, esp. 77-81 for a summary of the different phases and authors behind the work. For an account of the mosques see Bloom 1984, 162-7; Gascoigne 2008.

The simplest interpretation of this state of affairs is that there was a recognised no-man's land between Egypt and Nubia. This is encapsulated in a passage from the *HCME*: "There is a church of the glorious angel Michael (*Mikha'il*), which overlooks the river, and is situated between the land of Nubia and the land of the Muslims; but it belongs to Nubia. Near it there is a mosque which has been restored; and also a castle which was built as a fortress (*hisn*)³ on the frontier between the Muslims and Nubians, and is at the extremity of the Nubian territory" (Vantini 1975, 336).

However, al-Qasr was best known for the role which it played in the execution of obligations entailed as a result of a remarkable agreement negotiated between Egypt and Nubia shortly after the Arab conquest of Egypt, in about 651-52. This is known as the *baqt*. The conditions of the *baqt* are recounted in many sources, although with varying interpretations as to the nature of the arrangements and their significance; for a recent discussion, see Edwards 2004, 248-50; also Spaulding 1995. Put simply, it stipulated that peaceful relations would be maintained between the two powers, that the Nubians would provide the Muslims with a yearly consignment of captives, and would receive a specified quantity of foodstuffs; that is, it was an equitable exchange. The understanding remained in operation, if somewhat sporadically honoured and punctuated by outbreaks of hostility, for over five hundred years. Medieval historians agree that al-Qasr was the point at which the exchange took place.

References to al-Qasr disappear from textual sources by the end of the Fatimid period in 1171, and the fortress may have gone out of use at that time. Thus, assuming the correlation between al-Qasr and Hisn al-Bab is correct, textual sources suggest that the fortress was in use from about the mid-7th century to the early 12th century.

The survey

Our survey identified two fortresses at Hisn al-Bab, an older, ruinous structure incorporating a large area of the cliff top, and the more recent, upstanding building on the cliff side (Figure 2).

The earlier fortress

The earlier fortress consists of denuded stone walls on the plateau and running down the cliff towards the river (Plate 1). These are of unshaped boulders with a rubble core, and are about 4m thick. No evidence for the use of mortar survives, nor traces of any mud-brick superstructure above the

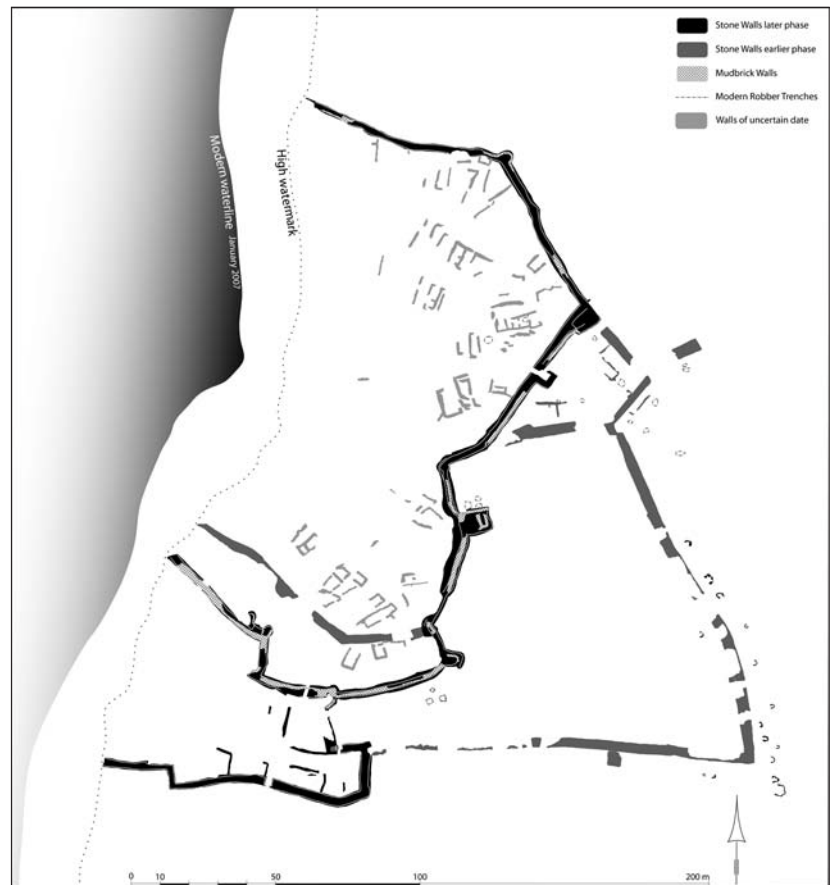


Figure 2. Survey plan of the fortresses at Hisn al-Bab; drawing by Piet Collet.

stonework. From their ruinous state, the walls were probably deliberately dismantled to provide stone for the later fortress.

Only part of the plan of this fortress can be identified; some of its walls were reused and obscured by the later



Plate 1. The earlier fortress: the south wall of the enclosure, looking west.

³ Contra Vantini, Evetts and Monneret de Villard both give the word *mahrās*, a lookout or guard post, here (Evetts' 1895 edition of the *HCME*, Arabic pages 126f.; Monneret de Villard 1935-57, vol. 1, 17).



building, and influenced its plan. This is especially true of the outworks on the south side, which may be common to both fortresses.

Today, the most conspicuous feature of the earlier fortress is a large, roughly triangular enclosure on the plateau of about one hectare in area (Plate 2). A single square



Plate 2. *The earlier fortress: the enclosure, looking south east.*

tower is abutted against its south wall halfway along its length, and at least one gateway gave access to the enclosure through the same wall at its west end. A further gateway was identified mid-way along the east wall, and possible traces of three narrower doorways were found, two through the south wall, and one through the east wall. Within the enclosure there is no evidence of occupation. Only in a smaller enclosure at the north end of the plateau could traces of structures be identified. These were associated with midden deposits, which, where exposed in recent robber pits, showed debris over 1m deep.

A further wall belonging to the earlier fortress was identified on the cliff slope within the south wall of the later fortress. It contained a doorway close to its east end, more or less aligned with that in the outer enclosure wall. No counterpart to this wall has been identified further north, and it is possible, given the alignment of the north wall of the earlier small enclosure, that it ran beneath the north wall of the later fortress. It is likely that at least part of the east wall of the later fortress also follows the alignment of an earlier wall.

The later fortress

The later fortress consists of the well preserved remains on the rocky slope above the river (Plate 3). Walls on the north, south and east sides enclose a roughly rectangular area. The

lowest parts of the north and south walls were destroyed by flooding after the heightening of the Low Dam, but comparison of the extant remains with those shown on a photograph taken between 1849 and 1851 suggests that although small parts of the riverside ends of these walls have disappeared, little other structural damage has occurred since the picture was taken (Du Camp 1852, pl. 82). Whether there was originally a wall along the west side, either at the foot of the cliff or on the flood plain, is unknown.

The later fortress undoubtedly was influenced by the older fort's layout, and reused some of its features, but it covers only part of the terrain occupied by the earlier structure. In addition to the possible matching wall alignments noted above, it may be significant that the gate tower on the eastern side is placed within the small enclosure of the earlier fort. In this same area the later fortress overlies the midden deposits associated with the earlier fort.

Four gateways led into the inner fortress, and another led through the outer defences on the south side. The fortress wall was equipped with irregularly spaced towers, the largest of which lies midway along the east side, and was at least two



Plate 3. *The later fortress from the river. The pale line just above the foot of the cliff marks the maximum water level.*

storeys in height (Plate 4). The walls throughout the fortress consist of lower courses of roughly shaped stones set in mud mortar, and upper parts of mud brick, although some interspersing and patching of one material in areas of the other are found. The towers have solid stone lower parts with upper rooms of mud brick. A walkway ran around the inner face of at least part of the enclosure wall at the level of the top of the stonework, and gave access to the towers, in the case of the largest tower by a surviving mud-brick stairway.

The interior

Inside the area bounded by the later fort's walls, traces of structures cluster at the north and south ends of the enclosure, separated by a steep central rock bluff. They stand both on the narrow flat area immediately inside the eastern wall, and on the steep slopes below it, although compared to the sturdy exterior walls, they are remarkably poorly preserved. It



Plate 4. The later fortress, looking south. The largest of the towers, midway along the east wall, is at the right of the picture.

is possible, therefore, that at least some of the features were originally part of the earlier fortress, and may perhaps have been reused in the later one. Weigall noted “some buildings of stone or crude brick inside the enclosure” (1907, 34), but whether the structures were better preserved at the time of his visit than they are at present is unclear. Today, the features consist principally of several series of rectangular terraces demarcated on the west side by low stone walls, built against or sometimes cut back into the steeply sloping hillside. On two terraces, the stumps of walls of rough stone set in mortar, projected from the terrace face. Very little evidence remains as to the superstructures: only one terrace preserved traces of a mud-brick vault, and this ran at right angles to the terrace face, rather than parallel to it, as might be expected.

It is unclear from the surface remains how the steep slope inside the fortress was traversed; no traces of pathways nor of steps have been identified, and only in one case has a possible ramp leading from one terrace to another been recognised.

Dating

The dating of the fortresses can be assessed from both the pottery recorded during the course of the survey and also their architectural parallels. Pottery was documented from the site surface, from the midden deposits, from the stratigraphy exposed in robber pits, and from the sherds incorporated into the walls of the later fortress. Analysis of this material was undertaken by Gillian Pyke. Almost all of the ceramics could be dated to the 6th-7th centuries, and, since the middens from which the pottery comes are associated with the earlier fort, this is likely to reflect the date of its use (Plate 5). There is a scattering of earlier Roman pottery (1st-3rd centuries), and a few Ottoman and more recent sherds (including a smoking pipe), but almost nothing is identifiable corresponding to the period of apparently intense activity described in the medieval

sources, except for a few fragments of *qullas*. The almost complete absence of material from the 8th-12th centuries, a time when textual sources suggest that the later fortress should have been in use, is puzzling.

The dating of the later fortress from architectural parallels is discussed in detail below, but a date of the 8th-9th centuries is plausible. By contrast, as yet we have identified no close architectural parallels for the earlier fortress.

The earlier fortress and the Late Roman frontier

As noted above, the pottery evidence suggests that the earlier fortress was in use prior to the Arab conquest and the *baqt* agreement of the mid-7th century. Was Hisn al-Bab part of the late Roman military configuration at the First Cataract?

Our preliminary research suggests that the earlier fortress was active at a time when relations between Egypt and Nubia were considerably less contentious than they had been in the preceding century. In the earlier 5th century,



Plate 5. Pottery of 6th-/7th-century date from Hisn al-Bab.

fighting between the Nobatae and the Blemmyes, the two tribal groups inhabiting the area immediately to the south, may have taken them at least as far north as Taifa, less than 40km south of the head of the cataract, and possibly as far as Shellal/Philae itself.⁴ At the same time, one or both groups, or elements of them, found time to raid the Aswan region (Eide *et al.* 1998, 314). Even though the Romans attempted to

⁴ Silko's third campaign, as described in his inscription at Kalabsha, ranged from Qasr Ibrim to “Telelis” which may be “an otherwise unattested Greek name for Shellal”; see Eide *et al.* 1998, 317, n. 783. The Meroitic Kharamadoye inscription (Eide *et al.* 1998, 300), also at Kalabsha, appears also to refer to some sort of activity, perhaps military, in an area the northern limit of which is Philae.



exercise a degree of control over their southern neighbours by means of federate alliances and the payment of subsidies, these efforts were generally unsuccessful.

In the attempts to arrange such alliances, Philae played a significant role: the instability south of the frontier culminated in a campaign against the inhabitants of Lower Nubia in the mid-5th century, after which a peace treaty was agreed at Philae, although the latter may have been only short-lived (Eide *et al.* 1998, 318). One of the Nubian protagonists involved in this was the phylarch (to be understood here as a tribal chief) Tantani, resident at Qasr Ibrim, over 200km to the south. A cache of letters found at Qasr Ibrim includes one to Tantani from the tribune Viventius, who is described as “over all the soldiers who are in the frontier [*limiton*] of Egypt” (Eide *et al.* 1998, 320). It gives an account of the circumstances of a failed meeting between Tantani and the *Comes Domestikon* (in charge of all Roman military forces in Egypt) in “Aswan and Philae”. This document seems to be an account of the attempted establishment of a federate relationship.

By the mid-6th century the area immediately to the south of the first cataract seems to have been unified into a single political entity, the kingdom of Nobatia. This was rapidly subsumed into the larger kingdom of Makuria (Welsby 2002, 24). Procopius noted that in his day (the mid-6th century) the Nobatae and Blemmyes received subsidies but still continued “to overrun the places in those parts” (Procopius, Book 1, XIX, 41). In addition, the temples at Philae may still have formed a focus for Blemmyan interest (Dijkstra 2005, 158-64), and may have provided another reason for the maintenance of a garrison in the immediate area.

The Patermuthis archive from Aswan, dating to the late 6th century, refers to Patermuthis as a *numerus* of Philae, showing that a garrison was stationed there at that time (Keenan 1990, 143), and one must have been present up to the time of the Arab conquest, at which time it was certainly withdrawn or disbanded. However, the precise location(s) of the camps is unclear. Reisner identified two Roman camps on the east bank of the Nile at Shellal, opposite the island of Philae during the first Nubian survey campaign (Reisner 1910, vol. 1.1, 72-3, vol. 1.2, plan IX; see Grossmann 1980, 11, Abb. 1, for a tentative reconstruction). Very little is known about them, but a coin found amongst the demolished mud brickwork of the larger fort suggests that they were out of use by the mid-4th century (Welsby 1998, 160-1).⁵

The impracticalities of locating a major military emplacement on the island of Philae are clear, and no evidence has been found in that place to suggest the presence of a fortress at any point during its occupation: the evidence that has been

⁵ The authors spent some time at Shellal in June 2007 to assess the extent to which the sites identified by Reisner, and inundated by the creation of the Low Dam, might now be on dry land after the building of the High Dam reduced the water level in the Shellal area. Although the site of the Roman camps remains underwater, the area of Cemetery 7 may well now be dry, although badly affected by modern housing developments.

put forward, such as the late 6th-century building inscriptions, in fact reflects repairs to quay walls (Dijkstra 2005, 172-3).

It seems, then, that the term “Philae” was used to indicate a wider area than just the island, as it was in later times. Thus al-Mas‘udi (d. 956) wrote that “Philae possesses ... many trees on both banks of the Nile”. A wider meaning of the term also accounts for the apparent confusion in the *HCME* description of Philae, in which the island appears to stand “opposite” a “strong and lofty fortress (*hisn*) called Philae” (Vantini 1975, 133, 336). Although the description that follows mentions fortified dwellings and “well-built edifices[,] the work of the ancients”, Philae island itself can hardly be described as ‘lofty’.⁶ Thus, it is possible that Hisn al-Bab was included under the name of Philae, which raises the possibility that Hisn al-Bab itself could be the location of the 6th-century camp.

One further piece of evidence must be considered. We have already mentioned the “camp of the Moors” near to Philae, known from a 6th-/7th-century papyrus (Łatjar 1997). Łatjar identified this camp with the visible, later fortress at Hisn al-Bab, but our dating shows that, if Hisn al-Bab is indeed the place noted in the document, the reference must be to the earlier fort.

Łatjar interpreted the text as evidence that the camp was a Nubian establishment. The archaeological results of our survey certainly suggest that there was a Nubian component to the inhabitants of Hisn al-Bab. The pottery assemblage consists mainly of locally manufactured wares (that is, those from the Aswan region, identifiable by their use of a distinctive clay), but it also includes some well known Nubian forms which do not occur in contemporary Egyptian ceramics. The crop repertoire too, analysed by Alan Clapham, includes plants of southern origin, such as pearl millet and sorghum, and the closest parallel to the range of botanical material comes from Qasr Ibrim. This may suggest a local, Nubian, element to the garrison, consistent with the use of recruits from allied polities to defend the frontier at least from the 5th century;⁷ or alternatively, that Hisn al-Bab was a Nubian camp on the Nubian side of the frontier, as it was in the following centuries.

The later fortress and the Nubian frontier

As already noted, there is almost no surface material associated with the later fortress by which to date it. There are, however, a number of useful architectural parallels from northern Lower Nubia. These are the fortified settlements that appear to characterise occupation of the early medieval period in that area. At least six are known, at Ikhmindi (Stenico 1960), Sabaqura (Stenico *et al.* 1961), Sheikh Dawud (Shaykh Dawud) (Presedo Velo 1964), Nag‘ esh-Scheima (Nag‘ al-Shayma) (Bietak and Schwarz 1987-98, vol. 1), Faras

⁶ This passage of the *HCME* echoes the use of the term *qasr ‘aliyya* – the high fort – applied to al-Qasr by Ibn Hawqal; see Vantini 1975, 153.

⁷ See Palme 2007, 258 for the well attested presence of a unit of *Mauri* in the Egyptian army between 339 and 539.

(Griffith 1926) and Kalabsha (Curto *et al.* 1965) (Figure 3). They share a common building technique of mud-brick upper courses over deep stone foundations (see also Diechmann and Grossmann 1988). They are rectilinear in layout and usually contain regularly spaced buildings, often including at least one church.

The erection of rectilinear fortified enclosures or settlements in the early medieval period was not restricted to northern Lower Nubia, and the establishment of fortified centres appears to have been characteristic of the kingdom of Makuria from early in its history (Żurawski 2003, 505). Whether the construction of such enclosures, which include the seat of government at Old Dongola, reflects state policy is disputed (see Welsby 2002, 129-33 and Edwards 2004, 228 for differing views). Such a policy would, however, be consistent with an interpretation of the later fortress at Hisn al-Bab as a foundation representing the Makurian state in a formal capacity (for a more detailed discussion see Rose and Gascoigne *forth.*).

The Lower Nubian fortified settlements also show similarities to a poorly understood fortress in Egypt, at Qal'at al-Babayn near Edfu, under excavation by Egyptian archae-

ologists at the time of writing. Its significance is still a matter for conjecture (Grossmann and Jaritz 1974; Effland 1999; Gascoigne and Rose 2010).

The Lower Nubian fortified settlements stand on the slopes next to the river. Their rectilinear enclosures have external, usually square, towers and employ the same combination of stone and mud-brick architecture seen at Hisn al-Bab. Many show signs of intensive occupation, consisting of rows of well preserved mud-brick vaulted structures on stone foundations, as well as (in most cases) a church. At Kalabsha, however, the preserved wall debris is of stone, and the rear faces of some rooms were cut back into the bedrock; the excavator's reconstruction suggests that these spaces had flat, presumably wooden, roofs (Curto *et al.* 1965, 39, fig. 9). This is more similar to the remains encountered at Hisn al-Bab than the mud-brick vaulted structures.

Five of the Lower Nubian forts show a distinctive entrance tower of the same type seen in the east wall at Hisn al-Bab, as far as can be discerned from the uncleared surface there. These are Ikhmindi, Sabaqura, Sheikh Dawud, Faras and Kalabsha; see Welsby 2002, 159-60. There is, however, a marked contrast at Hisn al-Bab between this east entrance

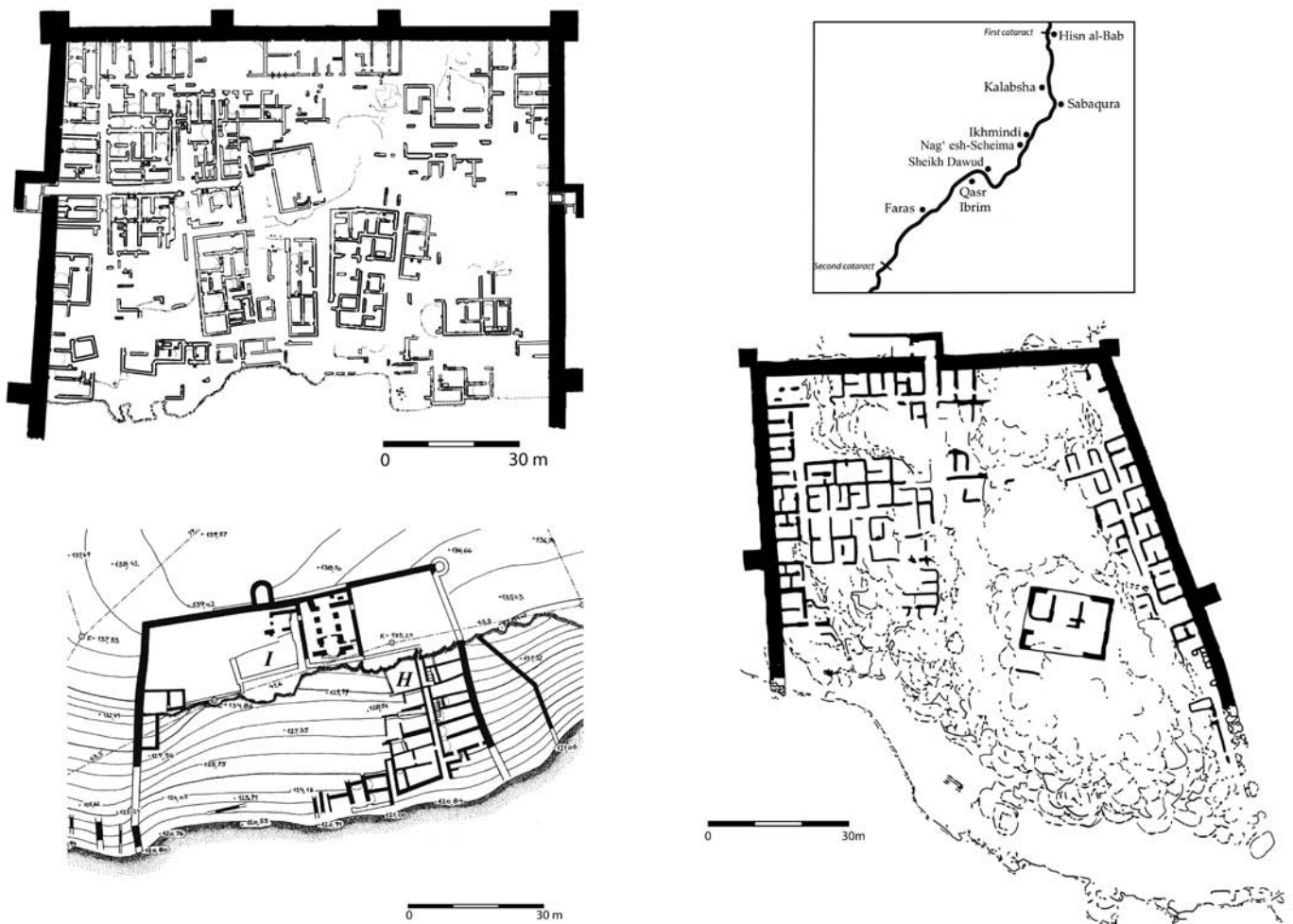


Figure 3. Lower Nubian fortified enclosures comparable to the later fortress at Hisn al-Bab. Top left: Ikhmindi, bottom right: Sheikh Dawud, bottom left: Nag' esh-Scheima.



and that through the south wall, which is of a different type, although equally defended with a rounded tower or pair of towers. None of the Lower Nubian enclosures preserves such a feature, although what may be a similar rounded tower enclosing a gateway can be seen at Qal'at al-Babayn, and is also found in some of the more southerly of the Nubian fortified enclosures (for example, Hallayla (Bakhit); Żurawski 2003, 371). Many of the Nubian enclosures make use of slit windows such as are preserved in the central tower at Hisn al-Bab (Welsby 2002, 179-80). More specifically, Nag'esh-Scheima provides a particularly close parallel to Hisn al-Bab, in that it has a large central rounded tower on the side away from the river (in this case the west), as well as an outer defensive wall to the north, similar in character to the Hisn al-Bab outer south wall. Such defensive double walling appears characteristic of the Lower Nubian enclosures built well into the medieval period (Bietak and Schwarz 1987-98, vol. 2, 267). Hisn al-Bab is, however, considerably larger in size than Nag'esh-Scheima.

The points in which Hisn al-Bab differs from the Lower Nubian enclosures are probably of little significance. It has a less strictly rectilinear outer enclosure than most, which may be due at least in part to the re-use of features of the earlier fort in the later structure. It also shows less regularly spaced towers, and these are rounded rather than squared in plan. The apparently unusual form of the south gate has already been remarked upon above. The few internal features appear to have a less conspicuous linear alignment than seen in the Nubian enclosures: the interior of Nag'esh-Scheima, for example, is densely occupied with poorly preserved terraced structures along well defined streets. Furthermore, while the terraces preserved at Hisn al-Bab are of a width to accommodate mud-brick vaults, the almost total absence of any mud-brick debris on the interior makes their presence unlikely, although a closer parallel can be drawn with the Kalabsha structures. Nothing amongst the structural remains at Hisn al-Bab appears similar in ground plan to a church.

The dating of the Lower Nubian enclosures lies within the early medieval period, but they are not all of exactly the same date. Ikhmindī has a late 6th-century foundation inscription, but this is clearly too early for the later fort at Hisn al-Bab. The few pieces of pottery published from that site suggest a dating slightly later than that of the inscription, of about 600 to 850, perhaps more likely towards the later end of the range (Monneret de Villard 1935-57, vol. 4, tav. CLXXXIV, CLXXXV). Sabaqura, Kalabsha and Faras have been dated solely on the basis of their similarity to Ikhmindī. Sheikh Dawud and Nag'esh-Scheima can both be dated on the basis of their pottery assemblages to about the 9th to the 12th century, and that from Nag'esh-Scheima was mostly from the earlier part of this period (Bietak and Schwarz 1987-98, vol. 2, 259-64). Qal'at al-Babayn was dated to the earlier 7th century on the basis of the presence of a church in the enclosure (Grossmann and Jaritz 1974, 200). Since the closest parallel to Hisn al-Bab is the fortified settlement at Nag'esh-Scheima,

a date range for the later fort's construction as sometime in the 8th to 9th century appears plausible. It is not possible at present to refine this date, nor to understand how quickly it succeeded the earlier fortress on the site.

Hisn al-Bab's proximity to the frontier with Egypt suggests strongly that the later fortress was the official Nubian border fortress of al-Qasr. It is difficult to imagine that the Egyptian authorities would have permitted such a foundation to exist so close to the frontier without its recognition as the official border control point. Under these circumstances, the lack of evidence for settlement within the later fortress of Hisn al-Bab may be significant. The fortress may not have been intended to house a substantial resident population; rather, it may have seen only sporadic or small-scale usage, and perhaps was required only when the *baqt* was exchanged. The main sphere of activity may have been the more convenient valley at the foot of the cliff, where, later, the mosques and associated horse-station were situated.

Conclusion

There were clearly some similarities in the approaches taken to their Nubian neighbours by the late Roman and early Islamic administrators of Egypt. Neither was willing to engage militarily beyond the southern frontier in any significant way, although the Romans in particular undertook apparently small-scale forays or raids to restore peace in troublesome times. Both governments preferred to make treaties with the Nubians. The Roman efforts, inevitably more piecemeal, and less successful, centred on the payment of subsidies and the formation of alliances with individual tribal groups, and may have resulted in the incorporation of Nubian elements into local Roman garrisons. However, the key factor in the stabilisation of the region seems to have been the creation in Nubia of a single political entity, the kingdom of Nubatia, and its later incarnation as the kingdom of Makuria, which provided the basis for an agreement – the *baqt* – which could be administered to the benefit of both sides. Thus, in the early Islamic period, a frontier zone, politically rigidly delineated and well regulated but also clearly highly porous, developed in the area immediately south of the First Cataract. The later, Nubian-constructed, fort at Hisn al-Bab, primarily but not always exclusively regarded as Nubian military territory, acted as a key frontier control-point in the regulation of flourishing cross-border personal and economic contacts.

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