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Old Dongola:

Archaeology, Heritage, and Society

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PREFACE

This volume brings together a selection of contributions that reflect recent community archaeology initiatives undertaken by Sudanese and Polish archaeologists in Sudan. The volume is edited by Dr. Tomomi Fushiya, who pioneered the implementation of community archaeology at the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw (PCMA UW).

Over the past six years, Dr. Fushiya, in collaboration with Sudanese and Polish colleagues, has significantly transformed archaeological practice at Old Dongola. Since the beginning of community archaeology at this site, I have emphasized generating tangible socio-economic benefits for the local communities surrounding this amazing archaeological site of global significance. By doing so, we not only contribute to community development but also encourage local engagement in the management and protection of cultural heritage in one of the world's lowest-income countries.

Through Dr. Fushiya's efforts, what was once a situation characterized by parallel coexistence and minimal interaction has evolved into a collaborative model of research, heritage management, and local development. This transformation represents a critical shift toward inclusive and sustainable archaeological practice.

The contributions in this volume explore diverse experiences and perspectives on archaeologist–community collaboration. Lorenzo de Lellis offers insights from the field archaeologist's viewpoint, while Robert Stark discusses capacity building in the field of bioarchaeology. Sudanese scholars Habab Idriss and Mohamed Siedahmed contribute with perspectives grounded in local experience. Maciej Kurcz and Katarzyna Radziwiłko present anthropological approaches and case studies, while Tomasz Michalik and Tobiasz Trawiński introduce new methodological developments.

I would like to express my deep gratitude to Dr. Fushiya for her editorial work on this volume and for her unwavering dedication to establishing community archaeology at Old Dongola and within the PCMA UW. Most importantly, I extend my heartfelt thanks to the communities of Ghaddar and Bokkibul for their trust and collaboration. Their openness has made it possible to reimagine the relationship between archaeological research and local stakeholders.

I am writing this while Port Sudan is under attack. The ongoing conflict is impacting the society of Sudan in the worst possible way. While remaining in solidarity with our friends and colleagues, I hope that the war ends soon and we can all focus on building a better future for the Sudanese people. While the Sudanese are suffering, the past two years were also a difficult time for the Polish Nubiological community. We have lost three beloved scholars, Mahmoud El-Tayeb, Stefan Jakobielski, and Magda Łaptaś.

Artur Obłuski
Warsaw, May 2025

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FOREWORD

This volume celebrates the 60th anniversary of research conducted by the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw (PCMA UW), at Old Dongola, Sudan. It brings together contributions that reflect on how archaeological work at the site has engaged with archaeology, heritage, and society. The articles stem from a call to researchers who have participated in the Polish expeditions to Old Dongola over the past six decades. Together, they explore Old Dongola in a broad social context using diverse methodologies and perspectives.

In recent years, community archaeology has gained prominence globally, and projects in Sudan —including the fieldwork at Old Dongola— have incorporated its principles over the past decade. However, archaeology in Sudan has long engaged with local communities even before the term "community archaeology" was coined. The Anglo-Egyptian Condominium administration made an early effort in public outreach by establishing museums to educate the Sudanese people about their history — though this was a top-down approach, and viewed through a colonial lens. Local people have always participated in archaeology —as excavation workers, drivers, household staff— and Sudanese archaeologists, conservators, and inspectors have conducted research alongside foreign archaeologists. Their involvement was indispensable to the accomplishments of Sudanese archaeology. Beyond archaeology, some teams also supported local communities in practical ways, such as renovating schools, providing assistance during medical emergencies, or digging wells.

Likewise, the Polish mission to Old Dongola has engaged with Sudanese communities since the beginning of the fieldwork at the site in 1964. The team has provided assistance to the local community and built personal rapports with its members. Stefan Jakobielski, a former mission director, recalls the archaeologists saw the community members "as our neighbors" who often invited the team to their homes "because hospitality in Sudan is infinite". Many villagers also worked in the excavations, not only because of the economic incentives but also because it was a social occasion. Jakobielski noted that "many people came to work only to socialize" (PCMA UW 2022). As the concept of community archaeology evolved, approaches to engaging different groups became more structured and inclusive, challenging older modes of communication and traditional archaeological practices. Today, a key goal of community archaeology is to practice archaeology with greater social sensitivity, improving relationships with communities that have cultural, historical, or geographic ties to the sites and objects under study. This is particularly important in countries like Sudan, where archaeology began under colonial rule. In the colonial era, archaeological research was often used to justify colonialism and assert control over both people and resources. Community archaeology in Sudan should seek to transform these legacies by collaborating with various communities. In pursuing a model of community archaeology in Sudanese Nubia, I learned that genuine collaboration cannot rest solely on the archaeologist's efforts; it requires

active involvement of both the archaeologists and the community members. This involves understanding different perspectives and needs, respecting diverse forms of knowledge of the past, cooperating in production of educational materials, sharing skills, and fostering respectful personal interactions. Achieving this requires a shift in mindset on both sides.

The contributions in this volume illustrate how diverse approaches in archaeology can strengthen the relationships between archaeologists and communities. De Lellis draws on his experience working with excavation workers to explore the importance of community engagement and how it can be integrated into field practice. Sudanese specialists Idriss and Siedahmed recount their experiences in designing and leading engagement programs, as well as training new facilitators at Old Dongola. They reflect on what community engagement entails and how it might evolve during and after the current conflict. Stark calls for an "engaged bioarchaeology", emphasizing the importance of involving diverse Sudanese communities in dialogue around bioarchaeological research. He addresses its colonial legacies and stresses the need for capacity-building and knowledge transfer to Sudanese students and specialists.

The volume also explores the economic and social aspects of heritage engagement. I discuss community-based business initiatives at Old Dongola carried out over five seasons, highlighting how local social networks, traditional craftsmanship, and community management capacity were indispensable for implementing such projects. I also note that the Sudanese tourism sector remains underdeveloped and vulnerable to both local and global trends. Radziwiłko presents the results of a 2019 community survey of Ghaddar residents, examining their interest in, familiarity with, and expectations regarding archaeology, heritage, and tourism development. Understanding local perspectives can contribute to a more effective design of site presentations aimed at diverse audiences. Michalik and Trawiński employ the eye-tracking method both to investigate how Sudanese and Western visitors visually engage with the Nubian wall paintings at Old Dongola and to compare their aesthetic choices. Kurcz, a cultural anthropologist, reflects on his ethnographic fieldwork at Old Dongola and other sites, examining the social impacts of ethnographic research on local communities and on the researcher himself. His personal account offers nuanced insights into the nature of "engagement" with communities.

A central focus of this volume is people — the local communities, students, and specialists in Sudan and, more broadly, the Sudanese society with whom we work. All those we have worked with, worked for, or written about in the studies presented here, including the two Sudanese authors, have endured many grave challenges since the outbreak of armed conflict in April 2023. Every aspect of life in Sudan has been affected: many civilians have lost their lives, and over 11 million people have been internally and internationally displaced, according to the International Organization for Migration (2025). Food and fuel shortages are widespread, while essential services such as education and healthcare have been severely disrupted. There have also been reports of irreparable damage to museums, universities, libraries, and cultural centers

across the country. At the same time, exceptionally heavy rains and flash floods in 2024 have had a serious impact on the preservation of archaeological sites, complicating proper assessment and conservation efforts.

Since the outbreak of the war, the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums (NCAM) —currently operating from Cairo— has allocated its resources to emergency heritage protection and community engagement initiatives. While Old Dongola and the surrounding villages have not been directly affected by the armed conflict, the impacts of the war are evident — many displaced families have sought shelter there, as in other parts of northern Sudan. Although we mark 60 years of Polish–Sudanese archaeological cooperation, a true celebration must wait until the war ends. In the meantime, we stand in solidarity with our friends and colleagues in Sudan.

I thank all the authors for their contributions to this volume, which represents the first collective examination of archaeology–community relationships at Old Dongola and beyond [*Fig. 1*]. I am also grateful to the reviewers for their indispensable feedback, and to the *PAM* editorial team —especially Chief Editor Dorota Dzierzbicka and editors Agata Czamara and Aleksandra Zych— for their support and commitment to publishing this volume promptly.

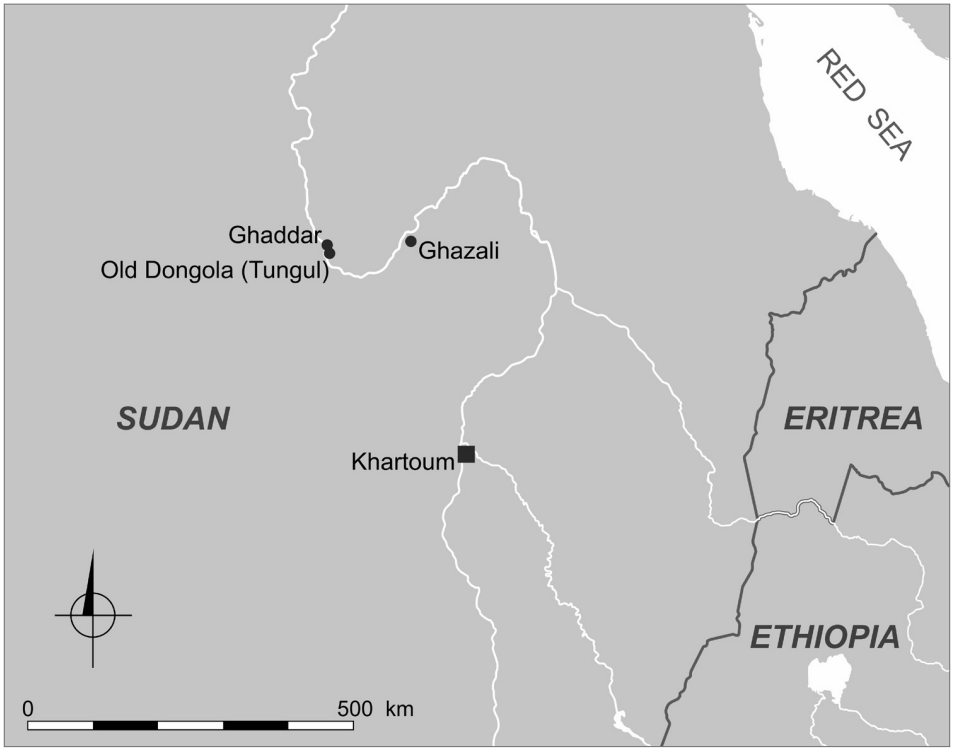

Fig. 1. Map of the north-central part of Sudan, showing the locations of the places discussed in this volume. Old Dongola (Tungul in Old Nubian) is located in the northern Sudan on the right side of the river, about 522 km north of the capital, Khartoum (Drawing M. Momot)

We also thank the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums (NCAM, formerly the Sudan Antiquities Service) for granting permissions and supporting our work, as well as the field inspectors, guards, and all excavation workers led by local *rais* (foremen), whose participation made this research possible.

We appreciate the kindness and cooperation of many residents of Ghaddar and Bokkibul, as well as the support of local institutions: the High Council of Tourism, Northern State, and the Department of Tourism at the Goulid Locality, the Old Dongola Unit, especially the Tourist Police Office and Tourism Office, the Ghaddar Public Council, the Women's Association, and the Council for Archaeology and Tourism at Old Dongola. Their assistance has been essential, especially since the start of our collaborative work on sustainable development and nomination of Old Dongola to the UNESCO World Heritage List.

It is not possible to trace back six decades and name everyone here, but I would particularly like to acknowledge those who have worked closely with our team in recent years: Abdelwahab Jaden, Abdelrahman Mohamed Saleh, Abeer Babikir Siedahmed, Abu Gashim, Anwar Ahmed, Abo Bakr Khalifa Mohamed Zyada (who is known as Sheikh Babiker Khalifa), El-Nour Ali Salah, Hasiena, Mamdouh Awad Hassan, Sheikh Mohamed Sati Babiker Hilali, Abugassim, Sumeyya, Mustafa Abugassim, Nahla Abdelgadir, Nasra Hassan Ali, Salah Mousa, the late Faki Sati Mohamed Ahmed, Swar elDahb Mahjoub Imam Hilali, Touma, Umm el Hassan, and Umm el Hussein.

Guest editor
Tomomi Fushiya
Warsaw, May 2025

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Archaeology with and within the community at Old Dongola: a view from the trenches

Abstract: This paper explores the implementation of community archaeology at Old Dongola in Sudan from the point of view of the author as a field archaeologist. Focusing on recent efforts to actively involve local communities in archaeological practices, this contribution reflects on how participatory methods can foster mutual trust, address the historical marginalization of local labor, and enhance collaborative interpretation within the trenches. Drawing on the experiences of the UMMA and Dialogue projects, the paper reflects on methodological adaptations that honor local knowledge and address complex community dynamics, including the delicate balance between cultural narratives. By positioning community engagement as an essential, integrated practice rather than a peripheral approach, this case study illustrates the broader potential for community archaeology to bridge the gap between academic research and local heritage, ultimately advocating for its role as a standard in modern archaeological methodology.

Keywords: community archaeology, field methodology, theory, collaborative interpretation

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The author wishes to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments, which greatly improved the manuscript, and Tomomi Fushiya for the invitation to participate in this thematic volume, as well as for generously sharing the results of her research with the communities in Old Dongola and providing feedback on the final draft.

INTRODUCTION

Community archaeology has become an increasingly influential approach within the broader field of archaeological practice, emphasizing the active engagement of local communities in the research, interpretation, and preservation of their heritage (Oldham 2017: 215). This participatory approach moves beyond traditional methodologies, which often positioned archaeologists as sole interpreters of the past, towards a model that recognizes local knowledge as integral to both fieldwork and heritage management. At sites with complex histories, community archaeology presents unique challenges and opportunities. These challenges include negotiating between historical narratives, addressing local social dynamics, and balancing diverse stakeholder expectations.

In this context, the experience of community archaeology that has been developed at Old Dongola (Fushiya and Radziwiłko 2019; Fushiya 2021a; 2021b; Larsen 2021; Obłuski and Dzierzbicka 2021) stands out as a unique case of a longstanding relationship between archaeology and the local community. Recent archaeological initiatives at Old Dongola have sought to bridge the historical and the contemporary, engaging local laborers and community members in various aspects of the project. By working closely with local residents, the Old Dongola project has implemented strategies aimed at fostering trust, enhancing knowledge exchange, and creating a collaborative environment within and beyond the excavation trenches.

This paper explores the process of integrating community perspectives into archaeological work at Old Dongola. It considers challenges and complexities that arise when engaging with diverse local identities, as well as practical outcomes of participatory approaches. By concentrating on the perspective of the author as a field archaeologist, this paper reflects on the ways in which community archaeology can foster a more inclusive approach to heritage, while recognizing the potential risks of over-theorizing community involvement. In doing so, it frames community archaeology not as a specialized subfield but rather as a best practice essential to contemporary archaeological research. Through this lens, the Old Dongola case study provides insights into the evolving role of community participation in shaping a shared cultural landscape, one that respects and empowers both past and present narratives.

COMMUNITY AND ARCHAEOLOGY: A COMPLEX RELATIONSHIP

Over the past five decades, archaeological practice has witnessed a growing emphasis on engaging the general public and local communities in the process of archaeological research. This shift has evolved from a mere acknowledgment of the need to communicate research findings to a more active involvement

of communities in the design and execution of archaeological projects. Driven by the opening of interpretative possibilities offered by the affirmation of post-processual archaeological theory, the discourse on the public and communities in archaeology has progressed from a growing awareness of multiple potential audiences for archaeological research (McManamon 1991: 123–127), through advancement in the legislative framework of nations impacted by settlers' histories, up to the full realization of the ethical issues involved in the archaeological practice and the necessity to involve the local communities in participatory schemes.

From local heritage management to the participation in the research and interpretation processes, a host of theoretical reflections and practical experiences have affirmed community engagement as a widely acknowledged best practice (Oldham 2017: 215). However, its implementation remains inconsistent across different fields and geographic regions. While certain subfields, particularly those affected by colonial and settlers' pasts, frequently incorporate some form of community engagement and may even be legally mandated to do so, many others still view it with varying degrees of interest, ranging from misunderstanding to full adoption.

Wright's (2022: 278–285) recent survey of archaeological literature highlights how, despite an increase in the number of specialized publications, community archaeology remains underrepresented in top-tier, peer-reviewed journals that shape the general archaeological discourse. This disconnect —between the actual impact of public and community archaeology and the theoretical perspectives held by practitioners— is underscored by propositions such as Grima's (2016: 55) assertion that "all archaeology is public archaeology", implying an obligation for all archaeologists to engage with the field. Yet, this ideal is far from reality, and a significant gap persists between core practitioners of community archaeology and the broader spectrum of the discipline. Based on the author's experience within European archaeological contexts, a general unawareness of the fact that any archaeological work involving public interaction inherently requires active engagement still prevails (Schadla-Hall 1999; Oldham 2017). Public engagement is often reduced to a superficial site tour, appeasing public curiosity momentarily while allowing archaeologists to return to their work with as little bother as possible. This approach reflects the persistence of an "ivory tower" mentality within the field — a mindset that disregards the negative consequences of minimal public involvement, such as declining public interest in archaeology and the reinforcement of power imbalances that enable the exploitation of cultural resources (Grima 2016). This disparity between recognizing the benefits provided by community archaeology and its actual successful implementation can be attributed to a multiplicity of factors.

First and foremost, public and community archaeology have not yet reconciled the duality between theoretical reflection and practical activity (Richardson and Almansa-Sánchez 2015: 194–195), with the latter often struggling to adhere to a standard framework because of the wide spectrum of archaeologies,

countries, and social realities where it is practiced (Tully 2007: 155–156). Another critical aspect comes from the way community archaeology is often implemented into research agendas. In many cases, community archaeology is still not part of the original planning of project activities and becomes a later addition that is difficult to integrate with the rest of the project. Conversely, if community participation is planned from the outset, it becomes easier to manage expectations, integrate community contributions into the project's outcomes and interpretations, and, ultimately, ensure everyone's contribution to the final results (Humphries 2019: 53).

Integrating community knowledge into scientific results can be a significant challenge in community-based approaches. Transitioning from a deficit model (Merriman 2004; Richardson and Almansa-Sánchez 2015), where archaeologists hold the sole authority over interpretation, to a more inclusive approach can be difficult. The deficit model is still deeply ingrained in higher education systems, and acknowledging the theoretical potential of community-produced knowledge (Cipolla, Quinn, and Levy 2019) requires a significant mental shift of paradigms. Furthermore, within the constraints and requirements of the scientific publishing system, it can be difficult to integrate community contributions into the final results of the project and to properly acknowledge them (Wright 2022: 285). Equally challenging can be the effort to work toward integrating multiple epistemologies into the archaeological discourse in order to counterbalance the bias inherent to Western perspectives and foster opportunities of a constructive dialogue with different epistemologies (Stahl 2020).

Creating a genuine collaborative environment within a community can be challenging for archaeologists, especially without the support of a specialist. Issues such as surrendering decision-making autonomy to address potential exploitation and power imbalances (Emberling and Davis 2024) can be particularly difficult to reconcile with the constraints of externally funded projects with rigid timelines and requirements. Additionally, conflict resolution and fostering a participatory environment can be demanding for project leaders, who often find themselves burdened with the additional responsibility of actively managing individuals, mediating personal agendas, and addressing potential conflicts within the community (Chirikure and Pwiti 2008; Young 2015).

Furthermore, the coming of age of the discipline starts to highlight potential pitfalls of community archaeology, such as misunderstanding, misuse, and even harm to local communities. Particular caution is necessary when engaging with marginalized communities, as sensitive topics like historical injustices, traumatic events, and other delicate issues may arise and require ethical handling (Sayer 2022). Projects should prioritize building local capacity and agency for long-term sustainability (Spencer et al. 2024). Ensuring sustainability and autonomy of community-led initiatives is crucial, as initial benefits can potentially turn into harm if not managed carefully. Moreover, recent scholarship (Meskell 2019; 2020; Meskell and Luke 2021) has highlighted how engagement of the local communi-

ties inevitably involves a political dimension. Past experiences, especially in the Middle East, have seen ample involvement of archaeologists in the unfolding of contemporary events, often in subordination of wider political agendas. Past attempts to promote local development through cultural heritage have sometimes inadvertently perpetuated the subordination of local populations to Western specialists. This has often involved the imposition of external perspectives and problematic practices, such as the excessive bureaucratization of preservation efforts (Meskell and Luke 2021). Such situations can lead to renewed forms of subordination and marginalization and even be exploited to advance the political agendas of foreign powers seeking to use heritage as leverage in implementing their international interests.

Finally, community projects may not always be beneficial and can even result in unintended consequences. Engaging the local community can exacerbate pre-existing conflicts within the community, with archaeology inadvertently promoting the interests of certain groups at the expense of others. In cases of pre-existing tensions, choosing a narrative and promoting a shared view of the past can marginalize dissenting voices or advance the political interests or claims of specific community segments (Supernant and Warrick 2014). In such cases it might be better to abstain from any community involvement or from any archaeological project at all.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH AT OLD DONGOLA: LEGACY AND NOVELTY

In the complex panorama sketched above, Old Dongola represents a unique case. Sixty years of an almost uninterrupted presence of Polish researchers there created an exceptional and complex relationship between the local community and the researchers. Since 1964, the arrival of the Polish expedition has gradually become a sort of annual event for the modern communities settled in the proximity of the site of Old Dongola. Through a host of significant changes and developments in the society and political circumstances of both countries (Larsen 2021: 85–86), the research at Old Dongola evolved and expanded under the leadership of five consecutive directors. A multitude of specialists, including archaeologists, iconographers, epigraphists, conservators, architects, and engineers contributed their expertise to the research done at Old Dongola and guaranteed the conservation of the site and the findings.

At the same time, every year, many inhabitants of the modern villages of Ghaddar and Bokkibul would be directly involved with the Polish expedition. The remarkable discoveries and the significant effort made on the entire site would not have been possible at all without the contribution, through time, of hundreds of local workers. Employed as site workers, cooks, drivers, and providers of many other services necessary for the successful execution of each season

of fieldwork, the local community became an indispensable partner in the execution of the research. Likewise, during its sixty years of seasonal presence, the Polish expedition at Old Dongola became deeply embedded in the local community. With time, the threads of this relationship ran deeper than mere work-related relationships, with many long-standing bonds of friendship and support forming through time. In the words of Stefan Jakobielski, director of the Old Dongola expedition from 1966 to 2006, "We come to the village, and we have to live there. The inhabitants are our neighbors, and we get along with them. They invite us because hospitality in Sudan is infinite" (PCMA UW 2022: 04:32–04:52). This longstanding collaboration has unfortunately been interrupted by the ongoing conflict in Sudan, whose devastating violence has prevented the continuation of research at the site and is inflicting unimaginable suffering on the Sudanese people.

During this prolonged period of coexistence and cooperation, the relationship between the parties has evolved into complex associations. While personal relationships have always been very cordial, formal relationships with the mission and its directors have seen alternating periods of easy or more tense relations. This is naturally understandable for such a long-term project and, partly, results from the government policy on cultural heritage that in the past was inclined to offload heritage preservation and decisions on the holder of the concession, with little direct involvement from the Sudanese authorities (Larsen 2021: 86) and none at all from the local population.

Only recently, the local community started to be involved in the research process, and they engaged in the decision-making processes related to the conservation and management of the local heritage. This development aligns with the ongoing refinement of the methodological approaches employed at the site, which run parallel to the broader advancements within the discipline and the increasing recognition of community archaeology as outlined above. The first attempt at participatory research in Old Dongola saw the realization of specific training opportunities for some of the employees of the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums (NCAM) within the context of a conservation and valorization project of the Mosque building on the site (Obłuski et al. 2013).

The implementation, since 2018, of two large-scale research projects at Old Dongola (Obłuski and Dzierzbicka 2021) brought elements of significant novelty in the research process, impacting both the people working in the field and the wider community. The Dialogue community project (DIALOG Grant 0298/2018: "ArcheoCDN Archaeological Centre of Scientific Excellence" project, the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, Republic of Poland), focused specifically on Old Dongola and related surrounding areas. The project aimed at fostering collaboration and partnership with the local community to achieve mutual benefits. Departing from the colonial approach that views the community as a mere research subject, the project engaged the local partners in the research. The primary objective was

to understand and strengthen the relationship between the expedition and the local community through a series of collaborative actions (Fushiya and Radziwiłko 2019: 174–175). Additionally, the Dialogue project explored alternative approaches to tourism to support local development through heritage. At the same time, the ERC Starting Grant "UMMA – Urban Metamorphosis of the community of a Medieval African capital city" (Grant ID 759926) proposed for the first time a systematic exploration of the post-medieval phases of Old Dongola (Obłuski 2021; Obłuski and Dzierzbicka 2021), with a specific focus on the transition period from the late Makurian to the early Islamic (Kingdom of Dongola period) phases of the city. Further details about both projects can be found in the contributions by Fushiya (2025) and Radziwiłko (2025) in this volume.

The simultaneous implementation of these two large projects entailed a considerable number of changes that involved archaeological practice at large and impacted both archaeologists and local laborers. It comprised an update of the excavation methodology to modern scientific standards (Dzierzbicka 2021; Dzierzbicka et al. 2024) as well as changes in the finds collection methodology (Obłuski and Dzierzbicka 2022: 5–8). For the first time, a comprehensive program of community archaeology targeted at the local communities was planned and executed along with the usual fieldwork (Fushiya and Radziwiłko 2019; Larsen 2021; Fushiya 2021a; 2021c), meaning that the community was included in the research process since its onset and engaged with specific actions implemented by the community archaeology specialists. As an example, in addition to school programs and "open day" site tours that provided opportunities for the local population to interact directly with archaeologists, the project, for the first time, offered community engagement activities targeted at the site workers.

The changes in fieldwork organization were necessitated by the imperative to implement modern scientific standards of archaeological research, which had become essential for pushing forward the research agenda of the site. Consequently, these changes impacted the organization of the work and required a period of adaptation for both the locally hired site workers and the archaeological team. The people engaged in field activities had to (re)learn how to work together, shifting from old paradigms into the new system within this transition period. Some of the locally hired collaborators had been working with the Polish expedition continually for an extended time (Fushiya 2021b: 59–63). While their knowledge of the site and their historical memory of past discoveries have proved useful on more than one occasion, all the people working in the field required a period of adaptation, as the old practices where deeply internalized, or they lacked any considerable experience.

It was also for the first time that the local community was invited to be part of the process of archaeological interpretation. During the digging seasons, a few events were organized that allowed the local population to visit the

site while the fieldwork was ongoing, to take guided tours, and to engage in the interpretation of the archaeological finds. Furthermore, local knowledge holders, such as Sheikh Mohamed Sati Babiker Hilali and Sheikh Abo Bakr Khalifa Mohamed Zyada (also locally known as Sheikh Babiker Khalifa), shared their expertise and local knowledge of the site's history, enriching the final interpretation of its Islamic heritage.

COMMUNITY AND ARCHAEOLOGY AT OLD DONGOLA

A community is a complex, diverse entity that can be challenging to define both in community archaeology practice and from a legal perspective, particularly when determining heritage status (Ozawa et al. 2018). Communities are composed of diverse individuals who may identify with multiple social groups based on factors such as age, gender, occupation, social status, and cultural background. Moreover, individuals often belong to multiple overlapping communities simultaneously (Pyburn 2011; Fushiya and Radziwiłko 2019: 173). This complexity can make it difficult to accurately assess and represent the needs of all community members, especially when dealing with sensitive historical issues or potential conflicts of interest.

In the case of a site with complex histories, where the local heritage spans across centuries and different religions and social groups, the choice of which historical phase should be privileged in conservation and research, or which heritage to protect, can be a very divisive factor (McAnany and Hodder 2009: 21). In the case of the communities living near Old Dongola, a significant obstacle to mutual trust was the belief that the archaeologists' primary interest in the site's Christian past might be linked to a desire to proselytize the local population. The team's efforts to dispel this misconception, particularly through the presence of Sudanese team members who could directly refute such claims, have successfully addressed this issue (Fushiya 2021a: 105). As a result, reciprocal trust, especially with local community leaders, has significantly strengthened. As a general impression, the shift of the primary research focus to the Islamic period seems to have contributed as well to improving the relations with the local community. The choice to concentrate on the Islamic period was made in order to address the existing gap in previous research, which focused mostly on the medieval (Christian) period. Recognizing and exploring this more recent past also aspired to encourage greater community participation in the project.

Certainly, the Islamic heritage is perceived as more relatable, making it easier to engage with the research, but it has to be noted that such relationships might be very complex and personal, while not easily understandable from the point of view of someone who is not part of the community (Näser 2019; Fushiya 2021a). Focusing the research on a previously understudied period also helped to address the bias inherent to much colonial-era archaeology: the prioritization of the distant past of subjugated populations over

their recent history. This prioritization implicitly suggested a cultural inferiority of contemporary populations and their cultures, thereby justifying colonial approaches and policies (Abu-Khafajah and Miqdadi 2019: 94–95). This perspective affected the field for a considerable time, informing much archaeological research conducted by European archaeologists, even those belonging to nations unrelated to past colonial experiences.

The sense of renewed trust paved the way to an effective cooperation in planning, joint management, community rights, community-based tourism development, local economy, and empowerment of disadvantaged groups (Larsen 2021: 92). Additionally, it was agreed that a collective effort toward a UNESCO World Heritage nomination would be pursued and that the site would be designated as a cultural landscape. This decision effectively unites tangible and intangible heritage, such as oral traditions, ethnicities, languages, Islamic cemeteries, and the so-called "Abandoned Village" (Hillat Dongola), within a broader framework of Dongola's protected heritage (Larsen 2021: 87–88). This approach aligns with the community leaders' perspective, which historically has prioritized more recent heritage, even though it may have been marginalized in previous outputs of the research. It also acknowledges the local residents' interactions with the landscape as a place not only where a significant part of their daily interactions is deployed but also as the container of places of particular personal or spiritual significance. Moreover, this major shift reframes Old Dongola from a mere collection of past structures and artifacts to a dynamic space that engages present-day actors, including all the stakeholders at the site (Fushiya 2021a: 95).

COMMUNITY ARCHAEOLOGY WITHIN THE TRENCHES

Historically, contributions of local laborers to archaeological projects, including those conducted in Sudan, have often been overlooked or undervalued (Fushiya and Radziwiłko 2019: 172). Community engagement projects typically do not prioritize involving site laborers in archaeological discourse, and their knowledge and skills are often regarded as distinct from mainstream archaeological knowledge (Mickel 2021: 29–31). Despite being the community members most directly involved in archaeological research, these individuals are often, paradoxically, overlooked by community archaeology initiatives, occupying a liminal space between the archaeologists and the wider local community. Local workers can face further marginalization due to the disconnect between their contributions and the benefits they receive. While they can contribute significantly to the project, they often do not share in the benefits such as academic degrees, career advancements, and job opportunities that are typically available for other expedition members (Fushiya and Radziwiłko 2019: 175; Mickel 2021: 36). They can also be impacted by limited access to the produced knowledge. In the great "colonial" excavation projects of the past, site workers were intentionally kept uninformed about the project's goals and even removed from the site during significant discoveries to maintain their marginalized status and prevent demands for better economic

treatment (Mickel 2021). Even in contemporary contexts, workers may still experience a lack of knowledge about the ongoing work and exclusion from opportunities to contribute their own perspectives and interpretations. Another significant issue affecting the field team can be the reciprocal lack of trust. On the one hand, archaeologists may not always be willing to accommodate the call of participatory research to inclusiveness and multivocality or even simply entrusting the local laborers with any degree of autonomy related to the execution of their own work. On the other hand, there can be issues of what Mickel (2021: 91–113) has defined as "lucrative non-knowledge", where experienced workers refrain from revealing their experience and knowledge because they think that this could affect them negatively.

Some of these issues were longstanding also at Old Dongola. Within the framework of the UMMA and Dialogue projects, the community archaeology team addressed them through various community engagement strategies, such as conducting interviews with workers to gather their experiences and organizing events specifically for the local collaborators, like site tours and public lectures, aimed to explain the project's goals and share its findings. Other issues remained within the trenches and their resolution, or lack thereof, depended exclusively on a mutual effort to renegotiate expectations. This ultimately led to some positive outcomes. As mentioned in the introduction, it is important to note that these observations are based on the author's firsthand experience as a field archaeologist in the UMMA project and may not reflect the views of the entire archaeological team, including the community archaeology specialists.

The changes implemented by the Dialogue and UMMA projects significantly impacted all aspects of the archaeological research conducted on the site, raising critical issues and offering valuable insights into engaging the community within the trenches at various levels. While these experiences are specific to this context and largely anecdotal, they are presented here as a reflection on the possibilities of more inclusive approaches to field archaeology. The trench represents the primary and often most intensive point of contact with the local community. It is the place where conflicts can arise and where constant negotiation is required, but it is also the place where participatory knowledge production can first take shape.

From the point of view of the daily work practice, the most significant changes for the field team were the methodological shifts. Initially, these changes caused misunderstandings between workers and archaeologists, with many experienced workers experiencing conflict because of their previously acquired expertise being suddenly devalued and their difficulty adapting to the updated standard of work that was being introduced at the site. For example, the shift in archaeological focus from the structures alone to also their stratigraphic context required extensive, sometimes unsuccessful negotiations on how to conduct the fieldwork. Similarly, the newly implemented practice of collecting all materials from each stratum, rather than only a selection chosen by the archaeolo-

gist, also necessitated clarification. However, after a transitional period, many of the tensions were resolved and most of the experienced workers reaffirmed their previous status within the increased documentation requirements of the new excavation practices.

Reaching common ground on the new requirements of the fieldwork opened up an opportunity to address problems of mutual trust, thus enabling a more participatory approach to work management, knowledge production, and the site in general, as this extends to issues of knowledge access and sharing, social status, and personal views and motivations regarding the local heritage. The first positive change in this regard was to entrust the site workers with the capacity to manage the work under loose supervision and participate more actively in the decision-making process regarding the excavation. This shift from a command-and-control approach toward a supervisory role allowed local workers to gain trust in the archaeologists and find greater satisfaction in their work. By outlining tasks and allowing workers to organize themselves, it was possible to account for the social hierarchies and existing dynamics between the site workers, consisting of a composite group of men of different ages, personal and social relationships, and attitudes. Furthermore, this let the archaeologist concentrate on other aspects of the work without having to micromanage every single activity going on at the site. Establishing stable groups of collaborators, including local workers and archaeologists, improved the execution of fieldwork. Consistent engagement within the same sector allowed workers to develop a greater familiarity with the context, resulting in higher-quality work, increased autonomy due to an improved understanding, and greater satisfaction from observing progress and appreciating the results of their efforts. Further changes, such as entrusting workers with collecting and packaging the excavated materials and consulting them on the best approaches to specific excavation challenges, fostered mutual trust and facilitated open discussion and shared decision-making. This increased engagement and provided workers with a sense of fulfilment beyond the earning of their daily wages as site laborers.

Another significant issue is the role of local workers in knowledge production. It is generally recognized that local collaborators should be encouraged to contribute to the organization of the project and interpretation of its results. Beyond the benefits of participatory research and diverse perspectives, this approach can foster mutual trust and bridge the gap between researchers and the local community (Mickel 2021: 131). However, challenges including communication difficulties and fundamentally different understandings of the work and its objectives remain. Language often poses a significant barrier. Workers frequently discuss artifacts and site features among themselves, sometimes engaging in debates, but they may not feel comfortable or inclined to involve archaeologists in these discussions. However, spontaneous instances of participatory interpretation and collaboration have occurred, benefiting both parties, and the workers have occasionally played a crucial role in identifying puzzling artifacts or defining the function of specific

spaces. Overall, fostering a more inclusive participation in archaeological interpretation within the trenches would allow future projects to overcome the unilateral interpretation of the local past while clarifying the objectives and intentions of the archaeological team. Many workers express curiosity about the archaeologists' rationale and the purpose of the project. Many of the younger or newer recruits often find it difficult to believe that people would travel from Europe to their village to excavate broken pottery and other "valueless" artifacts. Like in other countries, most assume that archaeologists must be searching for something more valuable. To address these misconceptions and foster a sense of ownership, it is essential to engage the workers in the project. Once they understand the goals and significance of the work, they often take greater pride in their contributions and become more motivated collaborators. It is significant, from this point of view, that in the very beginning of the project the participation in the excavation was often driven by motivators beyond economic gratification, with the site being a place offering opportunities of social connections. In the words of Stefan Jakobielski: "Did they have to? They did it to earn money but, at a certain point, we discovered that many people came to work only to socialize" (PCMA UW 2022: 05:11–05:23).

There is also the issue of social status within the local community that can significantly influence the workers' willingness to participate in knowledge production. Engaging in manual labor, such as working on an archaeological site, may be perceived as a lower-status occupation, potentially impacting their social standing within the community. This perceived social disparity and the abovementioned risk of further marginalizing the site workers due to their being pushed to a liminal position between the archaeologists and the community can further widen the gap between the workers and other community members, such as religious leaders or teachers, creating in this way a sense of detachment, which, in turn, may discourage the workers from sharing their insights or interpretations. All these intricacies may hinder the collaborative potential of community archaeology projects and limit the valuable knowledge and perspectives that local workers can contribute.

Finally, individual interests and attitudes play a crucial role. Some older workers, while taking pride in their work, primarily perceive working at the site as physical labor. Their satisfaction is often linked to the amount of excavation completed, and they frequently inquire about daily targets. While this partly reflects past work evaluation systems, it also highlights a potential disconnect with the project's broader goals. In some cases, workers have explicitly stated that they are not interested in the past and are solely motivated by the work itself. Regardless of their true motivations, it is important to respect their perspectives and understand that their participation is valuable. They may hold their own opinions and insights about the past, but they may not feel comfortable sharing them. Ultimately, their primary motivation may simply be to earn a living through their labor, and this is their right that we must respect and protect.

While the improvements in engagement and collaboration have been encouraging, there is still a significant potential to enhance the collaborative process within the trenches. Traditionally, archaeologists have been the primary interpreters of the past. While the community has its own perspectives and knowledge, these two interpretations have often remained separate. Although the situation has improved at a broader community level in Old Dongola, there is still room for increased collaboration at the site level. Given that workers often play a crucial role in stratigraphic investigation, their involvement in the discussion is vital. This issue could be addressed by increasing the presence of local archaeologists in the trenches. Their participation could help to overcome cultural and language barriers and facilitate the sharing and integration of experiences and specific know-how from everyone (Fushiya 2021c: 550–551).

While the Sudanese past is mostly a foreign land to us, one where our interaction is characterized by a looming dimension of reciprocal strangeness (Cipolla, Quinn, and Levy 2019: 131), it might be less so for our local collaborators. What may appear completely alien to us could still be part of their daily experience or be within their realm of knowledge, mediated by a less estranged past. By involving the local community more in the interpretive process, we can all share the burden of understanding the past. Engaging within the trenches with local archaeologists and with local workers can be an occasion to reflect on our practices and address the critiques that see field archaeology as being "over-described and under-theorized" (McAnany and Hodder 2009: 1; Roskams 2020: 267–270). By bringing participatory practices into the field, we can also increase the level of theoretical engagement within the trenches. However, assuming that modern communities are the faithful and static continuators of past societies documented archaeologically can be problematic and even harmful. This perspective overlooks the dynamic and evolving nature of local communities, potentially leading to misunderstandings and misrepresentations of both past and present cultures. It can end up marginalizing the contemporary local communities and imposing external narratives that do not align with the community's own understanding of their heritage (Cobb 2005; Colwell-Chanthaphonh 2010; Croes 2010; Marín-Aguilera 2021).

As a way to extend the community participation in archaeological interpretation beyond the trenches, the community archaeology team organized regular sessions of knowledge exchange (heritage *wanasa*) to discuss finds and involve members of the local community in their interpretation (Fushiya 2021a: 98). These sessions proved to be of particular interest to the whole archaeological team, from the finds specialists to the field archaeologists, and presented an opportunity for everyone to be involved in participatory research. The sessions fostered a genuine exchange of ideas, with both archaeologists and community members engaging openly with each other's perspectives while remaining open to all possibilities, including that of admitting one's lack of knowledge on

a particular matter. In many instances, these discussions were instrumental in clarifying the function of various objects recovered during the excavation, such as pottery, wooden tools, and basketry artifacts. More importantly, they created an inclusive space for a broader project involvement, enabling archaeologists to share and refine their findings in collaboration with the local community members. This collaborative approach was especially insightful when engaging with individuals still practicing traditional crafts or possessing knowledge rooted in local traditions, thus bridging past and present through shared expertise.

On a wider scale, the regular organization of open days provided the local community with an opportunity to visit the site and interact with the archaeologists. These events proved useful in building trust within the community by offering a first-hand experience with the site that was instrumental in dispelling misconceptions and fostering transparency. The positive response to these events, including the high attendance and enthusiastic participation, demonstrated the community's interest in their heritage, highlighting the potential of heritage in serving as a catalyst for social events and community building (Fushiya 2021a: 102–103).

CONCLUSIONS

Community archaeology compels practitioners to confront ethical and political issues that are often overlooked. By engaging with the modern world and moving beyond the confines of academia, community archaeology helps in dismantling outdated and potentially damaging approaches while bringing in new dimensions of usefulness and tangible public benefits to archaeological research. While the idea of usefulness can be instrumental to illustrating the importance of archaeological research and to securing its funding, archaeology should probably strive for a higher level of "effectiveness", as advocated by Stahl (2020). This effectiveness lies in its ability to challenge the established norms and expand our understanding of the past. By acknowledging the biases of our own epistemology and engaging in constructive dialogue with epistemological systems perceived as "other", we can effectively decolonize archaeological practice and construct historical narratives that recognize the non-neutrality of their foundational concepts and acknowledge potential alternatives (Stahl 2020).

As Moshenska (2018) insightfully observed, the over-theorizing of community archaeology often advances the careers of archaeologists more than it benefits the communities they aim to serve. This tendency can unintentionally reinforce colonial power dynamics, as theoretical frameworks imposed from outside may not align with the values or needs of local populations. To counter this risk, our experience suggests a stronger emphasis on practical engagement in the trenches. Community practice is essential at every level: we need dedicated community archaeology specialists to coordinate broader outreach and ensure meaningful community involvement. Equally important, however, is training all field archaeolo-

gists to integrate participatory research into their daily practice. As Grima (2016) proposed, community archaeology should not be isolated as a specialized subfield but rather established as a standard of best practice.

While community archaeology must be rooted in local perspectives, it is also vital to remain aware of relevant theoretical and political contexts. It may seem daunting to expect archaeologists to engage with politics, policy, and community development, but these are crucial aspects of modern archaeological practice. Archaeological research is never separated from the social and political context of its practitioners (Trigger 1984) and by acknowledging the broader societal implications of our research, we can make archaeology more relevant and impactful. This does not necessarily mean adopting a partisan stance but rather recognizing the ways in which our work intersects with the wider world. The field has evolved to a stage where these considerations are unavoidable; whether or not we consciously address them, they shape our work. Neglecting these broader contexts can hinder our goals and negatively affect the success of our archaeological projects.

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Old Dongola community engagement from a Sudanese perspective

Abstract: Amid growing threats to cultural heritage in Sudan — even prior to the outbreak of conflict in April 2023— the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums (NCAM) and various national and international archaeological missions emphasized an urgent need for capacity building to support the conservation and management of archaeological sites. Community work has proved effective in this regard. Training Sudanese archaeologists and university students, developing educational programs for learners at various levels, and involving local communities in the protection and management of heritage sites can significantly contribute to the sustainable development and long-term preservation of cultural heritage. This article provides an overview of the latest two community engagement projects conducted by the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw (PCMA UW) at Old Dongola.
Both projects, the training program in 2021 and the Baraka project, aimed to establish and strengthen the connection between archaeologists and local communities by fostering engagement and collaboration to raise awareness of cultural heritage and encourage community involvement in its preservation and protection. This was achieved by training Sudanese graduates in Archaeology and Tourism from various universities, particularly those of local origin, to serve as facilitators and instructors in community engagement programs targeting diverse local groups, including school students.

Keywords: Old Dongola, Sudan, training programs, Baraka project, community engagement, cultural heritage, capacity building

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INTRODUCTION

For generations, archaeology has been practiced by, and shared among, small groups of scholars. This attitude has now greatly changed, and archaeologists consider community engagement to be an important part of their work. Together with heritage managers, they attempt to understand the past and share this knowledge (Kusimba 2017: 218). In collaborative archaeology, archaeologists and local communities —both officials and ordinary people— aim to work together for the sake of knowledge sharing. This method relies on partnership, respect, and mutual trust between the parties involved (Colwell-Chanthaphonh and Ferguson 2008: 9). Four core principles underlie community-based participatory research (CBPR): collaboration with communities through the entire research process, appreciation of multiple knowledge systems, delivering reciprocal benefits for communities, and building capacity in the local community (Atalay 2012: 24).

Researchers applying the community engagement approach have long praised its benefits, such as increased sense of identity, pride, or community cohesion (Marshall 2002; Moser et al. 2002; Chirikure and Pwiti 2008; Atalay 2012; Little and Shackel 2014). Several scholars have even claimed that the future of archaeology as a discipline depends on community involvement, collaboration, co-creative methods, and improved knowledge dissemination (Atalay 2012: 7; Guilfoyle and Hogg 2015; Kajda et al. 2018; Kusimba 2017: 218; Nilsson Stutz 2018: 55). Archaeologists make special efforts to share their interpretations in ways that are more accessible to a wide audience than scholarly publications. Members of local communities at and around archaeological sites often feel a strong connection to these places, to the point of altering their daily routines so as to visit the place or hold community events there, while many make efforts to safeguard the sites against looting (Plumer 2018).

In the context of heritage education for younger generations, Egypt offers a valuable example to follow. Fatma Keshk, who participated in a British Museum project in Egypt, authored a book titled *The Tale of Shutb* to share recent archaeological discoveries from the village of Shutb with its local community. Written in Egyptian Arabic, the book aims to both entertain and educate by weaving historical information into a fictional narrative, encouraging young readers to form personal connections with the past and consider its relevance to their present lives (Keshk and Regulski 2020–2021).

Local community engagement projects were rare in Sudan before the implementation of the Qatar–Sudan Archaeological Project (QSAP). Most archaeological expeditions communicated only with Sudanese scholars and excavation workers from local communities. In 2013, by financing about 40 archaeological teams working in Sudan, QSAP provided financial means for archaeological teams to expand their research and develop additional facets of their projects, including greater involvement with local communities (http://www.qsap.org.qa/en/about-us.html). During implementation of QSAP, and after it was concluded in 2019, several

community engagement projects were realized in Sudan also with funding from other governmental and non-governmental organizations. Some have opted for more traditional outreach methods (e.g., lecture, site tour, book, children's book, on-site exhibition and presentation), while others have worked more closely with communities and integrated local perspectives and/or co-produced tools, materials, and exhibition spaces (Humphris and Bradshaw 2017; Anderson, El-Rasheed, and Bashir 2018; Kleinitz 2019; Näser and Tully 2019; Spencer 2019; Beyin et al. 2020; Drzewiecki et al. 2020; Fushiya 2020: 191–228; Mallinson et al. 2020; Spencer et al. 2024). The community engagement programs and collaborative research continued at several archaeological sites in Sudan (Bradshaw and Emberling 2022; Fushiya and Siedahmed 2024).

Local communities benefited from the extensive community engagement projects funded by the QSAP and other funding bodies, mainly thanks to the absence of strict guidelines or burdensome regulations imposed on community engagement. The QSAP project requirements were to produce a bilingual book about the site, to prepare interpretation panels, and to implement site protection measures. NCAM, in turn, encouraged variation of design and approach (Spencer at al. 2024), allowing each field project to adapt outputs to different needs and interests of various regions and communities.

These community engagement projects began to bridge the gaps between the communities and the archaeologists. In some cases, for instance in Amara West, community members learned about the history of the site (Fushiya 2017). The present authors' observations and long-term experience in participation in community engagement projects at various archeological sites in Sudan have shown that such measures increase the local communities' appreciation of nearby archaeological sites and their awareness of a need to protect them.

One of the leading international archaeological expeditions in Sudan to have adopted an effective system of involving the local community is the Polish archaeological expedition to Old Dongola. It started by reviving the relations with the community through increased interaction so as to understand the perspectives and knowledge of the local residents (Fushiya and Radziwiłko 2019). The archaeological work of the PCMA UW at Old Dongola started in 1964. Since then, the expedition has interacted with many Sudanese scholars and with the local community in Ghaddar. The Ghaddar residents were the neighbors of the archaeologists and some became involved in the research as excavation workers. Besides neighborly relations, oral histories relating to Old Dongola were collected by another Polish team as part of a field project in the area "to support archaeological work and analysis" (Bashir 2003: 519). Already in 2008, the Polish expedition to Old Dongola developed a plan for the first community project within the framework of a grant funded from the Polish Aid program, which focused on conservation and renovation of the mosque, raising awareness of the local and regional history, as well as making the building accessible for visitors (Obłuski et al. 2013). Not limited to archaeology, recent communications

with the Ghaddar residents revealed that there had been some efforts to support local schools in the past by the former expedition director, Stefan Jakobielski. This initiative has recently been revived thanks to the support of an international school in Warsaw, Niepubliczna Szkoła Podstawowa British International Academy Primary Warsaw (MyVinci School), which funded the renovation of two classrooms in Ghaddar schools. Another routine developed by the expedition members was the so-called "Thursday afternoons" — weekly visits paid by the mission members to their neighbors for tea in order to maintain their ties with the community (Fushiya and Radziwiłko 2019). This article presents a Sudanese perspective on the capacity building and outreach programs conducted as part of the two recent community projects led by Tomomi Fushiya and implemented within the framework of the Polish expedition to Old Dongola. Both authors participated in the programs as engagement facilitators and instructors.

OLD DONGOLA AND ITS COMMUNITIES

Old Dongola is situated on the right bank of the Nile, in Sudan's Northern Province, 350 km north of the nation's capital, Khartoum (see Fushiya 2025a: ***Fig. 1***, in this volume). Old Dongola (Tungul in Old Nubian, Dongola (دنقلا) in Arabic) was the most important center of the medieval kingdom of Makuria (Godlewski 2013). The city was founded in the late 5th to early 6th centuries by one of the first kings of Makuria (Godlewski 2013). During the Funj period (1504–1821 CE), Old Dongola became part of the Funj Sultanate (Obłuski and Dzierzbicka 2021).

The site is located next to the Ghaddar village, and three other villages —Bokkibul and Hammur in the south and Ghaba on the left bank of the river Nile— are located in its near vicinity. These four villages have a unique connection with the site and represent the local communities of Old Dongola, especially the latest phase of the site's history. Their residents' ancestors lived in what is now the southern part of the archaeological site, in Hillat Dongola (حلة دنقلا), the so-called Abandoned Village. A few scholars and residents with a personal interest in the local past have written about Old Dongola, mostly on the history of notable families and local heritage. In addition, for a long time, a number of the community members participated in the excavations as workers hired by the Polish archaeological expedition.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PROGRAMS AT OLD DONGOLA

Relations between the expedition and local community paved the way for the recent community engagement project of the Polish expedition, which began with meetings with the local communities in Ghaddar and later in Bokkibul (Fushiya and Radziwiłko 2019; Fushiya 2021a). Siedahmed observed that the local communities were well integrated and had good contact with the archaeologists during and after the community engagement project [***Table 1***].

Table 1. Community engagement programs at Old Dongola in 2019–2024

Program Name	Year	Activity
Dialog project	2019–2022	Poster workshop and Open Day
Baraka project	2021	Training program
	2023	Training program; "My House, My Heritage"; "My Heritage, My Identity"; Open Day
Emergency program	2024	"Enriched by Our Heritage"

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN THE DIALOG PROJECT

Although community archaeological work has only recently begun to constitute part of some archaeological projects in Sudan, as mentioned above, a number of archaeological expeditions have shown particularly notable progress in this field. One such initiative is the Dialogue community project in the Old Dongola area, launched in February 2019 (Fushiya and Radziwiłko 2019). Originally part of the Old Dongola project of the PCMA UW, it was designed for implementation over the course of two years (2019–2021), but ultimately continued for three seasons. Its main aims were to understand local standards and values of the Old Dongola community and to revive the relationship between the archaeologists and the communities in order to establish groundwork for working together for sustainable heritage management and community development (Fushiya 2021a). One of the key achievements of the Dialogue project at Old Dongola was the establishment of a strategic foundation for community engagement by the Polish expedition and stakeholders, along with the development of a plan for heritage protection and sustainable development. The development component was expanded, and a local sustainable development plan was formulated by Peter Larsen (2021; 2024). A series of discussions and workshops were held with other stakeholders at local, national, and international levels to identify issues and priorities concerning local development and their role in the plan (Larsen 2021; 2024; Fushiya 2021a). The project also helped foster the relationship between the expedition and the local

Fig. 1. Discussion, questions, and exchange of ideas among participants of the training course (PCMA UW | photos M. Rekłajtis)

community through formal and informal interactions, including interviews and outreach programs (poster workshops for primary school students and a Site Open Day for the community) (Fushiya and Radziwiłko 2019; Fushiya 2021a; Radziwiłko 2025, in this volume). In addition, the project assessed the potential for developing community-based handicraft businesses and provided local producers with guidance on quality and design. It also explored market opportunities and promoted local products, particularly — but not exclusively— within the context of site-based tourism. The project also succeeded in marketing basketry products and encouraged local women to take up basketry production (Fushiya 2025b, in this volume). The engagement team and archaeologists supported them by purchasing the products directly, offering an additional source of income.

THE 2021 TRAINING PROGRAM

The PCMA UW team provided several training opportunities for the Sudanese archaeologists and university students of Archaeology (Drzewiecki et al. 2023; Stark 2025, in this volume). Within the framework of the Dialogue community project, university students and NCAM employees had a chance to strengthen their skills in community archaeology and values-based heritage management (Fushiya 2021b). The need to build the capacity of Sudanese experts in conservation, protection, and management of archaeological sites is particularly urgent, given the increasing threats to cultural heritage (Tabet and Seif 2019). Regrettably, these specialized fields are not included in the curriculum of archaeology departments of the Sudanese universities. To respond to the current lack of training opportunities, a nine-day training program, "Values-Based Heritage Management and Community Archaeology", was organized at Old Dongola from 23 March to 2 April 2021.

It is important that this type of training program is supported and implemented by international missions, as it benefits both Sudanese archaeologists and students, as well as the international

Fig. 2. Group exercise (PCMA UW | photos T. Fushiya)

researchers. For Sudanese participants, such programs enhance their ability to act as community engagement facilitators and instructors. At the same time, international archaeologists gain valuable insight that enables them to shape future community engagement agendas that incorporate Sudanese perspectives.

The program aimed to look at the archaeological site beyond its archaeological scientific aspect, from the perspective of the social value of its features (Mason 2002). It involved theoretical and practical training designed specifically for the Old Dongola archaeological site and used an interactive learning method encouraging active participation in discussions [*Fig. 1*], group exercises [*Fig. 2*], and presentations. The lectures aimed to teach concepts and methodologies combining them with case studies, which stimulated discussions among the participants. The course also offered a great opportunity for an actual interaction with community in various settings, such as meetings and chatting (*wanasa*, ونسة)[1] with the members of local communities [*Fig. 3*], with a women's group [*Fig. 4*], and with school students through poster workshops. Nine graduate students from four Sudanese universities (Khartoum, el-Neelain, Bahri, and Dongola) —the latter one represented by four local (from Ghaddar and Letti) recent graduates— and three NCAM inspectors participated. One of the authors of this paper, Habab Idriss, also took part in this program. We were a group of ten females and two males. To better understand the participants and to enliven the discussions, the lectures included case studies with videos recorded in other countries. Since the training was conducted in English, Idriss also helped with English–Arabic translation.

Already a year before the actual training took place, the instructor —Tomomi Fushiya— created a WhatsApp group to facilitate communication with her and among the participants. This significantly enhanced preparations for the course: participants were given tasks to complete before the training and advised to read materials on general public archaeology, Old Dongola, and the UNESCO World Heritage Program, all distributed in digital form. They were also asked to bring a laptop, if they had one. The course

Fig. 3. A *wanasa* between course participants and the Community Council (PCMA UW | photos T. Fushiya (left), H. Idriss (right))

1 *Wanasa* is a Sudanese Arabic word for "chat".

was held in Old Dongola and conducted by the instructor, who was in charge of community work on behalf of the Polish mission. Most participants and the instructor stayed at the Polish House next to the site. Everything was well prepared thanks to the dedicated efforts of our colleagues: Zakieldeen Mahmoud (a member of the Polish mission), Abas AlKhalifa Mohamed (the cook), and Anwar Ahmed Mohamed (the housekeeper).

Idriss found the course design engaging for the participants, as it encouraged them to share their experiences on various topics related to archaeology and its role in Sudanese communities. Learning from case studies and examples from different countries broadened the participants' understanding of "collaborative archaeology" and its relevance to their daily lives. These examples helped raise awareness among archaeologists and recent graduates in Archaeology about the importance and benefits of interaction between archaeologists and local communities. One of the key concepts thoroughly discussed during the course

Fig. 4. A *wanasa* between course participants and a women's group (PCMA UW | photos M. Rekłajtis)

was heritage values, particularly in relation to their constructed, rather than intrinsic, nature (Mason 2002). In keeping with the title of the training —"Values-Based Heritage Management and Community Archaeology"— the participants had a valuable opportunity to give presentations on the values associated with various heritage places (e.g. the mosque, the *qibab* (قباب) — domed tombs) at Old Dongola, allowing them to apply and deepen their understanding of these concepts.

The program participants engaged in practical exercises and gave presentations on various topics related to heritage values, stakeholders, concepts and methodologies of community archaeology, and the UNESCO World Heritage Program — with particular focus on the challenges of heritage management at Old Dongola. The training also helped them improve their skills in giving presentations, planning engagement programs, and writing project proposals in English. To foster closer interaction with the local community in Ghaddar, the program offered two valuable opportunities. One was a poster workshop with primary school students [*Fig. 5*], and the other was a *wanasa* (ونسة) — an informal meeting with a women's group and the Old Dongola Community Council for Archaeology and Tourism. These encounters inspired an exchange of ideas and reflections on the knowledge gained during the training course. The participants were able to discuss the role of archaeology in the community and listen to the local communities' expectations regarding tourism and community development in the area. Such discussions and experiences are likely to encourage the trainees to develop their own programs and activities for heritage management.

Fig. 5. Poster workshop: Umm Salma Abu Alzine (local participant) and Sajda Ahmed (NCAM inspector) working with pupils from a local school on their posters (PCMA UW | photos R. Alamin)

For the local communities of Ghaddar, Idriss observed that the discussions helped strengthen their sense of belonging and ownership, and encouraged them to contribute to the protection and management of the heritage of Old Dongola. More importantly, community members felt more at ease and were open to freely sharing their opinions with the Sudanese training participants, as they spoke the same language and were working toward the same goal.

At the end of the course, the participants presented their final assignment —a draft project proposal on community engagement and heritage management— incorporating the knowledge and experiences they had gained. These proposals were presented in the presence of all the participants. The last day ended with a closing ceremony attended by representatives of the local community, and certificates were awarded to the successful participants [*Fig. 6*].

The training course was a valuable experience not only for the students but also for the NCAM inspectors. Although some had previously participated in similar initiatives, this was the first time they took part in a training program specifically focused on community engagement. This was true even for those who had participated in community work with national and international missions, as they had mostly served as translators. Idriss had prior experience, having participated in a community engagement project at Meroe —a site upstream of Old Dongola— where she worked as an inspector and a member of the community engagement team of the UCL Qatar mission directed by Jane Humphris (Humphris, Bradshaw, and Emberling 2021). She was involved in a program called the "Heritage Festival", which aimed to involve the local community in sharing and interpreting their heritage with the

Fig. 6. Closing ceremony, participants receiving certificates of completing the course from the Community Council (PCMA UW | photo M. Rekłajtis)

mission team. Many community members brought objects they felt represented their heritage and spoke about them. Idriss was involved in all stages of the festival — from preparation, through data collection and translation into English, to publishing a book about the local community of Meroe–Royal City (Humphris 2020). She confirmed it was a deeply rewarding experience from which she benefited greatly and which increased her knowledge of community engagement methods and practice.

Although the students' experience was incomparable to that of inspectors, this contrast actually contributed to a productive exchange of ideas and experiences among the participants, allowing everyone to benefit. A minor drawback of the training course was its limited duration, which made it difficult to fully absorb all the materials and concepts presented.

The course was a valuable experience not only for the trainees, but also for the Sudanese archaeologists and the local community. It was equally beneficial for the international archaeologists to better understand the interests of Sudanese archaeologists, which is essential in developing future community engagement activities. Fushiya, herself an instructor experienced in community engagement work, remarked: "It was also an important opportunity for me to understand the degree of interest in and need for these subjects among Sudanese archaeologists and reconsider the activities of community engagement programmes" (Fushiya 2020: 100). More broadly, Idriss believes that increasing the number of Sudanese archaeologists and students who can participate in projects as engagement facilitators and lead community programs is crucial for fostering greater involvement in community engagement programs among Sudanese archaeologists.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN THE BARAKA PROJECT

The "Baraka: Revitalization of the Oldest Preserved Mosque in Sudan" project was launched in January 2023 at Old Dongola with funding from the ALIPH Foundation. The project aims to document and assess the condition of the structure and its wall paintings and to conduct a holistic conservation of the mosque. An exhibition space, interpretive tools, and a visitor management scheme will also be developed to showcase the building's significance to both Sudanese and international audiences. The mosque, located on an elevated plateau within the Old Dongola archaeological site, is the most distinctive preserved building in the area. Its significance to local, national, and global heritage is undeniable. As mentioned above, some local residents are descendants of the former inhabitants of Old Dongola, including the Funj-period royal family and the families of *sheikhs* (شيخ, holy men) buried in *qibab* (قباب, domed tombs) or near their *khalwas* (خلوة, Quranic schools).

The project incorporates capacity building and community engagement programs and has been planned to implement three types of training in conservation and community engagement (see *Baraka…* 2023). The first is on-the-job training for Sudanese conservators

and architects, focused on documentation, conservation interventions, and site monitoring. For the time being, as no institution in Sudan offers formal courses in conservation, this represents a valuable opportunity for the Sudanese to gain practical training in this field. The second type of initiatives targets local technicians, training them to conduct regular monitoring and reporting under the supervision of the site manager. The third is aimed at training engagement facilitators. Several residents of Ghaddar, along with students from Khartoum, were trained as facilitators in community engagement programs. This training program allows young local residents to deepen their appreciation of both tangible and intangible heritage in the area, and to understand the importance of its protection and conservation. The present authors served as the lead instructors in this training program and also developed new engagement activities.

TRAINING COURSE IN 2023

The second type of training at Old Dongola (8 February–7 March 2023) aimed to raise awareness about the importance of tangible and intangible heritage and conservation work for long-term heritage protection and tourism development. It also sought to build the capacity of recent Sudanese graduates, many of whom came from the local community. Participants were expected to acquire the skills needed to design, implement, and evaluate heritage education programs upon completion of the training. In other words, the objective was to train future engagement facilitators and visitor guides at Old Dongola [*Fig. 7*]. Holding another training course in Old Dongola —targeting, more specifically, members of the local community— can further strengthen the partnership between the community and

Fig 7. The community engagement team (PCMA UW | photo M. Hassan)

the archaeological mission, reinforcing the role of the community in preserving the cultural heritage of the area. The program was led by Fushiya, with the present authors serving as the main instructors.

Idriss participated in the course in a dual role: as an instructor and a member of the community engagement team. Siedahmed has also co-organized several community engagement programs at Old Dongola and Amara West and teaches tourism at the college level. The intensive four-week program began with six participants and three instructors. For two of the participants, this was a continuation of previous training; for the other four —members of the Ghaddar community with Bachelor's degrees in Tourism, Archaeology, and Social Development— it was a new experience. The program included lectures by Fushiya, Idriss, and Siedahmed on a range of topics, such as tourism industry, visitor guiding, relevant legislation, international and national organizations, and the archaeology and heritage of Sudan. In addition to the theoretical components, the training also included practical exercises. For instance, participants drafted tourism development plans for Sudan in general and for Old Dongola specifically. A schedule for a Site Open Day and heritage workshops for local children has been devised as well.

Idriss delivered a series of lectures on various aspects of cultural heritage under the title: "The Role of National and International Legislations and Laws in Heritage". The lectures provided an overview of the importance of both international and national organizations responsible for implementing cultural heritage legislation in Sudan, and how these frameworks contribute to the protection of cultural heritage as an international, national, and local legacy. From the outset, it was clear that the trainees were already familiar with these organizations, which allowed the lecturer to focus more closely on their history

Fig. 8. Idriss in discussion with the trainees during her lecture (PCMA UW | photo T. Fushiya)

and the specifics of the Ordinance on the Protection of Antiquities (1999). The legal provisions set out in this ordinance were also examined in detail. This topic was also discussed among the trainees, especially in the context of land ownership, which has become an increasingly pressing issue in various places in Sudan, especially in times of conflict.

The second topic of Idriss's lectures was "Oral Tradition as a Source for Collection and Interpreting Data". She first explained the importance of oral traditions in the context of the Baraka project. The main reason for launching the revitalization project was to promote appreciation of the mosque building as a part of Islamic heritage and a place from which Islamic teachings had been disseminated since the 14th century. The project intends to adapt the ground floor of the building as an exhibition space where its symbolic and spiritual values for Muslim communities in Sudan and beyond will be highlighted alongside local heritage represented through objects and stories. The lectures aimed to raise the trainees' awareness of the importance of collecting oral traditions from the local community as part of heritage preservation and to encourage them to continue to do so. The trainees themselves acknowledged that there are many stories worth remembering and saving from oblivion. A long discussion followed on the rights of storytellers and how their data can be preserved and used in different contexts and for various purposes [*Fig. 8*]. Ethical issues related to collecting data, including appropriate conduct during both individual and group interviews, were covered in the lecture as well. The trainees appeared to appreciate learning these essential methods of collecting oral traditions in their own community. Idriss considered them ready to take part in collecting data and materials to be displayed in the new museum with attention to ethical aspects of handling both material finds and oral histories.

Fig. 9. Mohamed Siedahmed gives advice on creating an evaluation form (PCMA UW | photo T. Fushiya)

Fig. 10. Trainees enter workshop evaluation data into a spreadsheet (PCMA UW | photo T. Fushiya)

Siedahmed lectured on tourism, tourism-related organizations in Sudan, relevant regulations, tourism development in the Northern State, and heritage education through both lectures and practical training. These sessions aimed to prepare the trainees to guide visitors at sites in the Northern State, especially Old Dongola [*Fig. 9*]. The lectures and discussions addressed professional conduct when handling tourists, cross-cultural differences, and other aspects related to the tour-guiding profession. Training local tour guides is one of the key steps in developing community-based tourism in Old Dongola. On a more practical side, several lectures on tourism topics and package tour planning were followed by exercises such as business planning and designing a package tour visiting various tourist attractions in the Northern State. Each participant presented their own plans in class.

Computer skills and the use of software (Microsoft Word and Excel) were also practiced [*Fig. 10*]. The trainees then used these new skills to create evaluation forms and invitation letters for two heritage programs and the Open Day (see below).

An important part of the training — following the lectures on the history of archaeological expeditions in Old Dongola and their results— was a visit to the excavation area arranged by members of the mission team: Dorota Dzierzbicka [*Fig. 11*] led a tour of the citadel area and the monastery of the Holy Trinity, while Zakieldeen Mahmoud, Kacper Wasilewski [*Fig. 12*], Magdalena Skarżyńska, and Tomomi Fushiya provided a tour of the mosque, focusing on the Baraka project. The visit helped the participants appreciate the recent discoveries and provided them with archaeological information useful for guiding visitors during the Open Day. To further familiarize the trainees with archaeological methods, special sessions were held: on pottery processing and analysis by Katarzyna de Lellis-Danys, on archaeobotanical sample processing and sorting by Mohamed Nasreldein Babiker, and on documentation methods by Tomomi Fushiya.

Fig. 11. Dorota Dzierzbicka in the citadel during a site visit (PCMA UW | photo H. Idriss)

Fig. 12. Kacper Wasilewski at the mosque during a site visit (PCMA UW | photo H. Idriss)

These activities offered the trainees valuable opportunities to go through the whole process of archaeological fieldwork and to get to know the members of the mission. The visit to the mosque was especially meaningful, as they were able to meet the Baraka project team. Trainees listened attentively, asked questions about the team's work, and learned about the engineering, conservation, and archaeological challenges the team faced. They later shared what they had learned with their families and friends.

The training concluded with an evaluation session. Alongside suggestions gathered during the *wanasa* (ونسة), the participants' feedback and new ideas will help to improve the program in the future. During the closing ceremony, the participants met Artur Obłuski, general director of the Baraka and Old Dongola projects. They shared with him how the program had developed their knowledge, skills, and motivation, and received their certificates from him [*Fig. 13*].

NEW HERITAGE EDUCATION PROGRAMS

The poster workshop initiative began in 2019 and continued until 2022, targeting local students and teachers from schools in Ghaddar and Hammur (Fushiya 2021b). The idea behind these activities was to familiarize local children with the history of the area and the ongoing archaeological excavations. They provided opportunities for students to meet archaeologists, learn about the site and recent discoveries, and then present what they had learned at the archaeological site on their posters. In 2023, two new heritage education training programs were introduced: "My House, My Heritage" and "My Heritage, My Identity". The programs were also used as hands-on practice in the heritage management training program — the trainees helped the students collect data, assisted during the poster workshop, and entered data into the program evaluation forms.

Fig. 13. Completion ceremony, participants meeting the director of the Old Dongola project and receiving their certificates (PCMA UW | photos T. Fushiya)

The "My House, My Heritage" program, designed by Siedahmed, aimed to introduce the concept of heritage in a simple way that would capture the students' interest. The focus was placed on tangible heritage in their immediate surroundings, especially old houses and historical buildings in their villages. What makes Old Dongola stand out in this respect is the presence of buildings representing different architectural styles, constructed from various building materials. Through "My House, My Heritage", students explored and documented this important aspect of their heritage — a key part of our broader strategy to raise the local students' awareness of their heritage. Unlike previous one-off initiatives, this program was planned as a recurring event to gradually develop young people's knowledge, skills, and sense of commitment to heritage protection.

"My House, My Heritage" was designed as a three-day activity. Day one focused on selecting participants, explaining the program's goals, and helping them choose their topics. Day two consisted of a three-hour fieldwork session during which the participants collected data about the selected houses (see below for more details) [*Table 2*; *Fig. 14*]. Day three was devoted to student presentations of their fieldwork results at school [*Fig. 15*].

Table 2. "My House, My Heritage": objectives and materials

Objectives	Materials needed for the activity
• To train history and arts teachers in interpretative tools, conservation of local culture, and heritage education activities • To raise awareness and understanding of local heritage through involvement of schools • To teach students about local vernacular architecture • To assist students in gaining a better understanding of a house in their community • To raise awareness of the architecture and space-planning of local houses • To generate interest in and curiosity about traditional architecture • To introduce basic concepts in architecture and the art of building • To develop skills in interviewing, photography, and drawing	• Writing and drawing materials for 20 students • 20 pencils, eight rulers, and eight rubbers, one A4 paper packet • Four poster boards (or similar heavyweight paper) • Four cameras

Fig. 14. Students collecting data ("My House, My Heritage" — Ghaddar) (PCMA UW | photos H. Idriss)

In the fieldwork part of the workshop, students were instructed to select a house they wished to focus on in their activities. The house could be their own, a relative's, or any other house in the neighborhood. The main objective of the exercise was to learn something new about the house and its history. It was explained that, like people, many houses have stories to tell, and the selected house should have a history that the students found interesting and wanted to share with their peers. Equipped with pens or pencils and notebooks, the students visited the houses of their choice. They spoke with the owners and recorded the answers to their questions. In addition, each student was also asked to produce two drawings of the house: one showing the view from the street, and the other a floor plan.

Fig. 15. Students' presentations ("My House, My Heritage" – Ghaddar) (PCMA UW | photos H. Idriss)

The activity was a good starting point, and the lessons learned during this first implementation would help improve the program in the future, as outlined below. Siedahmed observed one particularly positive outcome: the school teachers found "My House, My Heritage" to be effective and useful for the students. The teachers were also actively involved in explaining the principles of the activity and its significance. The students, who greatly enjoyed the activity, documented various house designs and architectural details, noted differences between old and modern houses, and came to appreciate preserving houses located in Ghaddar, Hammur, and Bokkibul. In addition, the need to share and discuss their observations boosted the children's self-confidence.

For the next phase of "My House, My Heritage", Siedahmed plans to focus on houses in Hillat Dongola, Funj-period houses within the fortified city (the citadel), as well as churches, the monastery, and the mosque at the archaeological site of Old Dongola.

The second heritage education program —"My Heritage, My Identity"— was designed by Idriss and targeted secondary school students (14–16 years old). Its aim was to enhance the students' understanding of Sudanese history from an archaeological perspective, introduce the Antiquities Law, and explain the institutional framework for the protection and management of archaeological sites in Sudan. The program sought to raise the

students' awareness of their role in safeguarding Sudanese heritage. The training took place on 5 March 2023 at the girls' and boys' secondary schools in Ghaddar and consisted of a lecture followed by a discussion [*Figs 16, 17*]. 250 male and 270 female students took part in the lecture. The lecture concluded by emphasizing the shared responsibility of all citizens in protecting cultural heritage. It also aimed to strengthen the students' sense of identity as Sudanese.

Fig.16. "My Heritage, My Identity" workshop for girls at the secondary school in Ghaddar (PCMA UW | photos T. Fushiya)

The feedback received highlighted the need for further awareness campaigns, educational programs, and community involvement initiatives. These insights will help develop strategies to deepen community engagement in cultural heritage preservation.

The Site Open Day, held on 25 February in 2023, provided a good opportunity to present the outcomes of the archaeological work, including the ERC-funded UMMA project, the new conservation initiative, and the Baraka project funded by the ALIPH Foundation, to members

Fig. 17. “My Heritage, My Identity” workshop for boys at the secondary school in Ghaddar (PCMA UW | photos T. Fushiya)

of the local community. The training course participants collaborated to organize and run the event, starting with the production and distribution of invitation letters and posters [*Fig. 18*]. They also put up leaflets on shop walls in the Ghaddar market — *souq* (سوق). On the day of the event, posters created by local

Fig. 18. Poster made by local students displayed by the training team on Open Day (PCMA UW | photo T. Fushiya)

Fig. 19. Preparations for the Open Day (PCMA UW | photos T. Fushiya)

school students during previous heritage education workshops were displayed at the site's information point. Here, visitors were also introduced to a set of recommendations and awareness signs ("no graffiti", "no climbing walls", "protect our heritage", etc.), which were explained before the start of the site guided tour [*Fig. 19*]. Following recommendations from local representatives, the day was divided into two separate sessions: for women (from 11:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m., i.e. after housework and before the men returned from work) and for men (3:30 p.m.

Fig. 20. Open Day: guiding the visitors; visitors leaving comments after their visit (PCMA UW | photos T. Fushiya)

to 5:30 p.m.). The trainees, who had studied hard during their course, acted as guides during the Open Day, with one trainee leading each group of visitors. The visits' starting points were the Cruciform Church, fortification walls, Gate Church, House of the *Mek*[2] (الملك), the excavations at the Funj-period settlement, the Royal Palace, and the Church of Archangel Raphael. During the visits, the trainees also answered the visitors' questions to the best of their knowledge acquired during the lectures and discussions during the course. In the mosque, where conservation work was ongoing, the visitors were guided by the present authors. For safety, all visitors were instructed by the mosque's guardian to wear helmets due to the works in progress. At the end of the visit, the visitors left their feedback about the program on a comment board [*Fig. 20*]. The Open Day turned out to be a great success. Visitors particularly appreciated the opportunity to visit the site and learn about the monuments of Old Dongola, referring to their experience as "wonderful" and "beneficial".

The Open Day was an opportunity for the local community to observe the progress of the ongoing work, find answers to their questions (e.g. whether archaeologists find any gold during excavations, or what happens to the excavated objects), and see the scale of the archaeological

Fig 21. Habab Idriss explains the aims of the Baraka project to Mona Hassan, Head of the Department of Tourism in the Goulid District (PCMA UW | photo T. Fushiya)

2 *Mek* is Sudanese Arabic for "king".

mission's efforts to uncover their heritage. This certainly helped raise awareness of the importance of protecting the site. About 70 local residents came to the site, including official representatives: Mona Hassan, Head of the Department of Tourism in the Goulid District [*Fig. 21*], Abeer Babiker, Head of the Tourism Office in the Old Dongola Unit, and Alameen Mukhtar, Head of the Old Dongola Unit. Their presence testified to the interest of the local administration in these programs — comprehensive, all-encompassing, and conducted by the Polish mission for many years — which actively involved the local community at all levels.

ACTIVITIES IN 2024

In 2024, due to the crisis in Sudan, our colleagues from Poland were unable to travel to Sudan to continue their research and conservation projects at Old Dongola. Instead, a new emergency program was created and implemented in the winter of 2024, with the support of NCAM and the PCMA UW. A twelve-day training course, "Tourism and the history of Old Dongola", was held at Old Dongola from 17 to 29 February 2024. The training aimed to build the capacity of 15 recent graduates from the local community with Bachelor's degrees in Tourism, Archaeology, or Social Development from eight Sudanese universities [*Fig. 22*] — University of Dongola, University of Khartoum, National Ribat University, Shendi University, Omdurman Islamic University, Alzaiem Alazhari University, University of Gezira, and Red Sea University. This program, designed and led by Mohamed Hassan Siedahmed and Zakieldeen Mahmoud [*Fig. 23*], had three main objectives: 1) to familiarize the participants with the history of Old Dongola; 2) to raise heritage awareness among the local community; and 3) to train participants to become tour guides and educators in heritage management at local schools. As part of the program, the trainees organized a poster workshop —"Enriched by Our Heritage"— for middle school students (20 boys and 20 girls) from two schools in Ghaddar, including middle school students displaced from Khartoum following the outbreak of the conflict [*Fig. 24*]. The program's objectives were largely achieved.

Fig. 22. Participants of the 2024 training course: recent graduates from the local community (PCMA UW | photo I. MohammedAli Mohammed Elgadi)

The new heritage education program, "Enriched by Our Heritage", for middle school students was designed and implemented in collaboration with local teachers and facilitators who had been trained in 2023 as part of the Baraka project. It resembled the "My House, My Heritage" program in that it aimed to introduce the concept of heritage in a simple way, to make students aware of the heritage around them, especially historic buildings in Old Dongola. The "My House, My Heritage" program, on the other hand, sought to attract students' attention to houses, heritage materials, and architecture. "Enriched by Our Heritage" was, in fact, an emergency plan to accommodate the needs of middle school students who studied Old Dongola's history in local schools and who came from Khartoum due to the current crisis in Sudan. The workshop generally went very well. The students took good notes about the site's history, drew plans of the buildings, and took pictures. The activity expanded the young people's knowledge and skills. The experience was new and exciting for the students from Khartoum, as they had not visited the site before. Unlike the local students, they had only heard about the programs conducted in the previous year, but they participated for the first time. It was a valuable experience for all of them.

We hope to continue the "My House, My Heritage" program when the conflict ends. The "Enriched by Our Heritage" program is designed as a recurring event, like "My House, My Heritage", as described above.

Fig. 23. Zakieldeen Mahmoud gives a lecture to participants of the training course (PCMA UW | photo I. MohammedAli Mohammed Elgadi)

DISCUSSION

Among the programs implemented in Old Dongola, the most important were the training programs addressed at local and Khartoum-based students and archaeologists. They offered valuable opportunities for the participants. Firstly, the training programs facilitated the sharing of knowledge and experience among participants from different backgrounds. Secondly, they allowed the locally trained guides and facilitators to improve their knowledge of the site's history, as well as cultural heritage protection and management. In addition, the programs helped to strengthen the relationships between the local community and the site, fostering a shared sense of responsibility and interest in its preservation. The programs proved successful and beneficial, as they were the first among those offered by archaeological missions to focus on capacity building for Sudanese archaeologists and newly graduated students not only in Archaeology, but also in Tourism and Social Development. It was also a rare case where the main instructors of the second training program were Sudanese specialists. The trainees showed great interest in collecting information on various topics related to archaeology and tourism and discussed issues of interest both among themselves and with the local community (e.g. teachers, women's group, students). The visit to the site and the mosque provided the trainees with more information about the building and its history. In addition, it was an opportunity to

Fig. 24. A poster made by students during a workshop (PCMA UW | photo I. MohammedAli Mohammed Elgadi)

see what archaeologists actually do in the field and to learn about the latest discoveries. The participants were well integrated into the discussions, actively exchanged ideas, and gave informative presentations, which may benefit them in the future.

The trainings were empowering for the present authors as well, enhancing our experience in designing community engagement programs, enabling us to act as instructors and facilitators, and helping us improve our teaching methods.

Although the community engagement program in Old Dongola has been largely successful, it also faced some challenges. One of these was language. Learning English is essential for Archaeology graduates from various universities to effectively communicate with foreign visitors and work as tour guides at the site. Without adequate language skills, their ability to engage with international teams and tourists remains limited.

Additionally, despite the Polish mission's long history in the area and more than five years of community engagement in Ghaddar, the concept of site protection is still not fully understood. This is evident from the continued encroachment on the archaeological site by residents who have expanded their houses or agricultural plots into protected areas, a trend that has intensified during the ongoing conflict. With the influx of people into the region, such violations have increased, leading to official complaints against certain individuals.

The lack of awareness about the need to protect the site appears to concern only a few, while for others, agricultural expansion takes precedence — especially as many have lost their sources of income and turned to farming for survival. In such difficult circumstances, securing daily provisions becomes a priority over protecting the site. Addressing these challenges requires continuous education and efforts to balance heritage conservation with the community's pressing economic needs.

CONCLUSIONS

Old Dongola has recently witnessed significant interactions between the local community and the archaeological expedition, particularly through the Dialogue and Baraka projects. The present authors observed that community members have become more aware of the site's importance and the need to protect it. The local community appears to feel a strong connection both to the site itself and to the archaeologists and the Polish mission. In this article, we have traced the development of community engagement programs, focusing on three main aspects: capacity building for recent graduates and archaeologists, poster workshops for primary and middle school students, and the Site Open Day. We also discussed their significance and impact from a Sudanese perspective.

The training programs had a significant impact on the local community, as they involved diverse community groups and spanned more than four years. Both community members and archaeologists benefited from the experience. The first program, launched in 2021, laid the foundation for training Sudanese archae-

ologists and students of Archaeology and Tourism to serve as facilitators and instructors in community engagement initiatives.

Working with school students within the framework of local heritage education programs is also worth highlighting, as today's students are the future custodians of the cultural heritage of Sudan. Raising awareness of their heritage and drawing their attention to archaeological sites not only broadens their knowledge but also helps shape their identity. Reaching out to younger generations has proved highly successful, as students can positively influence others by sharing their newly acquired knowledge with family and friends. Their participation in these programs also fostered a sense of belonging. For Sudanese archaeologists and students of Archeology and Tourism, the impact of the programs was even greater. Training and preparation for community engagement work helped them recognize the importance of linking archaeology with the community and reinforced the value of this connection. This experience motivated them to further develop their skills and abilities to create their own plans and proposals. They not only have scientific expertise, but also belong to the community in terms of culture and language, which makes their contribution to community engagement efforts especially valuable. Moreover, they can be relied upon to organize heritage programs, which are particularly important in the light of the war that has severely affected Sudan's cultural heritage.

In the future, we aim to build on the success of the two projects already implemented. The plan includes training university graduates from the local community to develop and implement community work programs in schools at various levels. In addition, further efforts will be made to raise awareness of the importance of heritage and the role of local communities in its protection. These efforts are hoped to contribute to sustainable development in the area by fostering collaboration, building local capacity, and promoting long-term growth.

The current dire circumstances, caused by the ongoing war and resulting in the displacement of many people, make the need for training Sudanese specialists in heritage management even more urgent. This situation underscores the critical importance of raising awareness about the value of archaeological sites and the need to preserve them. Empowering local communities to protect their heritage is essential to safeguarding the region's cultural identity and ensuring its preservation for future generations.

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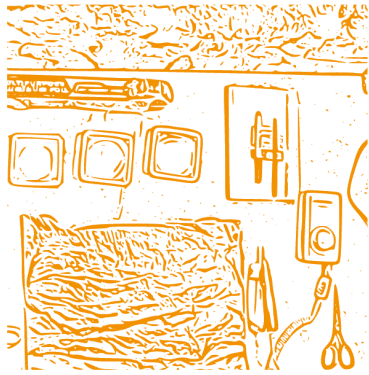
“The People of Ghazali”: a consideration of community engagement in bioarchaeology



Abstract: Community engagement approaches, along with the development of capacity building and knowledge transfer under the aegis of such, have grown rapidly in recent years within archaeology as a discipline. With increasing adaptation of community-engaged methodologies among archaeological projects in Sudan have come additional opportunities for further engagement in the realm of bioarchaeological research. Given the unique aspects of bioarchaeology centered around documentation of burials and analyses of skeletal remains, a key arena of engaged approaches has been the development of dedicated workshops to provide methodological training in conjunction with hands-on opportunities during fieldwork. Such capacity development plays an important role in facilitating bioarchaeological inquiry and remains a component of project development in Sudanese contexts that discussion with local stakeholders has demonstrated to be desirable and sought where possible. Such capacity development through three methodologically driven bioarchaeology workshops in conjunction with opportunities for engaging with individuals in Khartoum around bioarchaeological approaches was undertaken in the winter of 2022 as a component of “The People of Ghazali: Tracing the Human Experience in a Nubian Desert Monastic Community (680–1275 CE)” project. This paper explores the dynamics of capacity development and community engagement in the context of bioarchaeological research in Sudan.

Keywords: community engagement, knowledge transfer, Sudan, ethics, isotopes and DNA

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INTRODUCTION

The field of archaeology has reached a point in its development such that it can demonstrably be shown that discussion, engagement, and involvement of local communities in archaeological processes, from conception to completion and beyond to site management, is not only an ethically informed imperative, but also stands to provide a beneficial synergy to researchers and local communities alike, allowing for mutually beneficial relationships to be formed. As Obłuski and Dzierzbicka (2021b: 67) point out, archaeological projects must seek to go beyond simply excavating a site and endeavor to work with local communities: research does not exist in a bubble and the realities of local communities as stakeholders in the heritage realm should be recognized and fostered (Atalay 2006; 2012). The principles of community-engaged approaches to archaeology and the need to take such into account have been more and more frequently recognized and embraced among archaeological projects in Sudan, with aspects of community engagement becoming key components of project design and implementation at Meroë (Humphris and Bradshaw 2017; Humphris, Bradshaw, and Emberling 2020), Tungul (Old Dongola) (Fushiya and Radziwiłko 2019; Fushiya 2020a; 2021a; 2021b; Larsen 2021), Soba (Drzewiecki et al. 2023), Amara West/Abkanisa (Spencer et al. 2024; Fushiya forthcoming), and Mograt Island (Näser 2019; Näser and Tully 2019), among others (see also Hafsaas-Tsakos 2011; Bradshaw 2017; 2018), adding to the broader global development of community-engaged archaeological approaches (see Atalay 2006; 2012; Marshall 2009; McDavid 2014; Fushiya 2018; Acabado and Martin 2022).

While community-engaged approaches to bioarchaeology, which is to say the documentation, excavation, and analyses of burial contexts and associated biological, primarily human, remains (see BABAO 2019; Binder 2019; Buzon 2020; Sutton 2020), are comparatively nascent in the archaeological landscape of Sudan, the field of bioarchaeology has a rich, but also at times problematic, history in the region, with most research to date primarily being undertaken along the northern sections of the Nile River valley within the region referred to as Nubia (Binder 2019; Buzon 2020; Dafa'alla 2023). As a geographic region, Nubia comprises areas of what are today southern Egypt and northern Sudan, with Budka and Lemos (2024: 11) proposing a definition of this territory as extending from the First to the Sixth Nile Cataract. While the conceptual geography of "Nubia" as a place is broadly understood, the physical limits of this region have proven challenging to uniformly define and are often context-dependent to the extent that multiple "definitions" of Nubia as a place exist (Auenmüller 2019; Williams and Emberling 2020; Dafa'alla 2023). By contrast, the modern nation of Sudan, which borders Chad, Central African Republic, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Libya, South Sudan, as well as the Red Sea to the east comprises both parts of Nubia and regions beyond Nubia (FAO 2015; Williams and Emberling 2020). Additionally, the term "Nubian" refers to a

Nilo-Saharan ethnolinguistic group with ancestral connections to the geographic region of Nubia, contemporary individuals belonging to this group being known as Nubian and among whom Nubian languages are spoken, most notably for the areas discussed herein, Dongolawi and Nobiin; the nature of ancestral connections between Nobiin and Old Nubian remains an area of research and ongoing discussions (Edwards and Bell 2000; H. Bell 2009: 264–273; Bechhaus-Gerst 2011; van Gerven Oei 2021; Dafa'alla 2023; Hammarström et al. 2024; Wafa 2024). Contemporary Nubians have historically primarily resided in areas of geographic Nubia, though not exclusively, particularly more recently following resettlements and migrations in conjunction with land lost to dam floodwaters (see H. Bell 2006; 2009). As with archaeology in the region, foundational bioarchaeological research was undertaken in Sudan in the face of impending destruction in relation to the construction of dams and associated rising water levels threatening surrounding communities and heritage sites in the flood zones (Säve-Söderbergh 1987; Waldron 2000; H. Bell 2006; 2009; Hassan 2007; Andersen 2011; Hafsaas-Tsakos 2011; Rowan 2017; Edwards 2020; Welsby 2020: 310; cf. Carruthers 2022). Näser (2020) points out that by 1970, after three extensive salvage campaigns undertaken in advance of inundation in association with dam infrastructure development, Lower Nubia was quite likely the most densely archaeologically researched area globally.

While the "race to save the monuments" in advance of reservoir flooding associated with the Aswan High Dam, conducted under the International Campaign to Save the Monuments of Nubia UNESCO campaign in 1960–1980, is perhaps the most recognizable, particularly for the relocation of large monuments like Abu Simbel (UNESCO 2020), the flood zone imperative for archaeological survey and excavation in the geographic region of Nubia has been a factor for over a century now (see Rowan 2017; Salah Mohamed Ahmed 2020; Dafa'alla 2023). Early modern efforts at damming the Nile from the time of the first dam at Aswan effectively placed at odds two schools of thought referred to by Andersen (2011) as "muscular modernization" (i.e., those seeking to leverage control of the Nile River to facilitate economic development) and "paternalistic preservation" (i.e., those who saw preservation of cultural monuments of the past as a key stewardship responsibility). In the early 20th century, research undertaken by the Archaeological Survey of Nubia (ASN) in parts of southern Egypt and northern Sudan under the direction of George Reisner and Cecil Firth, in advance of additional flooding associated with the raising of the Aswan (Low) Dam, ultimately resulted in the excavation of 151 cemeteries over four seasons in 1907–1911, from which Metcalfe (2023: 1) estimates about 7500 individuals were recovered from approximately 20,000 graves reflecting contexts from early A-Group (around the 4th millennium BCE) through the early Christian period (around the mid-late 1st millennium CE). The skeletal remains excavated were variously analyzed by Grafton Elliot Smith, Frederick Wood Jones, and Douglas Erith Derry (see Waldron 2000), though it is only truly the remains from the first season

of the ASN in 1907–1908 that have been comprehensively published (G.E. Smith and Jones 1910), with the remaining three seasons being only partially presented (Derry 1909a; 1909b; Firth 1912; 1915; 1927; Metcalfe 2023).

The anatomical analyses undertaken by the ASN set a benchmark for today's bioarchaeology in the region and the field more broadly; the extensive qualitative and quantitative analyses of a diverse range of time periods and proposed "social classes" was atypical for the time, an era more readily defined by preferential collection of mummified individuals, cranial remains, novel cases of skeletal variation and pathological impacts, limited analyses of "elite" burials, and in many cases simply ignoring human remains in archaeological contexts (Metcalfe 2023). As such, the oft-cited ASN bioarchaeology results can be seen as a milestone and bellwether of subsequent research developments. This monumental survey project, however, also highlights a paradoxical component of the field that continues to be grappled with today. Undertaken by Western scholars in evident isolation from local voices, not to mention the largely unaccounted for members of the local workforce (cf. Quirke 2010; Baird 2023; Spencer et al. 2024), one of the key questions of the analyses of the ASN was to assess the degree of Egyptian influence and expansion into contexts in Nubia, as well as biological affinities among Nubian populations; adopting a primarily Egyptocentric, diffusionist, racialized model, project results were broadly steeped in the colonial rhetoric of the period (G.E. Smith 1914; 1923; Trigger 1978; Molleson 1993; Brace 2010; S.T. Smith 2021; Buzon and Marshall 2022; Schrader et al. 2024). Waldron (2000: 367) echoes the voice of Grafton Elliot Smith himself (see G.E. Smith and Jones 1910: 7) in noting that a primary incentivizing factor for Smith as an anatomist on the ASN project was the possibility of determining race from skeletal remains.

In a similar vein regarding contexts in Nubia documented by the expansive antecedent Royal Prussian Expedition conducted by Karl Richard Lepsius and colleagues in 1842–1846 (Lepsius 1849; 1852; 1849–1859; Fitzenreiter 2011; Loeben 2020), one of numerous contemporary and later foreign exploration forays into the region (see Ahmed M. Ali Hakem 1978; Salah Mohamed Ahmed 2020), Näser (2020) points out that Lepsius's chronology and historical grounding of Nubian monuments gave rise to what Said (1978) refers to as an "imaginative geography" that conceptualized Nubia as "the Other" in reference to Pharaonic Egypt. Such inferences tacitly put in place a notion of Nubia and Nubian history by extension as of less intrinsic importance and relatability than the *sotto voce* superior Egyptian cultural legacy (see also Budge 1907; Lemos 2024). This rhetoric would not only continue to be evident during the subsequent ASN, but is evident and often directly restated across numerous investigative contexts in Nubia for a substantial period into the 20th century (see Trigger 1994), with the work of Reisner (1923) at Kerma, where an Egyptian association was presumed on the basis that a local cultural group could not have been so sophisticated, being a commonly invoked lodestone (Matić 2018; Minor 2018; van Gerven Oei 2022;

Schrader et al. 2024). Consultation of the bibliographies presented by Rose (1996), which covers to varying extents the period up to 1995, and Sabbahy (2018), which presents sources published from 1995 to 2016, further demonstrate this particular vantage of inquiry within bioarchaeology and the progressive movement of the field away from such. Despite clear progress and increasing awareness of the implications of long established, often now questionable, paradigms, the legacy impacts of early contributions remain challenging to fully expunge from Nubiology, with, for instance, the A-, C-, and X-Group terminology, originally established by Reisner, remaining common touchpoints of cultural group reference and contestation in the literature (for recent examples of such see Dann 2020; Gatto 2020; Hafsaas 2020; Mahmoud El-Tayeb 2020; Näser 2020).

The legacies of colonialism, racism, and orientalism in bioarchaeology have been conceptualized and addressed at length in numerous venues (see Murphy and Klaus 2017; Meloche, Spake, and Nichols 2020), with probing consideration focusing on instances in Sudan most recently presented by Schrader and colleagues (2024). Additionally, as Spencer and colleagues (2024) note, most international and Sudanese archaeologists have long studied the past in isolation from local communities, effectively making local communities passive consumers of their own heritage (see also Humphris, Bradshaw, and Emberling 2020).

While a broader discipline familiarity with the implications of the 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) (United States Senate, Select Committee on Indian Affairs 1990) in the United States of America is often engaged as a paragon of progress in the realm of ethically engaged bioarchaeology, the dynamics of different global realities are such that the advances gained under NAGPRA are neither inherently transferable nor universally applicable. Yet the sentiment of NAGPRA as an ethically motivated and community engagement advocating path forward has spurred conversations and discourse development around the need for and manner of engaging with local communities in the execution of bioarchaeological research. Informed consent has increasingly become the norm in bioarchaeological research along with broader recognition and inclusion of indigenous and local community knowledge and voices in research scope development, both in terms of what can be learned and what the bioarchaeological research being conducted can contribute to enhancing the desired knowledge of extant indigenous/local communities. In line with such progress, increasing codification and advocacy for explicit permission around the examination and analyses of human skeletal remains has been included within the codes of conduct of numerous (bio)archaeological organizations (see WAC 1990; AAPA 2003; Roberts 2018; Turner, Wagner, and Cabana 2018; BABAO 2019; Squires, Errickson, and Márquez-Grant 2019; SAA 2021; Buikstra et al. 2022; ISNS 2022; AmSARC 2023; PPA 2023). Community engagement expectations and standards have also been developed and implemented across numerous global contexts (see Okamura and Matsuda 2011), with proactive engagement and transparent

community-engaged approaches advocated for by, for instance, the San (South African San Institute 2017; Schroeder et al. 2019), and numerous communities in North America in regard to cultural resource management (CRM) approaches (e.g., Ministry of Tourism and Culture [of Canada] 2011; Saugeen Ojibway Nation 2011; Kleer 2012; Curve Lake First Nation Chief and Council 2016; Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation 2018), among other global contexts. Embodying an engagement model in particular, the Paleopathology Association Bylaws (PPA 2023) under Article IX, 9.1 Statement of Ethical Principles, §1g implores that researchers "[m]ake results of study available to the scientific community, communities of interest, and non-specialist audiences promptly and responsibly", in addition to which §3c advocates that, "[w]hen members work outside their own countries, engage with local scholars in building mutually beneficial relationships and infra-structure". It is within this arena of introspection, reflexivity, advocacy for decolonizing methodologies, and progress in ethically grounded community engagement and capacity development that the global field of bioarchaeology finds itself striving towards today.

Within the purview of community-engaged archaeological practices, capacity building and knowledge transfer of skills remain prime areas of engagement. The specific skillsets held by archaeologists and bioarchaeologists can be operationalized through the provision of workshops with local researchers, the key lens here being an informed process of discussion around what skills local researchers and communities may wish to acquire and what can be provided to help make such possible. Workshops as such are not, and should not be, developed from a position of delivering skills that "need to be taught" (see Näser 2019: 396) based on some perceived insufficiency, but rather on the basis of reciprocity, informed dialogue, and capacity development collaboration around areas from which local communities, researchers, and colleagues may wish to gain further experiences and transferable skillsets (cf. Greer 2014). To this end, programs and workshops have been developed to facilitate opportunities for researchers to share knowledge with local students, fellow archaeologists, and community members, with a recent example from Sudan seen in the extended programming focusing on remote sensing and geomatic methods in archaeology delivered by Drzewiecki and colleagues (2022; 2023) in Khartoum in conjunction with ongoing field excavations at nearby Soba. Several capacity development and community engagement events with a focus on bioarchaeology have also been undertaken, with workshops held at the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums of Sudan (NCAM), the University of Khartoum, Al-Neelain University, International University of Africa, and the House of Heritage (Schrader et al. 2024: 10) as well as the establishment in 2019 of the M. Bolheim Bioarchaeology Laboratory at NCAM in Khartoum, the first such bioarchaeologically oriented research center in Sudan (Saad and Antoine 2021).

The concept of community engagement, while seemingly cohesive in terminological succinctness, is in reality a notion of practice more than a codified

doctrine, with Näser (2019: 380) noting how diversity of global contexts, unique cultural-historical situations within such, and diversity of approaches to engagement with local stakeholders being so variable and multifold as to inhibit any singular, universal definition as well as the need for such, presenting opportunities for case-by-case innovation and adaptation (see also Marshall 2009; Byrne 2012; Moshenska and Dhanjal 2012; McDavid 2014; Schroeder et al. 2019). The present contribution focuses on a series of capacity development and knowledge transfer events undertaken in February and March of 2022 as part of a broader bioarchaeological project entitled "The People of Ghazali: Tracing the Human Experience in a Nubian Desert Monastic Community (680–1275 CE)", hereafter referred to as the "People of Ghazali" project.

The site of Ghazali (18.441944, 31.931389; approximately 281 m a.s.l.) is located along the Wadi Abu Dom in the Bayuda desert region within the great bend of the Nile River, being situated approximately 15 km from the Nile Valley. Initially, excavations were conducted by Peter Shinnie, Neville Chittick, and Nigm ed-Din Sherif (Shinnie and Chittick 1961) and subsequently by the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw (PCMA UW) (Obłuski 2018). The site of Ghazali is most prominently defined by the presence of a large, around 5000 m^2, walled monastery occupied from the late 7th century CE into the late 13th century CE (Obłuski 2018; 2019). In addition to the monastery, iron production facilities, a lay settlement, and four cemeteries are also present at the site (see Ciesielska, Obłuski, and Stark 2018; Obłuski 2018; 2019; Stark and Ciesielska 2018). Along with the bioarchaeological analyses completed as part of the "People of Ghazali" project (Stark and Sirak forthcoming), a key component of the project was engaging with Sudanese students, colleagues, and community members through the development of workshops focused on bioarchaeological methods and sampling of skeletal materials for the purposes of isotope and DNA laboratory analyses, as well as research results dissemination focusing on what has been bioarchaeologically documented to date at Ghazali.

A diversity of understandings exist around what constitutes a "community", and by extension "local communities", such that case-specific contextualization is needed. A challenging concept to clearly define, "community" has come under increasing scrutiny as an encapsulating term for what in reality are often multiple and overlapping regional and personal iterations, with Pyburn (2011: 29) noting the idea of community itself as being the most undertheorized aspect of community archaeology, while Waterton and Smith (2010: 4) critique the use of the term "community" as often akin to an affix. This is to say that different communities can reside in the same locality forming other larger communities, and that individuals can simultaneously belong to more than one community, resulting in the reality that "communities" are not often monolithic nor monocultural and thus making the term both appropriate and in need of clarifying definition when utilized to discuss groups (see C. Bell and Newby 1974; Alleyne 2002; Marshall 2002; Neal and Walters 2008; Anderson 2016; Bessant 2018).

This article speaks of community in the broadest sense as an agglomeration of individuals who share common aspects of background experience and reside or have a direct connection to a given place. In terms of the discussion presented herein, that "place" is Sudan, namely Khartoum, a city inhabited by individuals from diverse backgrounds and regions of Sudan. An "us and them" dialectic is not intended, rather the conception of community utilized is intended to reflect broader commonalities of experience, worldview, and epistemology. "Community" as a term in the present work thus connotes Sudan and Sudanese individuals who have shared geocultural backgrounds and habitus of living and engaging with the cultural landscape in Sudan. This attribution is made with the knowledge that "Sudan" itself is a synecdoche for what is in reality a broad tapestry of ethnolinguistic backgrounds and cultural-community identities such that speaking of the "Sudanese community" as a succinct singular belies the nodal levels of diverse communities, identities, and realities within the nation of Sudan shaped by belonging, or exclusion, spanning from the micro- to the macro-level, from village and town levels, to regional and national levels, as well as along lines of ethnic affiliation. As such, "community" as elaborated herein is employed at the inclusive "Sudanese" level, with additional sub-specification beyond this macro-scale elucidated where necessary to the discussion presented.

The term "local" is also a challengingly vague term given that locality and, by extension, being local are inherently subjective measures. Must one permanently reside in a location to be local to it and, if so, where is the border between local and non-local, and should such be geographically or culturally determined (see Bessant 2018; Scherzer et al. 2020)? To this end, "local" is used herein in a multimodal manner, both to encapsulate communities that reside in direct local proximity to the sites discussed, namely Old Dongola and Ghazali, as well as Sudanese individuals in Khartoum who participated in the workshops and public presentation, of whom it can be said that they both reflect the local community within Khartoum, as well as in many cases belong to local communities elsewhere in Sudan, from which they have come to Khartoum for multifold reasons.

METHODOLOGY

In total three capacity development workshops focusing on topics related to bioarchaeological inquiry, with a particular focus on isotopes and DNA, and a community presentation of bioarchaeological research findings from Ghazali were undertaken by the author. The opportunity for English to Arabic translation was offered for each of the events.

The three capacity development workshops were each approximately 2–3 hours in duration and were held respectively at the University of Khartoum (n=around 30 participants) and Al-Neelain University (n=around 15 par-

ticipants), where students would have ample opportunity to attend, participate, discuss, and ask questions, as well as at the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museum of Sudan (NCAM) (n=around 30 participants), where the majority of attendees comprised professional archaeologists and heritage specialist authorities along with students. While numerous universities and community institutions in other regions of Sudan would also have been suitable locations for such workshop development, and at which it is hoped future workshops and engagement opportunities can be further developed, the University of Khartoum and Al-Neelain University were chosen given their substantial archaeological programs, while NCAM is the governmental authority for antiquities and archaeological excavations in Sudan, being a primary institution at which a large contingent of heritage professionals are employed and through which all archaeological research in Sudan is authorized.

The focus and intention of these capacity development and knowledge transfer workshops was to provide opportunities for engagement and heuristic learning around bioarchaeological practices and methods. Topics covered focused namely around bioarchaeological excavations and findings along with the methodologies involved in sampling skeletal materials for the purposes of radiocarbon dating, conducting isotope analyses of carbon ($\delta^{13}C$), nitrogen ($\delta^{15}N$), oxygen ($\delta^{18}O$), and strontium ($^{87}Sr/^{86}Sr$), as well as the manner of obtaining samples for ancient DNA (aDNA) analyses, with a primary focus on the cranial base drilling method (CBDM) developed by Sirak and colleagues (2017; 2020; 2021; 2022). While acquisition of sample materials for DNA analyses from both dental and cranial remains were discussed at the workshops, the bulk of the focus was on the CBDM method, as acquiring sample material from within the petrous part of the temporal bone via this method requires a particularly precise familiarity with the target locale and often must be conducted on site in the field in lieu of sampling in a laboratory environment. Participants in the workshops had the opportunity to engage with this method to gain familiarity for employing such while working in the field.

Along with slide-based material presentation and discussion, participants engaged with the dynamics of using a handheld micro-motor flex shaft portable K1030 Foredom drill with carbide burr, a device type commonly used to acquire samples for isotope and DNA analyses. Discussion was had around how to choose and locate which parts of the skeleton are ideal for sampling, namely around which elements are commonly selected for collagen acquisition and the formation periods of teeth in relation to which tooth might be sampled for oxygen ($\delta^{18}O$) and strontium ($^{87}Sr/^{86}Sr$) analyses at different stages of the life course. Capacity development also focused on identifying the anatomical landmarks for locating the point along the bony ridge that is situated between the jugular foramen and the carotid canal on the inferior surface of the petrous part of the temporal bone on the base of the skull, by

way of which the cochlear area of the osseous labyrinth can be accessed via a narrow aperture to acquire a sample for laboratory-based DNA analyses using the CBDM method (see Sirak et al. 2017: Fig. 1). Isotope and DNA analyses from Ghazali were utilized as the introductory foundation for discussing these methodologies along with the broader dynamics of bioarchaeological research inquiry with a focus on contexts in Sudan.

The objective of the workshops was not quantitative, but rather a qualitative process of engagement and discussion around bioarchaeological methods. While metrical approaches such as surveying can provide helpful feedback about workshop goals and knowledge transfer, they also do not necessarily fully encapsulate outcomes in a meaningful or superiorly insightful way (see Walton 1995; Rowe et al. 2008; Kolek 2013; Jerolmack and Khan 2014; Ketokivi 2019; Shekhar et al. 2019). Feedback on workshop experiences as such was undertaken through directed and open conversation. It was seen as most beneficial to all parties to engage with workshop participants through dialogue, both open to comment and questions as well as focused inquiry as to what might be of use in future endeavors around knowledge transfer engagement and bioarchaeology in the context of Sudan.

In conjunction with the three capacity development workshops, a presentation of bioarchaeological research findings from Ghazali and broader contextualization of what such research can tell us about past inhabitants of the region was held at the House of Heritage in Khartoum 2, at which around 35 individuals attended. The House of Heritage, established in 2016 and directed by Dr. Ismail Ali El-Fihail, is a community-centered location that presents cultural programing, training, advocacy, and capacity building with a focus on Sudanese cultural heritage, both ancient and modern, both tangible and intangible (Sudan Memory 2022). The House of Heritage effectively serves as a cultural heritage nexus, which while located in Khartoum focuses on the broad diversity of the multifold Sudanese cultural communities, providing opportunities to speak with and hear from an array of individuals from various Sudanese regions and backgrounds.

Following the presentation of bioarchaeological research findings from Ghazali at the House of Heritage, an open discussion was held. The use of a conversational approach in conjunction with question and answer allowed for extended opportunities to hear from Sudanese community members as well as discuss further in a candid fashion the findings, different angles of interpretation, and future avenues that the community highlighted might be of use to pursue for investigating further in subsequent excavation and analyses endeavors. Much as in the three workshops, the emphasis in the House of Heritage presentation was not centered around quantitation but rather focused on advancing dialogue aimed towards gaining insight to future routes of meaningful and beneficial engagement for return of research findings and avenues of additional inquiry.

DISCUSSION

To date in Sudan, aspects of community engagement in the realm of bioarchaeology have been comparatively less frequently addressed, leaving lacunae around the practice and how to approach such. While numerous protocols and ethical discussions have developed within bioarchaeology (see Lambert and Walker 2019), particularly in recent years around descendant communities and sampling for DNA (see Buikstra et al. 2022; Fleskes et al. 2023), there has not been an evidently equal push towards community engagement and efforts to provide on-site, in-community capacity development and discussion around bioarchaeological project goals. It has thus been, and should be, the initiative of researchers within contexts in Sudan, and elsewhere, to further extend engagement models developed within archaeology to endeavor where possible to more inclusively integrate local Sudanese learners (i.e., students at all levels) and community members (i.e., individuals in the communities in which bioarchaeological research is undertaken) —these categories need not be mutually exclusive nor finitely defined— who may wish to participate and engage both with the methods of bioarchaeology as well as facilitating community discussions around project development, research goals, and results return at local and broader national levels (see Borofsky 2019; Boutin 2019; Lambert and Walker 2019; Supernant et al. 2020; Schrader et al. 2024). This is not to say that such processes have been entirely absent, but rather to say that many such efforts have been comparatively ad hoc and there remains room for additional development and integration.

Engagement processes and more broadly knowledge transfer opportunities provided by non-local individuals while undertaking research in Sudan are also not without question. While numerous post-secondary programs in bioarchaeology exist outside of Sudan, at the time of writing, no dedicated bioarchaeology training programs nor course offerings yet exist among Sudanese educational institutions (see Jakob and Magzoub Ali 2011; Schrader et al. 2024), making opportunities to engage with the field of bioarchaeology directly through defined curricula in Sudan relatively limited (see also Strouhal 1981: 241; Jakob and Magzoub Ali 2011: 519–520). Such a reality results in a Catch-22 of sorts, as opportunities to undertake bioarchaeological training in Sudan are presently limited while opportunities to attend foreign programs outside of Sudan at the graduate level often require a degree of prior experience and can be highly restrictive at all educational levels, often requiring visas and significant financing to attend, which can add substantial burdens and impediments, to say nothing of additional challenges of living abroad, the common necessity of bilingualism, access to library resources, lab equipment, and advanced skills training broadly (see Abusharaf 2002; Schmidt 2009; Caldwell and Hyams-Ssekasi 2016; Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood 2017; Agbor 2021; Abdalla 2024; Elgadal and Glade 2024). In conversation with participants during the workshops undertaken as part of the "People of Ghazali" project

and at other times, the presently limited opportunity for formal bioarchaeology training in Sudan has been expressed by Sudanese colleagues as an avenue of capacity development for which further knowledge transfer events such as those discussed herein and, as previously mentioned, conducted by other researchers in recent years (see Schrader et al. 2024), would be further welcomed. The establishment of the M. Bolheim Bioarchaeology Laboratory at NCAM (see Saad and Antoine 2021) is a further testament to the advances and interest in bioarchaeological research in Sudan and signals the potential for continued capacity development and collaboration at the facility.

Language must also be considered here. In the context of Sudan, the publications of novel research findings are rarely produced or translated into Arabic, the main common language of Sudan, not to mention any of the Nubian or other languages spoken among the various local communities within which archaeologists conduct research (see H. Bell 2006; 2009; 2023; Medani 2016; Rowan 2017; *A crowdfunder…* 2021; Taras Press 2021; Mazhar, Morsy, and Radwan 2024; Spencer et al. 2024). As Hansen (2008) critiques, it is not even necessary that foreign archaeologists learn Arabic as a necessity of working in Sudan, and comparatively few actually do, with Spencer and colleagues (2024) adding the lack of capacity in local Nubian languages, such as Nobiin (see also Osman 1987). While this reality remains truer than not, Arabic translations of the bioarchaeological work of Schrader and Buzon (2017) by Mohamed Faroug Ali as well as the 2004 translation of William Yewdale Adams's monumental 1977 text "Nubia: Corridor to Africa" by Mahgoub El'Tigani Mahmoud, among select others (see AmSARC 2024), and a recent special issue on Sudanese archaeology with contributions in Arabic published by *Ādāb Al-Neelain Journal*, a publication of the Faculty of Arts of Al-Neelain University in Khartoum, signal progress, or at least effort, towards linguistic equity, though there quite clearly remains a long way to go.

Calls for further action have also emerged around language limitations and colonial legacies among digital resources with a focus on living up to FAIR principles (viz. findable, accessible, interoperable, and reusable), which, while widely beneficial, can also come with significant challenges in terms of functional viability. Hunnell Chen (2023) discusses how using local and/or non-Western names (e.g., Tadmor vs. Palmyra) as search terms when consulting digital databases can often artificially truncate search results, or in the worst case provide no search results at all, if specific efforts to include local names and simply the ability to search in non-Western scripts (e.g., Arabic) are not taken into account when scaffolding data on digital platforms. Beyond simply stymieing a broader multilinguistic discourse, the inability to search for data using non-Western scripts or terms also poses an artificial and arbitrary barrier to access among many of the communities from which the source data originate, effectively maintain European languages as a necessity for research participation. To mitigate these challenges, Hunnell Chen (2022; 2023) advocates for further development of linked open data (LOD) (see Berners-Lee 2006) protocols through

broader use of URIs and accessible and inclusive multilinguistic searchability and reporting, focusing in particular on the use of Wikidata which can facilitate search terms, metadata labeling, and editing in hundreds of world languages. Multilinguistic online access, as Kamash (2023) discusses, however, does not instantly equate with accessibility, as "technological solutionism" (see Huggett 2004; Morozov 2013) often belies the pragmatic practicalities of costs and accessibility centered around bandwidth and viewability on mobile devices, which remain barriers that future research should aim to ameliorate (see also Elmgrab 2011).

The question of language also introduces an interesting dynamic in the context of workshop orchestration. Among the workshops discussed herein, the nature of Arabic provision was mixed. At each of the four events discussed, there was the opportunity for Arabic translation. Yet in the end, such translation was only fully utilized at the University of Khartoum and House of Heritage events. At Al-Neelain and NCAM, despite the opportunity to do so, the workshops were held primarily in English as impelled by the directive of local colleagues with the imperative "everyone here speaks English". How then should engagement proceed when faced with a voice of local authority speaking for all members in an audience? Which is to say, when interlocution with local group leaders results in the imposition of an approach that not all local participants may equally be comfortable with, or with which it is not possible to individually gauge the degree of comfort of all participants, or in response to the voice of authority participants may not wish to speak up to express their linguistic delivery preferences in opposition to that chosen. Though no participants at these events voiced a concern with content being delivered in English, nor was any evident during the workshops, the question still remains. What, then, is the best solution? Is the impetus in such situations to insist that full local Arabic translation be provided with a view to ensuring equity or to respect the request of local groups with whom the decision to engage or not engage ultimately falls? Though only one example, what such situations illustrate is that there is no singular solution nor uniformly correct answer, but as previously mentioned by Näser (2019: 380), the multifold nature of engagement is a framework towards a discussion that seeks to represent all stakeholder voices as equitably as possible, such that each instance of engagement must and should be negotiated and navigated in that instant rather than endeavoring to fit a situation to a preconceived notion of "engagement".

During the undertaking of the workshops discussed herein, across all three events, students and professional archaeologist colleagues expressed interest in the methods presented. Among participants of the workshops, a desire for more hands-on, heuristic learning opportunities was widely expressed, with participants providing feedback in regard to wanting further opportunities for training in laboratory methods, osteobiographical assessments of age, sex, stature, and pathological conditions, and sampling procedures (e.g., for isotope analyses), among other avenues of inquiry — in short, hands-on experiences. Such

feedback in consultation with Sudanese stakeholders has provided the opportunity to further consider areas for future engagement focused on bioarchaeology.

In conjunction with the desire for further bioarcheology-oriented workshops, numerous individuals who spoke with the author expressed a strong interest in opportunities to collaborate in the field and gain practical experiences in the processes of excavation and cemetery documentation itself. While numerous opportunities have been possible on various projects over the years, a continued advocacy for developing ongoing collaborative opportunities for training in bioarchaeological field methods on-site in Sudan remains an area of aspiration for developing further engaged bioarchaeological approaches moving forward.

Engagement practices and, as part thereof, the development of workshops and knowledge transfer opportunities, have not been without criticism. Arguing via Musila (2019), Abd el Gawad (2023) posits that numerous research grants and career paths have been built on the *fata morgana* of global Western researchers endeavoring to redress the harms of colonialism through engaged processes, of which Abd el Gawad (2023: 289) further notes that "privilege is invisible to the privileged". This privilege-blind prerogative dovetails with the notion of "strategic narcissism", which is to say "'defining the world through and only in relation to Western eyes,' and then to assume that courses of actions taken, based on these views, will lead to favourable outcomes" (Abd el Gawad 2023: 292; cf. McMaster 2021). Under the aegis of strategic narcissism, one might also choose to include the performativity of "virtue signaling", viz. the attempt to demonstrate to others that you are a good person, also referred to as moral grandstanding along with which comes a sense of "recognition desire" (see Tosi and Warmke 2016; Orlitzky 2018; Levy 2023; cf. Táíwò 2022). Though much discussed in recent years, the philosophical undergirding of virtue signaling has also been questioned and challenged, with Levy (2021) arguing its basis in moral action and Hill and Garner (2021) questioning the foundations of such an inference (see also Táíwò 2022). One can see, then, in this rhetoric a veritable fork in the road around the concept of intention. Intention as a notion of practice is nebulous and all but impossible to quantify beyond the internal rationale held be any one individual. This is to say that bases of engagement are multifold in intention, some —hopefully less and less and ideally none— undoubtedly fall into the previously noted category espoused by Abd el Gawad (2023), of self-serving, strategically narcissistic, and colonialist paradigm reaffirming. But to see all endeavors at engagement as such Machiavellian machinations is also not fully reasonable, as the other side of the intention coin is one of genuine empathy and interest in community, which comes not from a primary place of career advancement or strategic gain, but rather from efforts to truly open the conversation with local communities and provide opportunities for knowledge transfer as expressed by community members and within the capacities of researchers who have the privilege to work with and within those communities. There are undoubtedly those who will not accept this as a basis of engagement, choosing rather to see any

global Western engagement processes as yet another attempt at control. And that is OK, for without checks-and-balances in the discourse, questionable intentions can indeed grow and once again become the dominant paradigm as has been the case on countless occasions throughout global history. It is then empathy, that must lie at the heart of engagement processes; not sympathy, not apathy, but empathy (Yorke 2023), the power of which, Abd el Gawad (2023: 297) notes, lies in how it fosters connection.

Yet, despite this emphasis on empathy, the colonial legacies of despoilation and disenfranchisement that have played an uncontestable role in the history of Sudan must also be kept in mind, with Schmidt (2009) pointing out the all too often true reality that colonial hegemonies are not miraculously resolved with the advent of national independence, both in the literal sense of the removal of structural systems but also, and arguably even more perniciously so, changes in mentality, but rather can linger in reified forms of hauntological persistence (see Derrida 1994). The manner in which Abd el Gawad (2023) frames "strategic narcissism" suggests the primary motive of engagement processes is self-serving, which is to say the purpose of such is to serve the deliverer rather than the participants/local communities. While one could construe such efforts in this way, the undertaking of knowledge transfer events need not be viewed exclusively through the lens of recolonization mentalities (cf. Atalay 2012; Abd el Gawad 2023; Spencer et al. 2024). Rather, if attempts at reparation and progress are to be envisioned and made, the Nubiological and more broadly global archaeological communities collectively need to concretely work towards moving past this rhetoric by ensuring that projects, programing, and engagement through knowledge transfer are not orchestrated from positions of power and capricious provision of scarce resources, but rather as a genuine interface for development, collaboration, and progress (see Atalay 2006; 2012; Byrne 2012).

Published in 2017, the San Code of Research Ethics, the first of its kind by an indigenous group in Africa, was established by the San of southern Africa to outline expectations of engagement for proposed research to be undertaken in San communities (South African San Institute 2017; Chennells and Schroeder 2019). The basis of this code was one centered around fairness, respect, care, and honesty in the research process. Rather than outlining strict requirements, the code establishes a "spirit of the law" basis for transparency in research when involving San community members, necessitating engagement and approvals by local communities; such a principle can readily be extended and applied far beyond San communities and in many cases has been, and in others where such efforts remain nascent or absent, arguably should be (see Schroeder et al. 2019). The San Code of Research Ethics (South African San Institute 2017) stresses the need to "…include co-research opportunities, sharing of skills and research capacity…", engraining the principle of knowledge transfer and capacity development opportunities as key aspects of engaged community approaches and areas of investment expectation by local communities.

Beyond the three methodologically driven workshops undertaken at the University of Khartoum, Al-Neelain University, and NCAM, the event held at the House of Heritage provided opportunities to speak with a wide array of individuals, primarily non-archaeologists, to hear their feedback about the research conducted at Ghazali. Through direct dialogue with individuals from a diversity of Sudanese communities it was possible to gain a sense of what aspects of bioarchaeological research individuals were interested in and identified with, as well as avenues for which further details, through future bioarchaeological research, might additionally contribute to the inquiries posed by participants — which is to say, avenues of inquiry that community members wish to learn more about through the directions pursued by bioarchaeological research. It is important to recognize that interest in components of the past and the community utilization of archaeological spaces may play different roles in different communities; as well, within community engagement must always remain the right to not engage: local communities need not be expected to engage if they do not wish to do so (see Abu-Khafajah 2011; Greer 2014). While this event was conducted in Khartoum, which is to say, away from the most proximate communities to the site of Ghazali, it nonetheless reinforced the interest of community members and provided an initial foundation of dialogue that, it is hoped, can be developed further in the coming years through additional community engagement in the communities around Ghazali, namely in the vicinity of Karima and Merowe.

A perceived disjunction between current, predominantly Muslim, Sudanese communities and earlier communities in the region has time and again been invoked as a basis of disconnect and therefore an inhibition to meaningful community engagement in regard to pre-Islamic cultural contexts in Sudan (see MacMichael 1967; Elzein 2004; Näser 2019; Soghayroun 2020). Though disjuncture may play a role, reflecting cultural change over the extensive regional history, the event undertaken at the House of Heritage, as well as more general anecdotal encounters experienced by the author over the years, have affirmed that regardless of religious identity and sense of direct filiation, there remains a general broader interest among Sudanese community members in regard to earlier inhabitants of the region and what their lives were like in the landscape that contemporary communities now inhabit. Questions around what people ate, theories about mobility and rationales for mobility, as well as manners of burial practices were all discussed during the question-and-answer session at the House of Heritage. Beyond inquisitiveness, individuals at the event also proffered explanations and insights from their own experiences and preserved community histories as to dietary practices, how food was gathered and prepared, mobility events, and health, topics of interest that have also been noted in other community contexts as well, with Spencer and colleagues (2024) noting similar avenues of inquiry and insight among community members in the area of Amara West/Abkanisa. This is to say that there was an exchange of ideas in which the information gathered from

bioarchaeological research was further informed and additional directions for future research provided through dialogue with Sudanese community individuals who attended the event, demonstrating the capacity for additional development of increasingly community-engaged models of bioarchaeological research (see Fushiya and Radziwiłko 2019; Fushiya 2020b; 2021a; 2021c).

The open dialogue which such events sought and continue to seek to develop falls within what Spencer and colleagues (2024: 23) elaborate upon as *turath*. *Turath* is an Arabic term conceptualizing "heritage"; heritage not only in the sense of archaeological heritage but at its broadest conceptualization, a notion encapsulating past and present, tangible and intangible heritage, incorporating local knowledge of an area, community practices, foodways, the findings of past archaeological excavations, linguistic dynamics, and community maintained knowledge about ancestral lineages and occupational histories of the landscape (El-Fihail 2014; Amel 2021). The concept of *turath* adopts a Janusian perspective, using a diachronic lens to examine the broadest scope of socio-cultural history, which also provides a model framework for approaching engagement in that it recognizes no singular narrative as monolithic and encompasses the spirit of many voices to generate a tapestry of past and present experiences. So too here can the types of bioarchaeological workshops and community engagement opportunities discussed herein be further integrated.

Though PCMA UW excavations at Ghazali were completed in 2017, there remains ample opportunity for further bioarchaeological research at this site. While the conflict in Sudan at the time of writing, of which it is hoped an immediate ceasefire can be realized, has forestalled further on-site development of research as a whole, following the end of conflict in the region, the "Life in the Makurian Metropolis: A Bioarchaeological Inquiry into Medieval Old Dongola, Sudan", project will seek to continue the community-engaged models that have been initiated and developed to date at Tungul (Old Dongola) by Tomomi Fushiya and colleagues under the Dialogue community engagement project (DIALOG Grant 0298/2018: ArcheoCDN) and the ERC Starting Grant, "UMMA. Urban Metamorphosis of the Community of a Medieval African Capital City" (Grant agreement ID: 759926) (see Fushiya and Radziwiłko 2019; Fushiya 2021a; 2021b; 2021c; Obłuski and Dzierzbicka 2021a; 2021b). As Larsen (2021: 89) notes, both cemeteries and Hillat Dongola, the so-called "Abandoned Village" (see Fushiya 2021a; 2021b), at Tungul (Old Dongola) form part of contemporary communities in the area of Ghaddar, placing the present within the past (see also L. Smith and Waterton 2009).

Community-engaged research focused on the Islamic domed tombs (*qibab*) of Tungul (Old Dongola) has already demonstrated a strong imbrication of contemporary and past communities and an interest by local communities to share their experiences, practices, and insights to the *qibab* as part of the preserved heritage and intangible cultural heritage of their communities (see Fushiya 2020b; 2021b; Larsen 2021; Stark and Fushiya

forthcoming). While such opportunities for discussion and engagement have been welcome and informative, to be clear, excavations within the Muslim cemetery at Tungul (Old Dongola) have not and will not be conducted as under the rule of law in Sudan disturbance of Islamic graves is forbidden and it is a widely accepted principle of undertaking archaeological research in Sudan that Muslim burials are not excavated (Jakob and Magzoub Ali 2011: 518). At Tungul, the Muslim cemetery remains in use by the Muslim majority communities living in the area, many individuals within which have relatives buried in the cemetery and feel a strong cultural connection with the Islamic history of the burial landscape comprising the Muslim cemetery. The community model to discuss burial spaces in relation to the *qibab* has established a network of engagement points that can be further developed in regard to other burial spaces at the site, namely earlier medieval Christian cemetery contexts and the associated burial landscapes of such which are situated between and around later developed Muslim cemetery spaces at Tungul (Old Dongola)/Ghaddar.

In the vein of engagement, both being open to engagement processes in developing bioarchaeological research goals and budgeting in grant applications, where possible, for funds to allow for fuller community engagement, including knowledge transfer/capacity development and equipment to facilitate such, come to mind as readily achievable shorter-term foci from which subsequent long-term engagement endeavors can be further developed (cf. South African San Institute 2017). Continued presentation of bioarchaeological research results in local communities where work is undertaken should remain a key aspect of research output. In addition to such opportunities, the possibility of creating a plain-text account, audio-visual representations, and/or graphic novel style account, with Arabic and ideally Nubian language translation, with the question also remaining of which script to use, of "what life was like" for the individuals assessed from a given site, remain important avenues to pursue. On the graphical front, numerous archaeological projects have already completed such publications for the work they have undertaken, particularly in relation to the Qatar–Sudan Archaeological Project (QSAP) (see Spencer et al. 2024), including iron production at Meroe (Humphris 2017), the archaeology of Sudan (SFDAS 2021), local heritage perspective in Abri, Amara West, and Ernetta Island (Fushiya 2017), crop agriculture (Ryan, Hassan, and Saad 2018), Mograt Island (Tully and Näser 2016), and the community collaborative Kushite Kingdom Manga (Ford Spora 2021). Yet, to the author's knowledge, no similarly oriented bioarchaeology-themed productions have been created to date; it is an aim of ongoing research that such can ultimately be realized for bioarchaeologically analyzed contexts at Ghazali and Tungul (Old Dongola).

While many goals remain for the furtherance of community-centered approaches to bioarchaeology in Sudan, so do many opportunities. As Näser (2020: 39) intimates, the future of Nubiology lies at the nexus of integrating and ac-

commodating disciplinary findings with the realities of the culturally complex zones of socio-political contestation within which such findings are generated. As Herman Bell (2006: 86) points out, the world has long known and appreciated the monuments of ancient Nubia, but overall still has a great deal to learn about the qualities of modern Nubia. Experiences working within various communities in Sudan, at Ghazali and Tungul (Old Dongola), as well as in consultation with colleagues and researchers in Khartoum, have demonstrated an interest in bioarchaeology and bioarchaeological findings by community members. Continuation of ongoing local collaborations and development of future ones around what bioarchaeology can tell us will remain imperative in the coming days as excavations continue to illuminate past cultural landscapes.

CONCLUSIONS

It is imperative that engagement, capacity development, and knowledge transfer remain processes of openness and provision and not obfuscation and prevarication. In addition to consideration of capacity development and knowledge transfer, the discourse around community-engaged bioarchaeology in Sudan is at present in a comparatively early stage of development. Nonetheless, the process is ongoing and has ample potential for meaningful development and collaborative opportunities between local communities and bioarchaeologists moving forward. Though it is often the case that a perceived disconnect between relatedness to past populations among modern Muslim majority populations of the Nilotic north of Sudan exists, it has been the author's experience that an interest in past populations by present populations persists regardless of a sense of direct filiation and ancestry. Questions remain among community members as to who lived in the landscape over the past, how old they were when they died, where they may have come from, and what they may have eaten, among other interests, providing ample engagement opportunities for bioarchaeologists to address local community questions and areas of research interest to collaboratively take forward in future research. Conversely, the knowledge preserved within local communities has time and again been of great importance and assistance to archaeologists, particularly around narratives of mobility and dietary practices, areas of topical inquiry that have direct implications to bioarchaeological research. How community-engaged approaches may unfold in regard to bioarchaeological research in Sudan need not be codified or monolithic but rather should seek to derive from an organic willingness to engage, to inquire, and to discuss, developing upon models that have found meaningful implementation among other disciplines and avenues of archaeological inquiry. It is with this hope and with this advocacy that a future of community engaged bioarchaeological practices may continue to emerge and fruitfully develop within and among the Sudanese communities in which research is ongoing or may seek to be developed in the coming years.

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Heritage, tourism, and community: developing community-based tourism in Old Dongola, Sudan

Abstract: In 2019, the Dialogue community engagement project at Old Dongola began collaborating with local communities to develop community-based businesses that would deliver direct economic benefits to the people living near the archaeological site. Archaeologists are usually not trained in economics or marketing, and there are limits to the social impact an archaeological project can achieve. Yet the implementation of two collaborative programs —one focused on community-owned tourist accommodation and the other on souvenir handicraft production— offered insights into the potential roles that archaeologists can play in supporting community-based initiatives and safeguarding intangible heritage. They also demonstrated how archaeology can contribute to local economy, empowerment, and heritage. The article discusses the ways in which the author worked together with the local community within the framework of the Dialogue project, citing visitor data and the results of community surveys collected in Old Dongola.

Keywords: heritage, empowerment, tourism, economics, community-based business, Old Dongola, Sudan

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INTRODUCTION

Archaeological sites and their surroundings in Sudan hold significant potential not only to attract tourists but also to create new opportunities for local economic development. Located at the crossroads linking Sub-Saharan Africa, the Red Sea, and the Mediterranean via Egypt, Sudan has a rich and unique archaeological heritage that reflects its long history of human activity and the ancient and medieval kingdoms that once flourished in the Middle Nile Valley. It is no coincidence that Sudan's archaeological monuments and sites have attracted travelers and scholars from outside of the country —especially over the past two centuries— to explore, discover, and study the Sudanese past (Adam and Taha 2022).[1]

Since regaining independence in 1956, Sudan has experienced political and economic turmoil, which has hindered the country's global image and discouraged both tourism and investment. In the absence of public interest, supportive policy, and private investment, tourism saw little development until around the 2010s. Between 2013 and 2019, however, over 40 archaeological projects were active in the country, many supported by the Qatar–Sudan Archaeological Project, QSAP, which aimed to promote Sudan's archaeological heritage as a driver for tourism (Leisten 2017; Ahmed 2021).

The population in Sudan has long suffered from economic stagnation, inflation, a lack of accessibility of basic infrastructure such as clean water and sewage systems, as well as limited access to quality medical and educational services. This challenging situation is reflected in Sudan's Human Development Index (HDI), which stood at 0.516 in 2022, ranking 170th out of 193 countries (UNDP 2024). Archaeologists who work in Sudan often stay in or near modern villages during fieldwork, directly witnessing and experiencing the living conditions of local communities. These experiences have seemingly prompted some archaeologists to respond to local needs by supporting communities in various ways — such as providing materials and funding renovations of local schools, digging wells, offering transportation during medical emergencies, donating clothes to schools or mosques, and mobilizing friends and colleagues to contribute donations for communities in Sudan. Support thus tended to be incidental and ephemeral, often relying on relationships built with local people, especially excavation workers and their families, through archaeological work (Humphris, Bradshaw, and Emberling 2021: 1132). The employment of local people —mostly men— in excavations and household work is often seen as a form of financial support to communities. However, a recent study shows that their salaries have not kept pace with the rapidly rising inflation and are less attractive economically compared to other available jobs (Bradshaw 2018).

1 It can be assumed that local communities held an interest in and reverence for past remains and monuments, as evidenced by their preservation until today and the incorporation of some sites into local stories and cultural practices (Osman 1992; Bradshaw 2017; Fushiya 2020).

Over the past decade, the relationship between archaeology and local communities in Sudan has received increasing attention, with growing efforts to improve it through research, community programs, and critical reflections on archaeological methodologies (Tully 2014; Bradshaw 2017; Näser 2019; Näser and Tully 2019; Fushiya 2020; Minor et al. 2020; Buzon and Marshall 2022; Lemos 2022; Drzewiecki et al. 2023; Schrader et al. 2024; Spencer et al. 2024). In their review of recent community-related activities and research spurred by the QSAP scheme, Jane Humphris, Rebecca Bradshaw, and Geoff Emberling (2021: 1131) summarize the relatively positive development of community participation and collaboration in Sudanese archaeology — an area that had previously "lagged behind" compared to some other African countries. However, what still appears to "lag behind" is a discussion on the economic value of archaeological and heritage sites, and how Sudan's rich heritage resources might contribute to socio-economic benefits for and overall sustainable development of local communities. Only a few studies have directly addressed this topic in recent years (Bradshaw 2018; Belotti 2024a; 2024b). As Claudia Näser (2019: 384) rightly argues, creating significant socio-economic impact through archaeology requires a broader project scope and a range of expertise that most archaeological projects do not possess (also see Gould and Burtenshaw 2014). Not all archaeological sites or community projects have the potential to generate economic benefits for local communities, due to factors such as location, site type, placement on tourist itineraries, or the availability of local infrastructure and resources (e.g., Amara West/Abkanisa, see Fushiya 2020: 92–93). However, the intersection of archaeology and development is gaining increasing attention, with more and more research funding bodies now requiring proposed research projects to demonstrate social impact. The potential for development also raises the profile of archaeology, reinforcing the importance of site conservation and management in today's global context (Gould 2016). While community archaeologists are typically not trained in development studies or economics, research findings —along with dialogue with communities about their perceptions and experiences of archaeology and local social environment— can inspire donors to initiate new community-based projects. In turn, this may encourage community members to propose new ideas and pursue new opportunities independently (Burtenshaw et al. 2019).

Over the past two decades, projects that integrate heritage research and conservation with local economic development have been carried out in Egypt, both within the scope of foreign archaeological missions and large-scale international aid programs. One example is a community archaeological project launched in 1999 at the Roman harbor site of Quseir el-Qadim, which aimed to generate economic benefits by supporting community-led design, production, and sale of quality souvenirs (Moser et al. 2002; Tully 2007). Another is the Azhar Park and Darb el-Ahmar revitalization project, led by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, which focused on the restoration of historic buildings in the heart of Islamic Cairo. This initiative helped boost the

local economy and improve living conditions through better housing, job opportunities, micro-credit loans, and training programs in areas ranging from heritage management for local experts and craft production to adult literacy (Aga Khan Trust for Culture 2005). More recently, in 2016, USAID launched the VISIT-Esna project, implemented by Takween Integrated Community Development and led by one of the trained experts from the Historic Cairo project. The initiative sought to revitalize Esna as an important tourist destination through the conservation of historic buildings, documentation of local tangible and intangible heritage, improvement of tourist infrastructure, promotion of local traditional food and handicrafts, renovation of shops in the tourist market, and training local people in tour-guiding and handicraft production (USAID 2020; 2023).[2]

In Sudan, archaeological projects have more recently received significant funding for excavations, research, and publications through the QSAP, whose primary aim was to promote the country's archaeological heritage (Ahmed 2021) and encourage the growth of domestic and international tourism to its archaeological sites (Leisten 2017).

At Old Dongola, archaeologists have engaged with, supported, and felt part of the communities around the site since 1964, when the Polish archaeological mission began its investigations. The first director of the mission, Kazimierz Michałowski, took an active interest in the well-being of excavation workers and their families (Michałowski 1983: 30), as he and his team had also done at Faras, another Nubian site (Jakobielski 2021). This commitment to supporting local people and building rapport was continued by Stefan Jakobielski who directed the Polish mission at Old Dongola for forty years (1966–2006) (Łajtar 2024).

Following the acquisition of QSAP funding, a tourism development plan was drawn up and partially implemented (Tarczewski and Dziedzic 2015). In 2019, with the support of a multidisciplinary grant, "community engagement" became a formal component of the research through the launch of the Dialogue project. These initiatives introduced programs and research focused on local heritage and its social values [*Table 1*],[3] aiming to explore the potential of heritage in and around the site for inclusive and sustainable development, in cooperation with local communities and other stakeholders (Fushiya 2021a; Larsen 2021; also see Obłuski and Dzierzbicka 2021). The overarching goal of the Dialogue project was to strengthen relationships between archaeologists and nearby communities and foster a mutually beneficial collaboration in the fields of

2 See https://www.facebook.com/hashtag/visitesna (accessed: 14.01.2025).

3 The Dialogue community engagement project (2019–2022) was implemented within the framework of the multidisciplinary project entitled "ArcheoCDN. Archaeological Centre of Scientific Excellence", led by Artur Obłuski, funded by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Poland as part of the DIALOG funding scheme, agreement No. 0298/2018. The project encompassed pilot projects in geology, geophysics, community engagement, setting up the archaeological archive, and development of virtual reality (VR) applications for the site of Ghazali and a monastery in Old Dongola.

heritage, archaeology, and sustainable development (Fushiya and Radziwiłko 2019; Fushiya 2021a). As part of this initiative, the project sought to strategically identify how an international archaeological project could contribute to sustainable development with local communities and take action accordingly. The sustainable development at Old Dongola centered on community-based tourism while also promoting local stewardship of heritage and customary land ownership, encouraging local entrepreneurship, and empowering women (Larsen 2024).

Table 1. Community engagement programs and local heritage studies in three projects conducted at Old Dongola (2019–2023)

2019 (Feb.)	•	Community meetings
	•	Community survey
	•	Visitor and tour guide surveys
	•	Handicrafts survey
	•	Poster workshop
	•	Site Open Day
	•	Research on social values (interviews)
2020 (Jan.–Feb.)	•	Sustainable development planning
	•	Object Open Day (knowledge exchange)
	•	Handicraft program
	•	Poster workshop
	•	Site Open Day
	•	Research on social values (interviews)
2021 (Jan.–Apr.)	•	Stakeholder meeting for sustainable development
	•	Community Archaeology and Heritage Management training course
	•	Object Open Day (knowledge exchange)
	•	Handicraft program
	•	Evaluation survey
	•	Poster workshops
	•	Site Open Day
	•	Publication of *Old Dongola: Continuity and Change from the Medieval Period to the 21st Century*
2022 (Jan.–Mar.)	•	Evaluation interviews (with community and archaeologists)
	•	Handicraft program
2022 (Nov.)	•	Research on social values of the mosque (interviews)
	•	Community meetings
2023 (Jan.–Mar.)	•	Conservation & management of the mosque
	•	Recording of oral histories about the maintenance of the mosque
	•	Community engagement facilitator training course
	•	Handicraft program
	•	New heritage workshops
	•	Site Open Day
	•	Research on social values of the mosque

This paper begins with an overview of the current state of tourism at Old Dongola and a summary of a stakeholder meeting focused on sustainable development at the site. It then discusses the aims, processes, and outcomes of two key community-centered programs: tourist accommodation and handicraft production. Both initiatives were launched within the framework of the Dialogue project (2019–2022) and continued —without additional funding— until March 2023, when fieldwork was suspended due to the outbreak of conflict in the following month.

The four years of project implementation were marked by major external challenges, including the dramatic political changes in April 2019, ongoing political instability in Sudan, the global pandemic in 2021 and 2022, and escalating political tensions in 2023. These circumstances significantly affected tourism, which had been envisioned as a central driver of sustainable development within the Dialogue project. Nevertheless, these challenges also offered valuable lessons that may benefit other archaeological projects seeking to incorporate aspects of sustainable development into their scope. The conclusion highlights both the vulnerabilities of tourism and the (potential) resilience of community-based tourism at Old Dongola.

This article is based on fieldwork conducted between 2019 and 2023,[4] up until the outbreak of the conflict in Sudan in April 2023. Since then, all archaeological projects in the country have been suspended, with the exception of emergency safeguarding measures and community engagement programs at certain sites which are being implemented by the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums (NCAM). No active armed conflict has occurred in the area of Old Dongola, and as of October 2024, local schools have remained open, albeit with limited resources. Yet, the ongoing conflict has severely impacted all aspects of economic and social life. Due to the difficulty of fully understanding these changes given the limited availability of information, the descriptions presented in this article reflect conditions as observed by the author prior to the outbreak of the conflict.

DIALOGUE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PROJECT AT OLD DONGOLA

OLD DONGOLA AND ITS LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Old Dongola is located on the right bank of the Nile in the Northern State. It is a unique site that reflects the history and cultures of northern Sudan from the late 5th century CE to the present day (Godlewski 2013: 7). Known as Tungul in Old Nubian, it was the capital of the powerful Kingdom of Makuria. Following the flight of the Christian royal court and the ruler's conversion to Islam in the 14th

4 The fieldwork was conducted in February 2019, January and March 2020, January–February 2021, January–February and November–December 2022, and January–March 2023.

century, it became known as the center of the Kingdom of Dongola. From the 16th century onward, it evolved into a center of Islamic teaching and a political and economic hub (Obłuski 2021). Old Dongola is the only archaeological site in Sudan that preserves churches and monasteries with extensive wall paintings and inscriptions *in situ*, along with well-preserved fortification walls and extensive settlement remains — testaments to the wealth and power of its rulers and the city's significance as a regional hub [*Fig. 1*]. Some structures at the site remain directly linked to local communities. The mosque at the center of the site, originally built in the 9th century as a church or royal throne hall, was used by the local population until 1969. Several residential houses were inhabited into the 20th century, while the tombs of Muslim *shyūkh* (pl. of *sheikh*) or *fuqara* (religious teachers, community leaders) — known as *qibab* (pl. for *qubba*, domed or conical tombs) continue to be visited by local people. Descendants of those buried there still reside nearby. These more recent historic structures also attract tourist interest, especially the *qibab*, which form part of Old Dongola's distinctive desert landscape [*Fig. 2*].

The houses and *qibab* form an important part of the local communities' heritage. Some residents of the nearby

Fig. 1. Archaeological site of Old Dongola (PCMA UW | photos T. Fushiya)

villages —Ghaddar, Bokkibul, Ghaba, and Hammur [*Fig. 3*]— are direct descendants of those who once inhabited Old Dongola. These families hold customary ownership of land along the river within the site and of some houses in the southwestern part of the site called Hillat Dongola, known among the archaeologists as the "Abandoned Village" (Fushiya 2021a; Larsen 2021: 88–91). The families continue to maintain and use these houses for festivities and communal gatherings.

The Muslim cemetery at the site also remains an active burial ground. Descendants of a *sheikh* or *faqir* buried in a *qubba* or *baniya* (a structure associated with a *sheikh*'s miracle) are interred near their ancestors, and some locals —especially women— visit these graves to seek *baraka* (blessing) (Fushiya 2021b). Men from Ghaddar and Bokkibul have also contributed to archaeological research at Old Dongola since 1964, serving as excavation workers and household staff —adding another layer to the enduring relationship between the community and the site. Particularly close ties developed with the community of the southern part of Ghaddar, where the archaeologists' houses were located for nearly six decades until a new research center with accommodation was built near the site entrance in 2020. Since 2019, when various heritage programs and community-based tourism development initiatives were launched, the archaeological team's local network has grown even further (Fushiya and Radziwiłko 2019; Fushiya 2021a) [see *Table 1*].

Fig. 2. Hillat Dongola (above) and the Muslim cemetery (below) (PCMA UW | photos T. Fushiya)

TOURISM AT OLD DONGOLA

Among the archaeological sites in Sudan, Old Dongola is relatively well visited and regularly features on tourist itineraries offered by Sudanese tour operators, most of whom are based in Khartoum. Tourism began to gain significance in Sudan from the 2010s onward, particularly after the secession of South Soudan in 2011 and the subsequent loss of oil revenues. In 2012, Sudan signed a bilateral cooperation agreement with Qatar, and the QSAP, mentioned above, supported over 40 archaeological initiatives between 2013 and 2019. These projects included site management, conservation, and public engagement components.

Tourism development, promotion, and sustainable growth in the country were also encouraged at the national level, notably with the visit of the Secretary-General of the UN World Tourism Organisation to Khartoum in 2016 (Tourism... 2017). Tourism showed promising growth[5] in the years leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022) and the outbreak of conflict in April 2023. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council, tourism contributed to 3.1% of Sudan's GDP in 2014 (Ritter 2014: 906), expanded to 10.4% by 2019, and declined to 7.6% in 2022 (WTTC 2023).

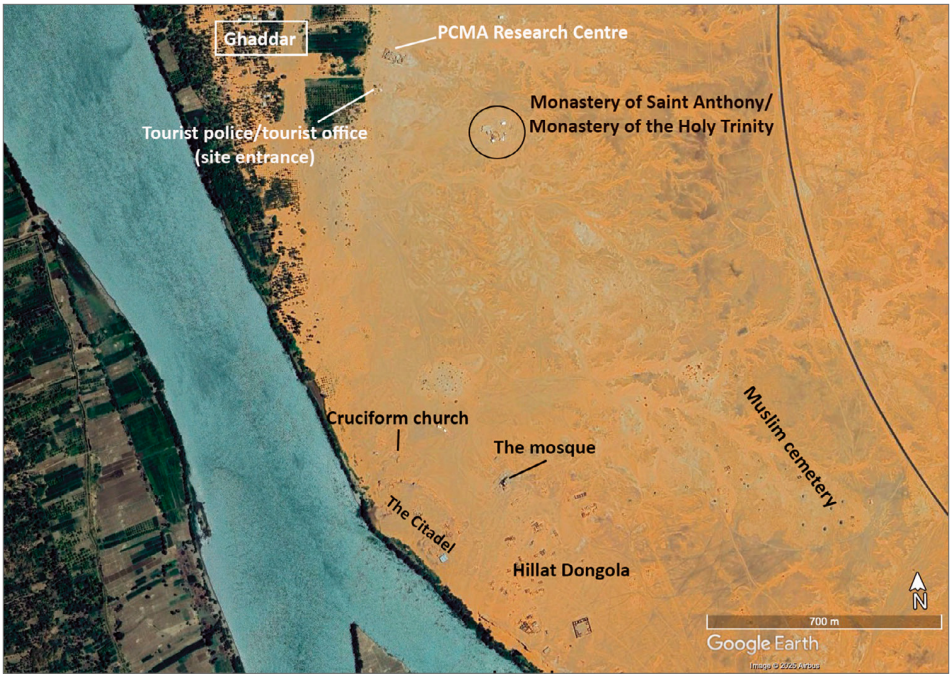

Fig. 3. Map of the area (satellite image Google Earth Pro | processing T. Fushiya)

5 In 2014, 506 thousand individuals entered Sudan for "personal holidays, leisure, recreation and other purposes". This number grew to 619 thousand in 2018 (UN World Tourism Organisation 2019), although it should be taken with caution since this category also includes Sudanese nationals residing abroad (UN World Tourism Organisation 2019), who came to Sudan to visit family or for other purposes (i.e. archaeological work, research visit).

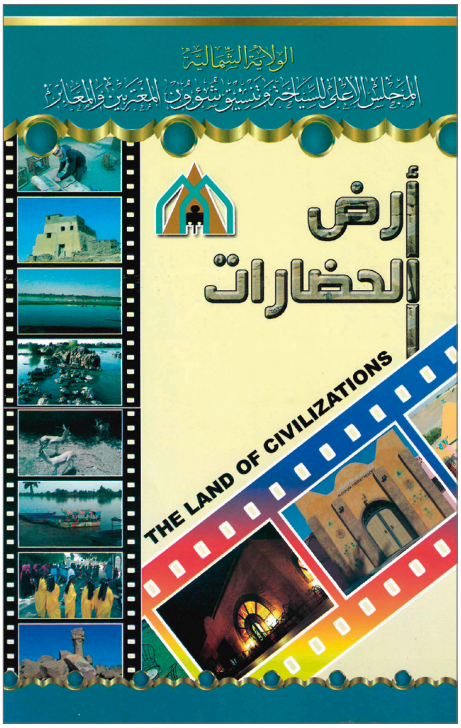

Fig. 4. Cover of *The Land of Civilizations*, a booklet published by the Northern State Higher Council of Tourism and Antiquities

The Northern State (*ash-Shamaliya*), home to several key archaeological sites —including the UNESCO World Heritage site of Gebel Barkal and the Sites of the Napatan Region, as well as Old Dongola— has shown a strong interest in developing cultural tourism around major archaeological sites and monuments located in the region. In 2017, the Ministry of Investment, Industry and Tourism of the Northern State published a magazine titled *Osool*, promoting tourism investment, and in 2018, the Higher Council of Tourism and Antiquities produced a bilingual Arabic–English tourist guidebook, *The Land of Civilizations* [*Fig. 4*], which introduced 11 archaeological sites and 10 public and privately-owned tourist accommodations, some of which were newly established in the 2010s.

Old Dongola is located about 350 km north of Khartoum —a five-hour drive— and lies within a few hours of

Fig. 5. Tourists visiting Old Dongola —often in organized groups— with 4WD vehicles (left), and, occasionally, by bicycle (right), 2019 (PCMA UW | photos T. Fushiya)

both the state capital, Dongola (about 110 km), and the city of Karima (about 145 km). Karima is situated near the UNESCO World Heritage site of Gebel Barkal and the Sites of the Napatan Region, while Dongola serves as a gateway to several major tourist destinations farther north, including Kerma, Tombos, Soleb, and Sai Island. Although this proximity to other larger cities is an advantage, it also poses a challenge: most tourists only spend a few hours at Old Dongola before continuing on to these cities for accommodation. Some tour groups camp in the desert between Old Dongola and Dongola, which may appear as part of the tour's attractions but is in fact often a practical response to the limited accommodation options in the cities. Local guides suggest that homestays could offer a more meaningful alternative.

Most tourists travel in rented cars, although bicycles are not uncommon [*Fig. 5*]. Reaching Old Dongola by public transportation —such as coach buses, minibuses, or taxis— from cities like Dongola, Karima, or Khartoum, or nearby towns like Debba, is possible but challenging, time-consuming, and typically requires knowledge of Arabic.

In the 2019–2020 tourist season,[6] Old Dongola received 1028 non-Sudanese visitors[7] [*Table 2*]. According to both the tourist office of the Old Dongola Unit[8] and local tour operators, it was a particularly active season (Belotti 2024a: 221). Most international visitors were from European and North American countries [*Table 3*], and their numbers varied from over 30 in a single day to none. However, the seasons following 2019–2020 were challenging for the tourism industry. Civilian protests continued after April 2019, leading to several violent clashes in Khartoum, and the COVID-19 pandemic paralyzed global tourism. Despite this, between November 2021 and January 2022, Old Dongola still received about a few dozen international visitors each month, totaling 102, including one group that arrived in two helicopters.

A visitor survey (36 participants: 12 female; 10 male; 14 unspecified) was conducted over a week in mid-Febru-

6 The tourism season in the northern part of Sudan typically lasts for seven months, from October to April. The rest of the year is unsuitable due to the severe climate.

7 Sudanese visitors may enter the sites without tickets, therefore their number is not recorded at the tourist office. The author has met several groups of Sudanese exploring archaeological remains and buildings together with family members and friends from the local area and Khartoum on the occasion of their family or neighbors' weddings. In addition, local residents visit Old Dongola during the *Eid*s (Islamic festivities), weddings, and other family gatherings (see Fushiya and Radziwiłko 2019; Fushiya 2021a). Presumably, the Sudanese visiting Old Dongola outnumber the international visitors. The Kerma Museum, for example, next to the western Defuffa, received 574 international visitors and 22261 Sudanese ones in 2012 (Bundi 2013).

8 "Unit" is the administrative division under the Locality, the State Government, and the National Government. Old Dongola archaeological site is located within the territory that falls in the Old Dongola Unit, Goulid Locality in the Northern State. Each administrative unit has a tourism office. The Old Dongola Unit has its main office in the administrative complex near the Ghaddar market and a satellite office at the site entrance.

ary 2019.[9] Although the sample size is too small to allow for statistically valid generalizations, the author presents the results and several observations below to offer insights on the international tourists who visited Old Dongola. Most respondents (28) were European citizens [*Table 4*], and the majority came to Old Dongola as part of organized tour groups. International visitors typically travel in convoys of several 4WD vehicles, accompanied by a Sudanese or international guide, a cook, and drivers with camping equipment. Only a few respondents were independent travelers visiting the site with their family (3 respondents), partners (2), or friends or relatives (3); one did not answer.

The primary motivation for visiting Old Dongola was archaeology and history (23 responses), though many also indicated a more passive reason — they had not actively chosen the site but visited it as part of a prearranged tour itinerary (17 responses) [*Table 5*]. These results show that many tourists rely on their tour operators to select destinations and accommodations, likely due to limited access to information about Sudan. For instance, there is only one recent guidebook in English (Ibbotson and Lovell-Hoare 2012), while the Lonely Planet website[10] lists only a few tourist attractions in Sudan —Old Dongola is not included— and offers no practical information. Compared to Egypt, archaeological and cultural sights in Sudan remain largely unknown to tourists. A visitor told the author that they were surprised to discover Christian culture in Sudan; a few others said they had never heard of Old Dongola before their trip. Nevertheless, they enjoyed their visit, praising both the site's historical significance and its natural surroundings [*Table 6*]. However, as shown in [*Table 7*], few respondents expressed interest in visiting a handicraft shop or joining a self-guided or guided tour in the nearby village. At the time, this suggested that handicraft businesses targeting tourists were not viable, though it later became clear that many tourists were indeed interested —some even purchased basketry made in Old Dongola (see below). It may be that what tourists claim to seek as "local culture" requires more nuanced investigation. The limited interest in hiring local guides likely relates to the group travel format — most visitors were already accompanied by a tour guide.

Table 2. Number of non-Sudanese visitors to Old Dongola in the 2019–2020 season (Source: Tourist Office at Old Dongola)

			2019				2020	
February	March	April	September	October	November	December	January	**Total**
309	142	34	6	28	131	170	204	**1028**

9 In total 38 responses were collected, but 2 were disregarded since tour guides filled the questionnaire. See Fushiya 2025.

10 https://www.lonelyplanet.com/sudan (accessed: 05.01.2025).

Table 3. Number of non-Sudanese visitors to Old Dongola by nationality in the 2019–2020 season (Source: Tourist Office at Old Dongola)

Europe	716
Americas	122
Oceania	51
Asia	63
Africa	18
No answer	58
Total	**1028**

Table 4. Country of residence and level of education of the visitor survey respondents (*n*=36)

Country of Residence	
Switzerland	14
Netherlands	6
France	4
Sudan	2
Italy	2
Austria	1
Belgium	1
Other	1
No answer	5

Final education	
Bachelor's degree	9
Master's degree	8
PhD	9
Secondary school diploma	4
Technical/vocational school diploma	1
No answer	5

Table 5. Respondents' reasons for visiting Old Dongola (*n*=36, multiple answers)

I'm interested in archaeology and history	23
Because it is a part of a tour itinerary	17
I'm interested in cultures of Arab/African countries	12
Other[11]	2
I have been there before	0
I'm interested in educational materials	1
I live near the site	0

Table 6. The aspects of Old Dongola most appreciated by respondents (*n*=36, multiple answers)

History of the place	27
Natural environment	10
Local cultures and customs (crafts and food)	5
Other	0
No answer	0

11 One of the respondents who chose "Other" noted that it was because "I work near the site", and the other did not give any reason.

Table 7. Aspects that would have improved the respondents' visitor experience at Old Dongola (*n*=36, multiple answers)

Information panels	18
Visitor center or museum	16
Access to the interiors of the church and monastery	15
Information booklet	7
Toilets	8
Self-guided visitor path	4
Sitting area	3
Self-guided visit to the local village	1
Guided visit to the local village	1
Camel riding	0
Local craft shops	0
Rest house (café and restaurant)	0
No answer	7

LOCAL COMMUNITIES AND TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

While the project considered tourists' expectations for their visits to Old Dongola, its primary focus was on understanding the expectations and concerns of local communities concerning tourism development — and if they desired tourism development at all. It has long been known among local people that tourists visit the nearby

Fig. 6. February 2021 stakeholder meeting (PCMA UW | photo M. Rekłajtis)

archaeological site. Two families living near the site entrance had even cooperated with several tour companies, occasionally offering overnight stays or local meals in their homes. Surveys conducted in Ghaddar in 2019 (Fushiya and Radziwiłko 2019; Radziwiłko 2025, in this volume) and again in 2021 (Fushiya 2021a; Appendix) revealed that local respondents were generally very positive about tourism development and saw it as a potential source of new jobs and improved infrastructure. This result was somewhat surprising, given that the prevailing form of tourism — organized group tours— had brought few tangible benefits to the communities, and most residents had very limited opportunities to interact with tourists.

Within the framework of the Dialogue project, a stakeholder meeting was held on 12–13 February 2021 at the Polish research center in Old Dongola to discuss and develop a strategic plan for the site's sustainable development. The meeting was led by Peter Larsen, with support from Baloula Mohamed Baloula Abbas [*Fig. 6*] (Larsen 2021). It was attended by 37 international, national, and local stakeholders, along with researchers from the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw (PCMA UW) [*Tables 8, 9*]. The event began with a site visit guided by archaeologists, Artur Obłuski and Maciej Wyżgoł, and a community representative, Sheikh Mohamed Sati Babiker. During the discussions, participants exchanged ideas, identified the site's potentials, and raised concerns — particularly regarding land ownership and restrictions on local practices such as cultivation and expansion of agricultural areas within the site boundary. The meeting resulted in a shared vision and led to the formulation of several documents: *Heritage and Sustainable Development Strategy*, the *2021 Action Plan for Old Dongola*, and the *Nafir Commitment* (Lars-

Fig. 7. "Six strategic pillars" discussed during the stakeholder meeting (After Larsen 2021b)

en 2024). The action plan was formalized through participants' signing of the *Nafir*[12] as an expression of their joint commitment to implementing the plan (Fushiya 2021a; Larsen 2021).

The plan, centered around "six strategic pillars" [*Fig. 7*] (see Larsen 2021; 2024), was discussed in detail during the meeting. It was prepared in both English and Arabic[13] and distributed to all participants. A notable outcome of the stakeholder meeting and resulting plan was the engagement of actors typically uninvolved in archaeological projects, such as foreign governments, international organizations, regional tourism offices, and the State Governor's office (see below).

Table 8. Agenda of the stakeholder meeting

Day 1 (Friday, 12 February)	Day 2 (Saturday, 13 February)
• Arrival to Old Dongola • Friday prayer	7:00 am Breakfast
3:00 pm Lunch	8:00 am Session 2 • Presentations of the discussion results and action plan, led by Dr. Larsen
3:30 pm Site tour	9:30 am Coffee Break
5:30 pm Session 1 • Welcome and introduction of the project by Dr. Artur Obłuski and Mr. Salah Mousa • Introduction of the draft of the strategic plan and the Strategic Pillars by Dr. Peter Larsen • Group discussion about the action plans of the Strategic Pillars 1–6	10:00 am Session 2 (continued) • Presentations of the discussion results and action plans of the Strategic Pillars, Questions & Answers session 11:00 am Session 3 • Discussion and drafting of the Joint Action Plan 2021, led by Dr. Larsen
8:00 pm Dinner	12:30 pm Lunch
	2:00 pm Closing remarks and farewell

Table 9. List of participants in the stakeholder meeting in 2021 (titles held at the time of the meeting)

Institution	Participating representative(s)
Ministry of Higher Education and Science	• Prof. Intisar Soghyroun (Minister)
National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums (NCAM)	• Dr. Hatim el-Nour (Director) • Dr. Abdelhai Saeed (Head of the Field Projects) • Mr. Murtada Bushra Mohamed (Regional Director, Northern State) • Mr. Fakhri Hassan Abdallah (Inspector)
Qatar–Sudan Archaeological Project (QSAP)	• Dr. Salah Mohamed Ahmed (Coordinator)

12 *Nafir* is a Sudanese Arabic term that refers to cooperation to build something (often a house) together by individuals contributing to it by providing labor, food for workers, financial support, etc.

13 Translation by Ola Mamoun, see Larsen 2024.

Table 9. List of participants in the stakeholder meeting in 2021 (titles held at the time of the meeting), continued

Institution	Participating representative(s)
UNESCO Khartoum Office	• Dr. Pavel Kroupkine (Head) • Dr. Abderrhman Ali (Consultant)
European Union Delegation to Sudan	• Mr. Fabien Schaeffer
Northern State	• Mr. Zaki Abdelhai al-Thair (Governor's Office) • Mr. Ali Mohmaed Ali (Governor's Office) • Dr. Afraa Osman Hussein (General Director of Tourism Council) • Mr. Abdel Khalid Awad (Head of Tourism) • Mr. Abdellhai Mahmoud (Media Consultant) • Mr. Abdel Moneim (representative)
Goulid Locality	• Mr. Mohamed Ali (Director of the Goulid Locality) • Ms. Mona Hassan (Head of Tourism Office)
Local community	• Mr. Murtada Abdelhafiz Suleimam (Director of the Old Dongola Unit) • Mr. Ahmed Amin (Head of Tourist Police, Old Dongola Unit) • Mr. Mohamed Ibrahim (Deputy Head of Tourist Police, Old Dongola Unit) • Mr. Mohamed Hassan (Head of Police, Old Dongola Unit) • Ms. Abeer Babiker (Head of Tourism Office, Old Dongola Unit) • Ms. Nasra Hassan Ali (former Head of Women's Union) • Ms. Nahla Abdelgadir (former Head of Women's Union) • Mr. Salah Mousa (Head of the Revolutionary Council of Old Dongola) • Mr. Ayman Abubakr al Khalifa (Community Council of the Old Dongola site) • Mr. Mosaab Mohamed Ali (Community Council of the Old Dongola site) • Mr. Ibrahim Allah Jabo (Community Council of the Old Dongola site) • Sheikh Mohamed Sati Babiker (Community Council of the Old Dongola site) • Mr. Mohamed Ali al-Gadi (community representative)
Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw (PCMA UW)	• Dr. Artur Obłuski (Director of the PCMA and the Old Dongola mission) • Dr. Mahmoud El-Tayeb (Director of the PCMA Research Centre in Sudan) • Dr. Tomomi Fushiya (PCMA Research associate, the Dialogue project) • Dr. Peter Larsen (Consultant, the Dialogue project) • Dr. Baloula Mohamed al-Baloula (Consultant, the Dialogue project) • Mr. Zakieldeen Mahmoud (Archaeologist) • Mr. Mohamed Nasr ed-Deen (Archaeologist) • Mr. Tohamy Abugasim Khalifa al Tohamy (Archaeologist)

To promote community-based tourism development, the action plan included the creation of a visitor guideline or code of conduct for non-Sudanese visitors to local villages, an outline of local cultural practices, and the training of community members as local guides — the latter of which had already begun (Idriss and Siedahmed 2025, in this volume). As community surveys confirmed (Radziwiłko 2025, in this volume; Appendix), residents were generally eager to welcome tourists from diverse cultural backgrounds. However, both the community consultations and the stakeholder meeting revealed that this "welcome" was conditional. Community members emphasized the importance of creating the visitor guideline or code of conduct themselves. Such an approach would support sustainable tourism by reinforcing their cultural, human, and land rights, while promoting self-determination throughout the tourism development process (Holmes, Grimwood, and King 2016; also see the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples). Representatives of the Ghaddar community expressed a strong interest in creating guidelines that would ensure tourists would respect local traditions and customs. A guideline of this kind would help foster a sense of comfort and safety for both community members and tourists.

The community also viewed tourism as a means of promoting their heritage. A local guide system was seen as a way for community members to share historical, cultural, and spiritual knowledge about Old Dongola and its surroundings in their own voices. The local people have in-depth knowledge and first-hand experience of the area, so it is important to train community members to be visitor guides within the community. The system would also provide direct benefits through employment opportunities. For example, the director of the Polish mission proposed that all tour groups and visitors hire a local guide, granting them access to the Monastery of Saint Anthony (also known as the Monastery of the Holy Trinity), which preserves the best *in situ* Christian wall paintings in North Africa,[14] as a way to support this initiative. However, implementing such a system requires approval from NCAM, coordination with tour companies, and the training of English-speaking guides who are knowledgeable about the site's history, local heritage, and heritage protection. Good command of English remains limited among local youth,[15] making the establishment of a robust guiding system challenging. Addressing this issue would require long-term com-

14 The monastery is usually closed to visitors, except when a Polish archaeologist/conservator happens to be working on-site and can guide visitors. This is because a measure to protect the wall paintings is not in place yet and visitors should be instructed to pay careful attention to the vulnerable areas including narrow passages in the building.

15 Being aware of the English language status in tourism and the current lack of language educational/training tools, schools in Ghaddar asked for support in teaching English. Marcin Gostkowski, a Polish teacher and archaeologist who visited Old Dongola and the local schools in 2020, volunteered to raise funds in Poland to support the local school renovations and purchase audio-training devices. Classrooms were renovated thanks to the support of Niepubliczna Szkoła Podstawowa British International Academy Primary Warsaw (MyVinci school) in 2022.

mitment and funding for education and strategic tourism development, which is beyond the scope of this project. As an alternative, a training program began in 2023 to prepare recent graduates in archaeology and related fields to guide Sudanese visitors, including members of local communities, when a new project was funded by the ALIPH Foundation[16] (Idriss and Siedahmed 2025, in this volume). The aim was to train these guides to share the results of the archaeological research at Old Dongola and develop heritage workshops for local children and youth. Familiarizing the younger generation with the site and archaeology may encourage some of them to become tour guides for international tourists in the future. Having a group of trained engagement facilitators would also allow heritage workshops and site visits to continue during the archaeological team's nearly eight-month absence from the site each year.[17]

COMMUNITY-BASED BUSINESSES IN THE DIALOGUE PROJECT

The Dialogue project initiated two programs aimed at fostering community-based tourism. Among the six strategic pillars outlined in the sustainable development plan, the promotion of local entrepreneurship —particularly with a focus on job creation and women's empowerment— seemed, from the author's perspective, to hold the most promise. The author was already aware of existing local initiatives and skills in this area. The former Ghaddar Women's Union, for example, had brought together women engaged in handicraft production, selling their work in markets and cultural festivals and sharing their skills with other women (Fushiya and Radziwiłko 2019). The Union had been a well-organized and connected network of 96 local women and 17 men, committed to supporting families and children in the village. Beyond handicrafts, they had previously invested in soap production and a small shop, which, however, did not thrive. Their products were mostly sold locally, targeting Sudanese customers, and the profits were limited because of the small market among Sudanese communities — an audience familiar with, already owning, or capable of producing similar items.[18] The widespread willingness to support each other continued after the Union was formally dissolved following the fall of the government of President Omar Bashir and the establishment of a civilian–military interim government. Their awareness and capacity for running their projects and organizing networks both within and beyond the village were already evident during

16 See the project description at https://pcma.uw.edu.pl/en/2023/04/25/project-baraka/ (accessed: 02.04.2025).

17 Unexpectedly, this idea helped to continue the heritage workshop after the conflict outbreak (Idriss and Siedahmed 2025, in this volume).

18 In addition to the limited sales opportunities, it later turned out that the pricing of their products was also an issue — although attractive, the handicrafts were deemed pricey.

the first meeting held in February 2019 (Fushiya and Radziwiłko 2019). These local initiatives convinced the author that it would be more effective to collaborate with existing initiatives and interests in the community, rather than the project starting from drawing up a systematic plan — especially since the author lacked experience in community-based business development. In fact, the community had far more experience in this area. Thus, the author decided that the project should focus on identifying needs and interests, facilitating matchmaking with potential tourist markets, supporting start-up investments, and offering advice on what types of products might be suitable or preferred by international visitors. The project also encouraged the women by affirming the importance of their skills and the appeal of their traditional products to foreign visitors, helping them create products that are potentially attractive for international tourists and benefit their households economically. Many decisions about how to work, who should be involved, and the roles of individuals were intentionally left to the community itself.

COMMUNITY-OWNED VISITOR ACCOMMODATION: THE HOUSE OF GEILI

As mentioned above, even before the Dialogue project began, two families had already opened their homes to a small number of tourists based on personal contacts with tour guides. Several tour operators the author spoke to at Old Dongola noted the need for more accommodation. Through several meetings, discussions, and conversations with community members, the author identified a family in Ghaddar that owned an uninhabited house and expressed particular interest in hosting international visitors.

Two members of the family, Nasra Hassan Ali and Nahla Abdelgadir, were active local entrepreneurs who, as representatives of the Ghaddar Women's

Fig. 8. Meeting the family who owned the House of Geili, renovated to serve as tourist accommodation, 2021 (PCMA UW | photo T. Fushiya)

Fig. 9. Interior of the House of Geili after renovation, 2021 (PCMA UW | photo T. Fushiya)

Union, had already conducted initiatives supporting local women and children in need. Another member of this family, the late Ali Geili, had a strong personal interest in the heritage and history of Ghaddar and Nubia in general. He collected local oral histories and published a book, *al-Kushr* (2016). Inspired by the many stories shared by "uncle" Ali, the family was eager to engage visitors in conversations about local heritage. The family of Hassan Ali owned a large house complex in Ghaddar village, a 15-minute drive from the site entrance to Old Dongola. The property included two large buildings with 23 beds and a kitchen, a smaller building with toilets and showers, a water tank, and a large courtyard surrounded by palm groves and fruit gardens. They also owned another uninhabited house next door that could also be converted into tourist accommodation if the first venture proved successful.

In 2020, the project was invited by the family to a meeting to discuss the use of the house [***Fig. 8***]. Impressed by both the house and the owners' enthusiasm, the Polish mission offered financial support that covered a significant portion of the renovation costs [***Fig. 9***]. The family repainted the walls, repaired the windows, and decorated the house with local handicrafts. They set up a tea area in the courtyard with a table and seating under a large tree and hired local women for food preparation and cleaning. Finally, the family named the renovated house the "House of Geili". Thanks to the family's local networks and word-of-mouth among tour guides, following its opening in 2021 the house quickly became known to tour operators and frequently welcomed both individual travelers and tour groups.

In fact, the House of Geili was ready before the stakeholder meeting in mid-February 2021, and its availability as a newly established community-owned visitor accommodation drew the attention of the UNESCO Khartoum Office. In response to the evident need to build capacity among local communities, the Office added a workshop on community-based tourism and sustainable development to the action plan. At the time, the UNESCO Khartoum Office was already supporting cultural tourism initiatives in collaboration with the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Antiquities, and organizing similar workshops across Sudan. The timing of the stakeholder meeting, the initiative at Old Dongola, and the ongoing UNESCO program coincided, making it possible to deliver the workshop immediately after the stakeholder meeting.

The three-day workshop on community-based tourism was held in February 2021 at the House of Geili and a local school in Ghaddar.[19] It introduced participants, including those managing and working at the House of Geili, to a range of ideas for developing tourism-related businesses within the community [***Fig. 10***]. The workshop was led by instructors —Layla Osman and Gafar Osman— who had run other commu-

19 See also: https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/community-based-tourism-training-old-dongola-sudan (accessed: 06.11.2024).

nity-based tourism workshops organized by the UNESCO Khartoum Office, highly acclaimed by participants. Layla Osman made herself available for follow-up advice and support after the workshop. She also voiced a need for another workshop —this time devoted to sanitary conditions— intended for women interested in food preparation for tourists. As of October 2024, this workshop has not yet taken place. Nevertheless, post-workshop interactions with the instructors demonstrated that the community was highly motivated to acquire new skills and knowledge that would make visitors' stays more comfortable and enjoyable, establishing tourism as a viable business. This proactive engagement could serve as a solid foundation for attracting future support from national or international organizations.

The House of Geili opened to tourists in 2021. As it gradually became known to tour guides, over 180 tourists had stayed there by 2023. It created 16 jobs for community members, including positions as cook, driver, and cleaner.

BASKETRY FOR SOUVENIRS FROM OLD DONGOLA: MINI *TABAQ* AND BEYOND

Handicrafts in northern Sudan are made from readily available natural resources, with minimal need to purchase raw materials to produce utensils or furniture. Various traditional handicrafts continue to be produced in present-day Ghaddar. For instance, wooden furniture made

Fig. 10. Workshop on community-based tourism at Ghaddar, 2021 (PCMA UW | photos Zakieldeen Mahmoud)

with plant-fiber cordage, such as beds (*angareeb*) and low stools (*bamba*), are crafted by men, while basketry such as mats (*birsh*),[20] basket containers (*goffa*), and flat baskets (*tabaq*),[21] made of date and doum palm fronds, are produced by women [*Fig. 11*] (Fushiya 2021b). Basketry is primarily made for individual use, and only the surplus is offered for sale to neighbors or at a local *souq* (market). Both *angareeb* and basketry have a long history in Nubia. Wooden beds are attested in ancient burials in Nubia already in the Early and Middle Kerma periods (2500–1750 BCE) (Gratien 1978: 55, 167, cited in Lehmann 2023), and were a common feature of burials during the Classic Kerma period (1750–1500 BCE) (Lehmann 2023). More recently, wooden beds have been used for sitting, sleeping, and during weddings and funerals, and have constituted a common feature of domestic space. Although they have been gradually replaced with metal beds —and their plant-fiber cordage with plastic strings— ceremonies like funerals continue to use wooden beds to carry the deceased to a cemetery. Likewise, some well-preserved basketry objects have been excavated in tumuli and graves dated to the Classic Kerma period in Kerma (Reisner 1923: 317–318, Pl. 69). In Qasr Ibrim, a donkey saddle, various types of containers, and mats have been recovered; these are dated from the Meroitic (100–300 CE) through the Ottoman period (1560–1812 CE) (Wendrich 1999: 207–215; Driskell 2018). Even when organics are not preserved in archaeological contexts, the use of basketry can be confirmed based on its imprints on pottery —from as early as the 5th millennium BCE (Gatto 2019)— and on roofing materials found in the pharaonic colonial town at Amara West (1300–1100 BCE). A similar use of matting as roofing material is still seen in the nearby villages of Abri and Ernetta Island

Fig. 11. Handicrafts produced by members of the Women's Union at Ghaddar, 2019 (PCMA UW | photo T. Fushiya)

20 *Birsh* is made of several *dafir* (a band of flat basketry woven using the plaiting technique) sewn together, and is used for sitting, as a (personal) prayer mat, as floor covering in a prayer room in a mosque, as wedding decoration, and it can be (re-)used as roofing material. Depending on its function, the colors and shapes differ.

21 *Tabaq* is made using the coiling technique, in different sizes, made of date and doum palm fronds. *Tabaq* is used for food-covering to avoid dust and insects, cooling flatbread (*kisra*), and winnowing grains and seeds. Some food-covering *tabaq* are colorfully decorated.

(Vandenbeusch 2017). Containers, lids, matting, sandals, and other fragments of basketry have also been uncovered from domestic spaces dated to the Funj period (16th to 18th centuries CE) at Old Dongola (Warowna 2022a; 2022b). Today, *tabaq* and *birsh* are the two most common types of basketry used in everyday life in Sudanese Nubia. Both *angareeb* and basketry are household items that are considered "heritage" (*turath*) among Sudanese Nubian communities (Adams 1977: 48–50; Fushiya 2020: 185–187). The importance of basketry was recognized in 2022 when it was inscribed in the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity as "Date palm, knowledge, skills, traditions and practices", through a multinational nomination by 15 countries, including Sudan.[22]

These traditional and environmentally friendly handicrafts have been increasingly replaced with inexpensive materials such as plastic bags or containers, and a preference for new materials in northern Sudan was notable. As a result, their production has declined and the associated skills are at risk of being lost. The author observed the dire situation of these skills in different parts of Sudanese Nubia. For instance, most *angareeb* craftsmen were elderly, and it was difficult to find an active craftsman making them around Abri, though Manuela Lehmann (2021) found a skilled person further south near Dongola. Similarly, several women in Abri claimed to know how to weave basketry, but there was only one who actually produced *tabaq*. Philippa Ryan and her colleagues reported an account of a family from Ernetta Island near Abri, in which the women used to gather and make basketry together until the 1980s (Ryan et al. 2021). In Tombos, a woman showed the author well-made *tabaq*s and *birsh* [***Fig. 12***]. The *tabaq*s were decorated with colorful strips of textiles typical of Mahas and Sikoot Nubia (Ryan et al. 2021), as well as modern Egyptian Nubia (Wendrich 1999). Colored doum palm leaves were used to create argyle patterns on the *birsh*. The author later learned from a few basket producers in Ghaddar that this particular weaving pattern was made using a complex technique that many producers today find difficult to replicate. The woman in Tombos explained that she had stopped making basketry because no one was interested in purchasing or using it.

On the other hand, the Women's Union in Ghaddar at the time included an active handicraft group. The challenging situation of handicraft production, skill transfer, and customer interest in Ghaddar may differ little from that in other parts of Sudanese Nubia. Yet, the group continues to produce crafts, train anyone interested, and sells their products at various cultural festivals and markets in Sudan. Using traditional weaving skills, they make containers, bags, hats, small flat basketry objects used as fans, and other items fit for use in modern households. They also mentioned that a woman from another part of the re-

22 See the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage website: https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/date-palm-knowledge-skills-traditions-and-practices-01902 (accessed: 08.08.2024).

gion, who visits different villages to hold workshops for women, came to Ghaddar some years ago and taught them how to make paper crafts. The Ghaddar's women's group primarily produces and sells two types of items: basketry, which uses traditional skills of weaving palm fronds, and containers made from recycled paper and plastic.

Together with this local initiative, several other positive developments encouraged collaboration with women craft makers in Ghaddar. Firstly, some of the craft makers expressed interest in working with us on production, redesign, and sales for tourists during our first meeting with the Women's Union in 2019. The meeting also confirmed that the Union was a well-organized structure. Secondly, at the time, the Polish team was planning to construct a visitor center featuring a souvenir shop and a cafeteria to be operated by community members, allowing them to directly profit from tourism. The initial strategy of the handicraft program was to make full use of this new facility. Thirdly, year 2019 was an economically and socially challenging time in the country. The dire situation led to civilian protests that culminated in the fall of the 30-year regime of President Omar Bashir in April 2019. In such circumstances, the new collaboration should not be an additional burden on a community already facing hardship. Basketry production is not only ecological and sustainable but also requires minimal investment, as all necessary raw materials can be sourced locally; only the dyes and textiles for decoration need to be purchased at the market (Wendrich 1999: 397–405). Finally, a few local people occasionally visited the archaeologists' house offering their crafts for sale.

Fig. 12. Basketry (left: *birsh*, right: *tabaq*) made in Tombos, 2020 (Photos T. Fushiya)

The handicraft collaboration was launched in 2020 by the author and Mohamed Hassan Siedahmed.[23] At the time, neither had any experience in souvenir design or marketing. The project offered only advice on the women's proposals from a foreigner's perspective and provided a place to sell their products — to the team and the occasional tourists who visited the archaeological house. The two project members sold the handicrafts at prices suggested by the makers, without charging any commission, so the entire profit went to the individual craft makers. The project ended up working mainly with two groups of local women in Ghaddar. One comprised women living in different parts of the village, whose products were collected by the former head of the Women's Union, as she had always done in the past. The other group consisted of women living near the Polish archaeological team's house, who were also members of the Union. The project dealt with them directly and picked up their products. In addition, a few women and locally hired household staff occasionally brought some handicrafts to the archaeologists' house — just as they had done previously.

The first step of implementing the Dialogue project was to understand the process of basketry production and explore options for redesigning basketry to serve as souvenirs. For example, the *tabaq* made by the women of Ghaddar was appealing in itself, but its size —typically 40–50 cm in diameter— was too large to fit in a traveler's bag. Transforming the traditional *tabaq* into a "tourist-friendly" object (about 15 cm in diameter) did not require any major changes to the original style or decoration. A group of three craftswomen living near the Polish team's house were asked to make samples. After around 10 days, they produced 10 small *tabaqs*, while in the meantime, the head of the Union brought two bags and some other hand-crafted items [***Table 10***]. The palm fronds needed six to seven days to dry, while the actual weaving of a small *tabaq* could be completed by an experienced craftswoman in one day, if done during breaks in her housework. All pieces were unique: although more or less the same size (15 cm in diameter), each was woven in a different style and featured individual decorative patterns [***Fig. 13***]. The products were priced by each craft maker.

The second step was to find a souvenir shop in Khartoum interested in selling handicraft products from Ghaddar. By early 2020, it had become clear that the construction of the visitor center was indefinitely postponed, so the possibility of selling the products in the city, in addition to the local market, was seen as a way to boost sales. It was also important to gather feedback from professionals in the handicraft sector, who catered mostly to international tourists. Three areas in the Khartoum agglomeration were key to the crafts trade: Souq Omdurman — the oldest

23 Mohamed Hassan Siedahmed was an interpreter, translator, and engagement facilitator in the Dialogue project. He is the Director of the Information & Promotion Directorate at the Higher Council of Tourism and Antiquities, Northern State, Sudan, and teaches tourism at the University of Dongola.

market in Greater Khartoum, frequently visited by international tourists; a group of handicraft shops near Souq Arabi in Khartoum; and several art galleries in the upscale neighborhoods of Khartoum, which mostly catered to expats. There was also a small-scale vendor at the entrance of a hotel near Souq Arabi, where many international tourists, journalists, aid workers, and archaeologists stayed. The shop sold various handicrafts and jewelry, including basketry from Sudan and other countries such as Rwanda, but none of the products came from the northern part of the country. Before traveling to Old Dongola, the author approached this vendor and one of the art galleries. The shop owner was immediately interested in the handicrafts and said he would pay 75–100 SDG per piece, while the gallery owner, although curious, was more skeptical about their potential to sell at a good price. Once the basketry samples were ready, the au-

Fig. 13. Test products made by craftspeople in Ghaddar, 2020 (PCMA UW | photos T. Fushiya)

thor first returned to the vendor's shop before reaching out to other shops and galleries. The vendor instantly decided to buy all eight small and medium *tabaqs* and a bowl for 1000 SDG (the equivalent of 20 USD) and two bags for 500 SDG (10 USD)[24] and put them on display alongside other handicrafts. He found the basketry from Ghaddar to be well-made and asked for additional pieces and contact information to the producers. According to him, it is not easy to find good craft makers who could provide a steady supply of quality handicrafts.

This apparent success increased the craft makers' motivation. The news that all the products had been sold at once was, not surprisingly, well received. When the project team returned to the village the following year, three women were waiting for us with 35 small *tabaqs*, while others later brought a large and a small *birsh*, a medium-sized *tabaq* with textile decorations, small baskets, and a variety of bags [*Fig. 14*]. Additional basketry products were collected by the Women's Union. These were displayed in the Polish mission's house during the stakeholder meeting as samples

Fig. 14. Basketry made in Ghaddar, displayed during the stakeholder meeting, 2021 (PCMA UW | photo T. Fushiya)

24 The exchange rate as of 1 February 2020 (1 USD was worth 48.904 SDG), according to the Xe website (https://www.xe.com/currencytables/, accessed: 10.01.2024).

of local community handicrafts, successfully drawing the attention of attendees. A few items were purchased by participants, while the Northern State Tourism Office promised to build a new office at the site entrance, where local handicrafts could be displayed for sale.[25] The basketry was also sold to members of the Polish archaeological team and to a group of tourists who visited one craft maker's house in the village and —overwhelmed by the experience— paid more than the asking price (e.g., a tourist who was asked to pay 700 SDG instead gave 1000 SDG). As the archaeological team purchased many pieces, its members requested a special discount, which was approved by the craftswomen [*Table 11*]. By this time, different groups of women began spontaneously visiting the team's house with products to sell and with new business proposals to discuss. On one occasion, a group of women came seeking advice on new products and ways to improve their sales [*Fig. 15*]. Many of the handicrafts featured unique designs inspired by traditional styles and techniques. However, it became clear that there was a difference between how the project team and the local women understood the concept of a "local souvenir". The former envisioned it to be a unique handicraft produced locally, while some of the local women offered items made in other parts of Sudan and purchased from markets elsewhere. One woman saw tourism as a new business opportunity and attempted to sell soap labeled "made in China" to international tourists. The meaning of "local" and strategies for developing the handicraft business were discussed in several meetings, some of which were also attended by Sudanese archaeologists and Archaeology students participating in the Community Archaeology training course (Fushiya 2021c).

Fig. 15. Meeting with a group of women who brought new products and ideas, 2021 (PCMA UW | photos M. Rekłajtis (left), T. Fushiya (right))

25 Construction work began in 2022 but was interrupted by the change of Director in the Northern State Tourism Office and the uncertainty in the tourism industry due to the global pandemic.

Table 10. Types of products and their numbers produced and sold by individual craft makers in 2022–2023

	2022			2023		
	Types of products	**Products for sale**	**Products sold**	**Types of products**	**Products for sale**	**Products sold**
Craft maker 1	3 types (small *tabaq*, small and large *goffa*)	7	7	2 types (small and medium *tabaq*)	15	14
Craft maker 2	1 type (small *tabaq*)	6	6	2 types of basketry (small *tabaq* and *goffa*)	12	8
Craft maker 3	1 type (small *tabaq*)	4	0	–	–	–
Craft maker 4	1 type (small *tabaq*)	1	1	–	–	–
Craft maker 5	–	–	–	6 types of basketry (different sizes of *tabaq*, *birsh*, *goffa*)	37	25
Craft maker 6	–	–	–	2 types (small and medium *tabaq*)	15	4
Craft maker 7	–	–	–	9 types of basketry (small and medium *tabaq* with colored rims, large and extra-large basket box with cover, small and tiny bags, round and small square *birsh*)	28	17
	–	–	–	Non-basketry items (different sizes of metal containers, *garaa* (loofah fruit), *motabal* (kohl container), *gadas* (pottery), container, small charcoal holder)	19	4
Craft maker 8	–	–	–	1 type (*tabaq*)	1	1
Total basketry	–	**18**	**14**	**–**	**108**	**73**
Total products	–	**18**	**14**	**–**	**127**	**77**

Table 11. Prices of basketry and other items over the course of four years [Sudanese pounds]

Product type	2020	2021	2022	2023
Small *tabaq*	100	300 (for tourists); 200 (for the team)	3000 (for tourists); 2000 (for the team)	1500–2000
Medium *tabaq*	150	500–1500		2000–2500
Large *tabaq*				3000
Medium *tabaq* with handle		700		2000
Small *tabaq* with colored rim				2000
Medium *tabaq* with colored rim				2500–3000
Tabaq with cover				3000–5000
Small *goffa*			3000	
Medium *goffa*				3000
Large *goffa*			5000	5000
Basket bowl with colored rim				2500–3000
Extra small *birsh*				2500
Round *birsh*				2500
Extra small square *birsh*				3000
Large basket box with cover				20000
Extra-large basket box with cover				30000
Tiny basket bag				
Small basket bag				3000
Medium basket bag	250	2500		
Basket clutch bag		1500		
Perfume pot	100			
Ceramic ashtray	100			
Small metal container				1000
Medium metal container				1500
Large metal container				2000
*Garaa (*loofah)				500–1000
Motabal (kohl container)				6000
Antique *gadah* (wooden bowl)				20000
Pot				2000
Medium container				3000
Small charcoal holder				1000

The 2022 season brought little success, largely due to the pandemic. In accordance with local regulations, the archaeological team was quarantined in the expedition house for 10 days, and even after the quarantine period, the author chose to refrain from visiting members of the community. Nevertheless, a batch of basketry products was delivered by the same three women who lived near the

Polish house. Most of the items were sold to team members and a group of American tourists. As not all tourists had local currency, they paid a few dollars extra for each item as a "donation", amounting to around 20 USD in total. In sum, 14 basketry items were sold for 32000 SDG (approximately 73 USD) [see *Table 11*]. The three women continued to make small *tabaqs* along with a few other unique products, designed specifically to test their "salability". By the following year, it was clear that they had discussed their new business with friends and neighbors. As a result, in 2023, four additional women from the same neighborhood brought basketry and other handicrafts at the beginning of the season. The involvement of different craft makers meant a broader variety of products. Most of them were the same-style, well-made small *tabaqs*, although a few new items appeared as well, such as lidded containers, colored basketry, a large container, and a few other small objects [*Fig. 16*]. The new designs appealed yet again to members of the archaeological team, who saw the offer as an opportunity to purchase gifts for friends and family back home and a way to contribute to the local economy. The 2023 season saw the highest sales to date, mostly to members of the archaeological team and international visitors guided by team members. The sales reached 194500 SDG, equivalent to approximately 334 USD at the time.

Until the 2023 season, despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, the handicraft collaboration grew steadily. It had a positive impact both economically and socially — generating income for the participating craftswomen and contributing to their empowerment, while also supporting the preservation of traditional basketry skills. This success was partly due to the consistent presence of the archaeological team, which returned every year and purchased basketry items. This ensured a steady amount of income and encouraged the craft makers to continue producing basketry and experimenting with new designs and products. The craftswomen also appeared to be motivated by the relative freedom to design and manufacture the items — apart from the initial requirement regarding the size of the *tabaq*, all other aspects of production were left to their discretion. This aligns with the results of similar studies — for instance, a study on souvenirs

Fig. 16. Products made by Ghaddar craft makers, 2023 (PCMA UW | photos T. Fushiya)

and traditional handicrafts in Thailand shows that craft makers prefer designing their own items or drawing on their own ethnic group's traditions, rather than reproducing designs suggested by NGOs or national institutions keen to promote "traditional" or "authentic" crafts to tourists (Husa 2020). The craft makers in Ghaddar experimented with various styles and products and independently decided what to produce next. Such freedom of choice, as well as actual sales, must have been empowering. As such, the basketry making initiative created a unique opportunity for local craftswomen to manage their own businesses and freely express their understanding of heritage. This stands in contrast to handicrafts fashioned under the framework of the Authorized Heritage Discourse (Smith 2006) that advocates for the understanding of heritage as stipulated by national or international authorities (Varutti 2015).

CONCLUSIONS

This article presented two programs initiated by the Dialogue project in collaboration with local communities in Old Dongola, aimed at enhancing the growth of community-based tourism. The tourism industry in Sudan showed promising development, and, prior to the pandemic and the outbreak of conflict, Old Dongola was regularly visited by non-Sudanese tourists. Yet, even in 2019, when the number of non-Sudanese was at its highest, the overall visitor traffic remained very small compared to countries where tourism is a major economic driver, such as Egypt or Morocco. Being primarily an archaeological project, the Polish expedition was unlikely to dramatically boost the flow of international tourists, even with support from international sponsors or the national government. However, the two programs that focused on community-run entrepreneurship and the use of local resources and heritage showed that a positive impact on local household economies and heritage preservation was attainable. This could be achieved with limited input and relatively modest financial support for local initiatives. Rather than relying on step-by-step support, which risks creating a top-down dynamic in the so-called "collaboration", an international archaeological team can contribute to community-based initiatives by drawing the attention of other regional, national, and international stakeholders. If local needs align with the resources, interests, and goals of these stakeholders, they can offer further support to the community. Such was the case of the UNESCO Khartoum Office's training workshop for the community and the Northern State government's commitment to build a tourist office with a space for selling local handicrafts. In these cases, the international archaeological team acted as a facilitator, connecting international organizations and donors with the community (see also Burtenshaw et al. 2019).

These initiatives also illustrated how an archaeological team can contribute to the local economy and respond to community needs. Working closely with local communities could help lay the ground-

work for more structured and sustainable support. While the Dialogue project's initiatives were funded externally, the most important resource invested was time devoted to communicating with the community. One of the key insights gained was the recognition that archaeologists or other researchers can be among the most reliable customers supporting the local handicraft initiative. This highlights the vulnerability of the local tourism economy to external factors, such as political instability or global crises like the pandemic, both of which led to a significant decline in visitor numbers to Old Dongola and, generally, Sudan. Yet, the presence of reliable customers may have helped preserve the skills and knowledge of handicraft producers from oblivion and eventual loss of the handicraft know-how. These purchases might not have led to significant social and economic change within the community as a whole, but they demonstrated a clear potential to encourage handicraft production and help the community realize its economic potential in the future, once tourism resumes. It is essential for community-driven initiatives that the producers retain control over the commercialization of their cultural products. The next step would be to gradually reduce the project's role in sales and accounting, letting the craftswomen be more independent, perhaps by collaborating more closely with the local tourist office that would create a space for selling the handicrafts at the site entrance. The basketry initiative, in turn, could shift focus to promotional activity and attracting more potential customers.

Currently, the ongoing conflict in Sudan has brought tourism and archaeological research to a standstill. When this conflict will end is, at the time of writing, difficult to predict. However, cultural heritage and tourism are expected to play an important role in Sudan's post-conflict recovery (see Belotti 2024a). In that future context, the community-based initiatives developed through collaboration with the Dialogue project will have the potential, even if only to a limited extent, to contribute to the local economy. The development of the two community initiatives at Old Dongola has shown that the community possesses the skills, experience, and commitment necessary to work towards building community-based tourism.

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APPENDIX
METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS OF THE SECOND COMMUNITY SURVEY

METHODOLOGY

A structured questionnaire consisting of 43 questions was used for data collection in Ghaddar. Ghaddar is an administrative town in the Old Dongola Unit, Goulid Locality, Northern State of the Republic of Sudan, with a population around 6000. It is located immediately north of the archaeological site of Old Dongola. The survey aimed to understand the community's life, experiences, and perspectives on archaeology and heritage, their views on tourism and related development, and their evaluation of the community's experience with the engagement programs conducted at Old Dongola between 2019 and 2020. The single- or multiple-answer questions were divided into seven themes; (1) life in Ghaddar, (2) archaeological work in the area, (3) benefits of archaeological work in Old Dongola, (4) benefits from tourism development, (5) heritage and archaeology, (6) community engagement programs, and (7) demographic questions. The questions in themes (1) to (4) and (7) mirrored those of the first community survey, developed by Katarzyna Radziwiłko and Tomomi Fushiya in 2019 in English. The first survey questionnaire was translated into Arabic by Mohamed Hassan Siedahmed (see Radziwiłko 2025, in this volume, for the method of the first survey). The 2021 survey modified theme (5) and added theme (6). These changes and additions were translated into Arabic by Tohamy Abulghasim.

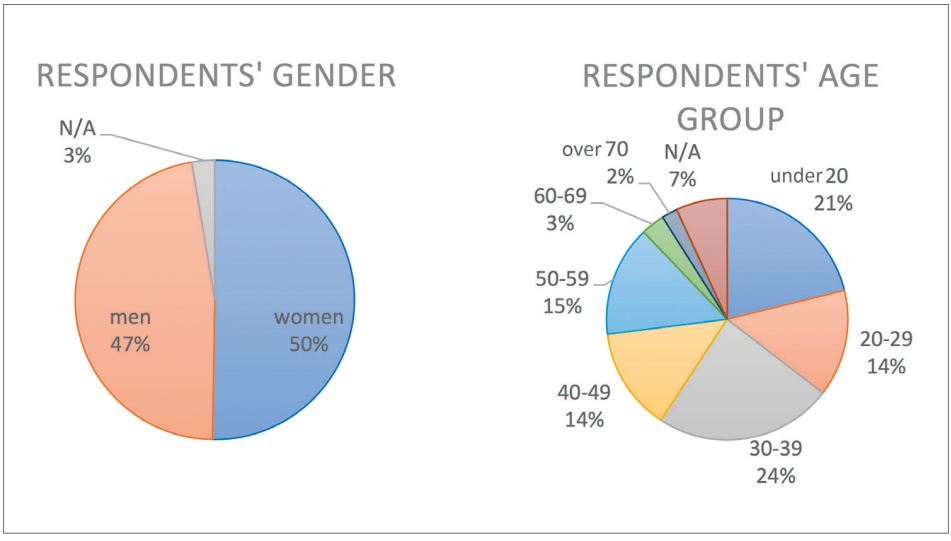


Fig. 17. Demography of the second community survey in 2021 (T. Fushiya)

A random sampling method was applied to collect data in Ghaddar. The collection of the data was carried out by three local recent graduates (Umm Salma Abu AlZine Mohamed, Manal Mohamed, and Wafa Ahmed), the Head of the Tourism Office (Abeer Babiker), and Tohamy Abulghasim, under the author's supervision, in five different areas of the village from 6 to 15 February 2021. A total of 195 respondents answered the questionnaire, but six questionnaires were excluded from analysis due to incompleteness, leaving 189 valid responses (women: 95; men: 89; no answer: 5 [*Fig. 17*]). The collected data were entered into SPSS by the author for frequency and tabulation analysis.

The collected data and the survey questionnaires in English and Arabic are available at DOI: 10.58132/IIQGBQ (Fushiya and Radziwiłko 2024).

RESULTS

Table 12 presents the results from the second survey relevant to this article. For the results of the evaluation of the engagement programs (theme 6), see Fushiya 2021a. The 2019 responses (Fushiya and Radziwiłko 2019; Radziwiłko 2025, in this volume) can be compared with those from the 2021 survey. However, it should be noted that the 2019 and 2021 respondent groups differed in occupation and the last completed education level. Furthermore, the 2021 data collection was conducted in different parts of Ghaddar by local interviewers, while the 2019 survey, conducted by Radziwiłko and Siedahmed, was limited to areas near the site and administrative buildings and schools. These differences in data collection method and respondent demography may have influenced some variation in the survey results.

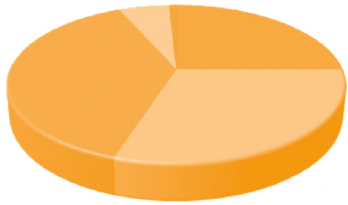
Table 12. Results of the second community survey in 2021 (*n*=189)

1. Demography of the respondents	
Level of education completed	**%**
Elementary education not completed	21.2
Elementary school diploma	21.7
Secondary school or technical school diploma	31.7
Bachelor degree	20.6
Master degree	1.6
Other	1.6
No answer	1.6
Occupation	**%**
Homemaker	22.8
Daily worker	20.1
Teacher	19.0
Student	16.9
Farmer	4.8
Worker	2.6
Unemployed	2.1
Driver, lawyer	1.1 each
Nurse, agricultural engineer, excavation supervisor, medical lab specialist, registration assistant, self-employed, tourist guard, tourist police	0.5 each

Table 12. Results of the second community survey in 2021 (*n*=189), continued

2. Responses concerning tourism development	
Tourism development could be a potential consequence of archaeological excavations in your area	**%**
It is good news for me	91.5
It is bad news for me	3.2
I don't know	3.2
No answer	2.1
Tourism development will bring new jobs to my village and the area	**%**
I agree	96.8
I don't agree	2.6
No answer	0.5
Tourism development will lead the surrounding area to lose its unique character	**%**
I agree	53.4
I don't agree	42.9
I don't know	3.2
No answer	0.5
Tourism development will bring more people to our area who do not know our traditions or customs	**%**
I agree	94.7
I don't agree	3.2
I don't know	0.5
3. Responses concerning heritage	
Heritage is an important element of everyday life in Ghaddar	**%**
I agree	94.7
I don't agree	3.7
I don't know	1.1
No answer	0.5
More people forget about heritage that continues from our ancestors these days	**%**
I agree	91.0
I don't agree	7.4
No answer	1.6
It is important to preserve our heritage	**%**
I agree	97.4
I don't agree	0.5
I don't know	0.5
No answer	1.6

Ghaddar Community Survey: a socio-archaeological case study



Abstract: Ghaddar is a Sudanese village of about 6000 inhabitants. It is located next to the archaeological site of Old Dongola, which has been excavated by the Polish archaeological expedition since 1964. In February 2019, a quantitative social survey was conducted among the local community as part of the "ArcheoCDN. Archaeological Centre of Scientific Excellence" project. The survey aimed to understand the social environment of the local community and to identify their perceptions and expectations with regard to local heritage, archaeology, and tourism. The results were used as a starting point for designing community outreach programs and ensuring the transfer of necessary knowledge to members of the local community.

Keywords: Ghaddar, Sudan, Dongola, community survey, public archaeology, heritage, community outreach

INTRODUCTION

Cultural heritage is an integral part of local identity, especially for communities living in places rich in history. Old Dongola in Sudan, the former capital of the kingdom of Makuria, excavated by Polish archaeologists since 1964, is a case in point (Jakobielski and Scholz 2001; Obłuski and Dzierzbicka 2021: 76). With a growing awareness of the importance of the Old Dongola herit-

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age, it has become increasingly important to involve the local community in efforts to preserve and promote it. This approach is in line with global trends to encourage participatory heritage management, empowering communities to take an active role in protecting and promoting their own history and culture.

This paper presents the results of a socio-archaeological study conducted in February 2019 as part of the "ArcheoCDN. Archaeological Centre of Scientific Excellence" project (Fushiya and Radziwiłko 2019; Fushiya 2021a; 2021b; Obłuski and Dzierzbicka 2021). The objective of the two-year project was to understand the local values of Old Dongola and to work with the local community for sustainable heritage management and development (for more about the project, see Discussion). Among the aims was to gauge the attitudes, needs, and expectations of the Ghaddar community towards the archaeological heritage of Old Dongola and the development of archaeological tourism in the region. The survey shed light on the respondents' attitudes towards their heritage, their level of identification with the site, and their perception of potential challenges and benefits connected with tourism development. An analysis of the results will inform future efforts towards sustainable heritage management and community integration, which may have broad implications for the protection and promotion of local cultural resources in a post-colonial context.

CONTEXT OF THE SOCIAL SURVEY

The social (community) survey was conducted in Ghaddar, a village adjacent to the archaeological site of Old Dongola, approximately 350 km from Khartoum (Fushiya 2021b: 9). Old Dongola used to be the capital of the Nubian kingdom of Makuria, whose territory extended from the Third to the Fifth Nile Cataract. Founded around 500 CE, the city quickly rose to prominence as a political, religious, and cultural center (Godlewski, Dzierzbicka, and Łajtar 2018: 11). It featured a citadel, churches, and elite residences. Outside the citadel, monastic complexes were built on the northern outskirts of the city (Godlewski 2013). In Old Dongola, local Nubian traditions intertwined with Byzantine influences, which are evident in the architecture and wall paintings. The kingdom of Makuria reached the height of its power between the 9th and 11th centuries, a period of prosperity and extensive trade links. After the fall of Makuria in the 14th century, Old Dongola became the capital of a smaller but still significant political entity, while also undergoing a religious transformation and conversion to Islam (Obłuski 2021).

Polish archaeologists have been excavating Old Dongola since 1964 in order to understand and document the political and economic history of the city. The fieldwork has been complemented by conservation work focusing on the wall paintings and written sources (Godlewski, Dzierzbicka, and Łajtar 2018; Obłuski and Dzierzbicka 2021; Chmielewski and Skarżyńska 2024). In addition, the Polish expedition has attempted to involve the local population more in the research process (Fushiya 2021a: 95). The long-

standing collaboration has resulted in a close, neighborly relationship between the researchers and the local community, augmented by the fact that the expedition members would stay at the nearby village of Ghaddar for the entire excavation season. This village of 6000 people, bordering Old Dongola to the southeast, is the administrative center of the region, housing government offices, a hospital, schools, and a local court (Fushiya and Radziwiłko 2019: 173; Fushiya 2021b: 9). Importantly, it is a place where social activities take place, as initiated by Stefan Jakobielski — not only the long-time director of the excavations (1996–2006) and a researcher, but also a true friend of the local community (Obłuski and Dzierzbicka 2021: 298). In the last decade, thanks to the efforts of the current director of the Polish expedition to Old Dongola, Artur Obłuski, the number of participatory activities has increased. Recent projects, e.g. the "ArcheoCDN", were implemented with the aim to facilitate the engagement of the local communities in the promotion of their heritage.

GHADDAR COMMUNITY SURVEY: METHODS, CONDUCT, AND RESULTS

The socio-archaeological survey had the form of a close-ended questionnaire developed in English by the author and Tomomi Fushiya and translated into Arabic by Mohamed Hassan Siedahmed. This is a standardized survey method, available at low cost and providing data for statistical analysis (Lutyński 2000; Grabowska 2013). In addition, questionnaires of this kind allow a large number of respondents to be surveyed in a relatively short time, which is crucial in the context of research conducted with a limited researcher presence in the field. What makes these questionnaires a handy tool is that —compared to a face-to-face interview— they allow for a greater anonymity, letting the respondents choose their responses freely. Last but not least, quantitative surveys (e.g. questionnaires) are easy to replicate by other researchers, which increases their credibility and allows the results to be verified by independent experts.

However, while they facilitate comparative analyses, quantitative surveys are imperfect as a research method, mainly because they reduce social complexities to categories predefined by the researchers. As a result, certain important phenomena may be overlooked if they are not included in the set of answers available. Another disadvantage of this approach is that it pushes the respondents to take a stance on issues they actually may have no particular views on. What the questionnaires seem to test best is, as it seems, the respondents' factual utterances which may not reflect their actual beliefs (Babbie 2007; Krzewińska and Grzeszkiewicz-Radulska 2013).

The qualitative approach, on the other hand, undoubtedly has a number of important advantages that make it a valuable tool in the research process, one being a chance to gain a deeper understanding of both the phenomena under

study and the surveyed people themselves (Silverman 2001: 32). However, this can be a challenge in traditional societies or authoritarian states (Fujii 2017). Qualitative studies are also time-consuming and allow for only a limited number of interviews (up to a dozen or so) during a single field trip. For this reason, the author decided not to conduct qualitative research, initially planned as a means of learning more about effects of tourism on daily life. Within the framework of the project, however, interviews focusing on handicrafts were conducted, which, in case of tourism development, could play a role in regional promotion and become a source of income for the local people (see Fushiya 2025, in this volume). These preliminary interviews (Fushiya and Radziwiłko 2019) were continued in subsequent seasons (Fushiya 2021a), but they did not delve deeply into the issues raised by the quantitative research. According to the present author, there is therefore a need to enrich the analysis with qualitative research, including in-depth interviews.

Respondents were carefully selected with their availability in mind (convenience-based sampling technique), as the social structure of the community was not fully known to the researchers (Lutyński 2000). The socio-archaeological survey involved 120 people living and/or working in Ghaddar and representing various social groups: men and women, youths and adults (between 18 and 69 years), and different educational and occupational backgrounds. The questionnaire was distributed in public places such as schools, local government offices, the site of Old Dongola, in the streets and the market in the village center. The project interpreter, Siedahmed, ensured complete anonymity of the respondents and helped some of them read the questionnaire.

The questionnaire consisted of six parts. The first dealt with issues related to everyday life in Ghaddar; the second with issues related to archaeology, including the participants' knowledge of archaeology. Questions in the third and fourth parts, respectively, referred to expected benefits the archaeological research in Old Dongola may yield to the local community and concerns related to tourism development, while the fifth part comprised questions about heritage in Ghaddar. The final, sixth part of the questionnaire collected demographic data such as age, gender, place of residence, level of completed education, and occupation.

RESPONDENTS' PROFILE

A total of 120 people took part in the survey (123 forms were collected, 3 incomplete responses were excluded from consideration). Of these, 47 (39.1%) were men, 62 (51.7%) were women, while 11 (9.2%) did not indicate their gender [*Fig. 1*]. 80.8% of the respondents (n=97) provided information about their age [*Fig. 2*]. The majority of the respondents (40.3%, n=48) had completed their education up to the secondary level or the university level (undergraduate) (42.9%, n=51), which is reflected in their professions. Only a small number of respondents had a master's degree, and few reported having complete or incomplete primary education.

Teachers and public administration employees (with secondary school diplomas or university degrees) were the dominant occupations among the respondents. The rest were mostly workers with a lower level of education (primary or incomplete primary education). Most of the people in the latter group had difficulty reading the questionnaire. Because of the literacy problem, not everyone we contacted during the fieldwork was able to participate in the survey. Some respondents needed help from other people to complete the survey forms.

Fig. 1. Gender of the respondents (Graph K. Radziwiłko)

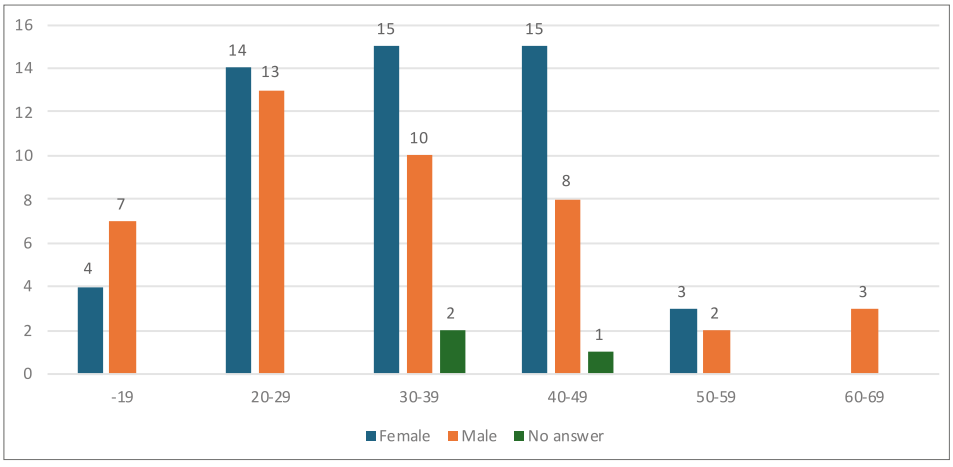

Fig. 2. Age structure of the respondents (*n*=97) (Graph K. Radziwiłko)

DATA ANALYSIS

In the first part of the survey, respondents were asked about their everyday life, including their satisfaction with their living conditions and problems they faced daily. The data analyzed has shown that 90.0% (*n*=108) of the respondents were happy with their current social setting. Almost everyone (99.2%, *n*=119) felt safe in the village, while many (93.3%, *n*=112) declared they could truly rely on their neighbors and family for support in times of hardship. In addition, more than half of the respondents (56.7%, *n*=68) asserted they would not like to move out, with a majority (77.5%, *n*=93) confident that Ghaddar was a good place for the education of their children [***Table 1***].

Nevertheless, they also saw drawbacks. A significant percentage of the respondents (73.3%, *n*=88) believed that Ghaddar lacked adequate road infrastructure and did not provide easy access to clean water (54.2%, *n*=65). A large group of respondents (83.3%, *n*=100) also complained about the high unemployment rate [see ***Table 1***].

The second part of the questionnaire aimed to examine the respondents' experience with archaeology and their interactions with the archaeologists working at Old Dongola. The analysis showed that many of them were aware of the archaeological excavations in Old Dongola (85.0%, *n*=102) and had visited the site (80.8%, *n*=97) [***Table 2***]. Considering that the excavations have been conducted in this area since 1964, this is a relatively low number. This may be due to the fact that the survey was conducted among people from different villages. Among the most frequented monuments the respondents named: the church (73.3%, *n*=88), the domed tombs (66.7%, *n*=80), the mosque (61.7%, *n*=74), the *khalwa* (45.8%, *n*=55), and the monastery (42.5%, *n*=51) [***Table 3***]. The poor knowledge of this last monument may be due to the fact that the monastery was closed to the local community. More than half of the respondents (58.3%, *n*=70) had also interacted with members of the archaeological project, usually during a site visit or a village meeting [see ***Table 2***].

In general, the respondents were happy that the excavations were taking place in Old Dongola, although the analysis showed a fairly limited knowledge of archaeology among the residents despite the long-term presence of archaeologists there. Indeed, the respondents themselves assessed their knowledge of archaeological excavations at Old Dongola as fragmentary [***Fig. 3***].

The questions in the third part of the questionnaire concerned benefits —as perceived by the respondents— related to the archaeological excavations in the area. The assumed benefits were indeed ranked very high — the most valued were: gaining new historical knowledge about the area (85.0%, *n*=102), new job opportunities (74.5%, *n*=89), more tourists visiting the area (91.7%, *n*=110), and the opportunity to meet new people from different cultures (86.7%, *n*=104) [***Table 4***].

The vast majority of respondents (84.2%, *n*=101) expressed their satisfaction with the prospect of archaeological tourism development in the region. Nearly half (47.5%, *n*=57) believed that the development of tourism would have a major

impact on the village, one in four (22.5%, *n*=27) assumed tourism may be a game changer in the life of Ghaddar, while a relatively small percentage of respondents (7.5%, *n*=9) felt that the development of archaeological tourism would only slightly change the village and their own lives. It was only very few respondents (6.7%, *n*=8) who felt that the local community would remain unaffected. Still a few others (13.3%, *n*=16) did not have any particular view on the matter [*Fig. 4*].

In the fourth part, the questions focused on benefits that tourism development could bring to the local community. As the analyses showed, the respondents believed tourism may benefit their community, and their expectations were high indeed. They hoped tourism would change the situation of the labor market and provide more job opportunities (90.0%, *n*=108), improve the local infrastructure, especially roads (84.2%, *n*=101), attract more government attention to their problems (75.8%, *n*=91), and im-

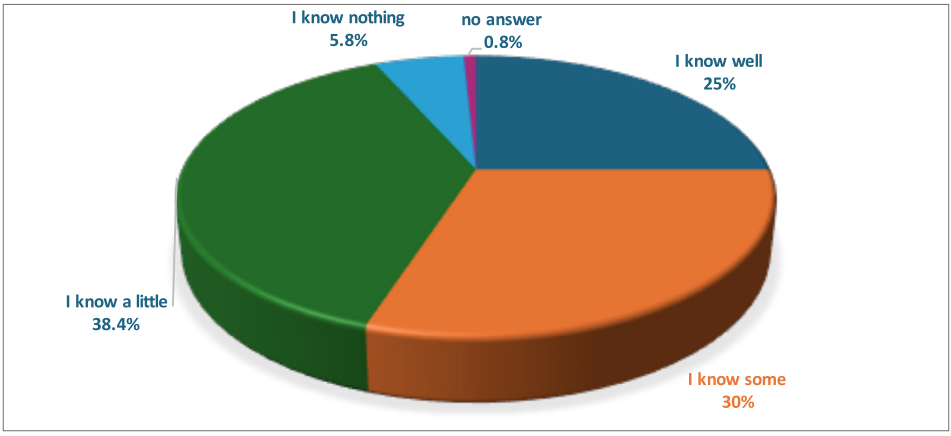

Fig. 3. The respondents' self-assessment of their knowledge of the Old Dongola site (Graph K. Radziwiłko)

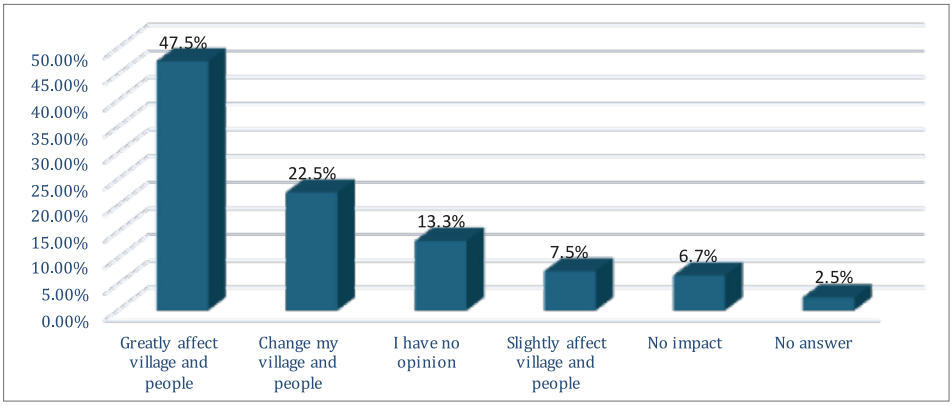

Fig. 4. Potential impact of tourism on the local community according to the respondents (Graph K. Radziwiłko)

Table 1. Life in Ghaddar based on responses to the first part of the questionnaire

	I agree		I do not agree		I do not know		No answer	
Statement	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
My village is safe	**119**	99.20%	**1**	0.80%	-	-	**-**	-
The road infrastructure in my village is in bad condition	**88**	73.30%	**22**	18.30%	**9**	7.50%	**1**	0.90%
Access to clean water is limited in my village	**65**	54.20%	**47**	39.10%	**6**	5.00%	**2**	1.70%
Many people would like to find a job, but they can't	**100**	83.30%	**13**	10.80%	**1**	0.90%	**6**	5.00%
My village is good place for children's education	**93**	77.50%	**22**	18.30%	**5**	4.20%	**-**	-
Life in my village is very hard. I would like to move to different place	**47**	39.20%	**68**	56.70%	**2**	1.70%	**3**	2.40%
In a difficult situation I can count on family and friends	**112**	93.30%	**2**	1.70%	**4**	3.30%	**2**	1.70%

Table 2. Contact of local people with archaeology and archaeologists in Ghaddar based on responses to the second part of the questionnaire

	Yes		No		I do not remember		No answer	
Statement	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
I heard about an archaeological expedition in our area	**102**	85.00%	**15**	12.50%	**1**	0.80%	**2**	1.70%
I visited the archaeological site in Old Dongola	**97**	80.80%	**17**	14.20%	**2**	1.70%	**4**	3.30%
I talked with a member of the archaeological team at Old Dongola	**70**	58.30%	**40**	33.30%	**7**	5.90%	**3**	2.50%

Table 3. Visits of the local community to the monuments of Old Dongola based on responses to the second part of the questionnaire

Monument	No.	%
Church	**88**	73.3%
Domed tombs	**80**	66.7%
Mosque	**74**	61.7%
Khalwa	**55**	45.8%
Monastery	**51**	42.5%

prove their lives in general (65.8%, *n*=79). Respondents also expected the region to gain more recognition worldwide (85.0%, *n*=102). At the same time, more than half of the respondents (57.5%, *n*=69) hoped that tourism would not change the unique character of the area [*Table 5*], seemingly being unaware of the fact that tourism development brings about benefits and challenges alike (Seweryn 2002).

The questions in the fifth part referred to the local heritage (*turath*), and the an-

swers gathered truly attest to the site's vital place in the community's daily life: 90.0% (*n*=108) of the respondents claimed it was important, while 95.8% (*n*=115) said they were proud of it, and even more (96.7%, *n*=116) saw the need to protect it. At the same time, most of the respondents (72.6%, *n*=87) admitted that in everyday life the care for the local heritage is sidelined in favor of the pursuit of goods and new technologies [*Table 6*]. It was the Ghaddar residents, teachers in particular, who had the most positive attitude towards heritage conservation, while the representatives of the local authorities seemed to be less concerned, possibly due to their "non-resident" status.

Table 4. Benefits from archaeological work in Old Dongola for the local community based on responses to the third part of the questionnaire

	I agree		I do not agree		I do not know		No answer	
Statement	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
New historical knowledge about the area	**102**	85.00%	**8**	6.60%	**5**	4.20%	**5**	4.20%
More tourists in the region	**110**	91.70%	**4**	3.30%	**5**	4.20%	**1**	0.80%
More opportunities for work	**89**	74.20%	**14**	11.60%	**15**	12.50%	**2**	1.70%
New opportunity to meet people from different cultures	**104**	86.70%	**4**	3.30%	**7**	5.80%	**5**	4.20%
Greater recognition for the country and region abroad	**104**	86.70%	**5**	4.20%	**8**	6.60%	**3**	2.50%

Table 5. Local community's expectations and fears concerning tourism development based on responses to the fourth part of the questionnaire

	I agree		I do not agree		I do not know		No answer	
Statement	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Job opportunities	**108**	90.00%	**1**	0.80%	**7**	5.80%	**4**	3.40%
Road condition	**101**	84.20%	**2**	1.60%	**11**	9.20%	**6**	5.00%
Government attention	**91**	75.80%	**8**	6.70%	**17**	14.20%	**4**	3.30%
General improvement in life	**79**	65.80%	**15**	12.50%	**24**	20.00%	**2**	1.70%
The local area to be internationally recognized	**102**	85.00%	**6**	5.00%	**8**	6.70%	**4**	3.30%
Loss of the region's unique character	**23**	19.20%	**69**	57.50%	**26**	21.70%	**2**	1.60%

Table 6. Heritage in Ghaddar based on responses to the fifth part of the questionnaire

	I agree		I do not agree		I do not know		No answer	
Statement	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Important element of everyday life in Ghaddar	**108**	90.00%	**5**	4.20%	**5**	4.20%	**2**	1.70%
Pride in their community	**115**	95.80%	**4**	3.40%	**1**	0.80%	**-**	-
Nowadays we forget about heritage	**87**	72.60%	**26**	21.60%	**6**	5.00%	**1**	0.80%
Preserving heritage is important	**116**	96.70%	**1**	0.80%	**-**	-	**3**	2.50%

DISCUSSION

Interactions between archaeologists and local communities have only recently attracted the attention of scholars (Shanks and Tilley 1992), first in the United States (McGimsey 1972) and then in the United Kingdom (Merriman 2004; Schadla-Hall 2006). Indeed, especially in countries with a colonial past (e.g. African countries), such interactions were frowned upon until the colonial legacy was questioned by archaeologists and the involvement of local communities in archaeological projects became a way of recognizing their knowledge and potential (Greer, Harrison, and McIntyre-Tamwoy 2002; Atalay 2006; Chirikure and Pwiti 2008; Schmidt 2014; Pikirayi 2016). In fact, for many years, it was not the practice of archaeologists to seek opportunities to interact with residents of local sites; they would rather conduct their research undisturbed by local communities and their heritage (Pwiti and Ndoro 1999; Chirikure et al. 2010; Schmidt and Pikirayi 2016). This is why it is so important to strengthen collaboration between archaeologists and local communities (Deskur 2009: 286; Kobiałka 2014: 359; Pawleta 2016: 121) and encourage their involvement in archaeological initiatives (Schadla-Hall 1999; 2006; Little 2002; 2012; Merriman 2004; Deskur 2009: 284; Skeates, McDavid, and Carman 2012; Pawleta 2016: 121). What is needed, to start with, is to abandon the previous (colonial) mindset and focus on grassroots initiatives that give voice to local people who decide about their own heritage, thereby building their social capital (Abu-Khafajah and Miqdadi 2019: 101; Ronza 2023: 27–29) and shaping a society that is responsible for its own heritage. This approach —taking into account the needs and expectations of local communities— fosters the ethical dimension of archaeology (Atalay 2007: 253; Nicholas and Hollowell 2008: 66–67) by drawing attention to its obligations to the public (Holtorf 2007: 150).

Archaeological projects that welcome the participation of local communities in heritage recognition and development are becoming increasingly common, as exemplified by some projects conducted in the Levant, notably the Winged Lions Temple project in Petra, which aimed — among other things— to encourage members of local communities to learn new skills and increase employment (Tuttle 2013). This approach was also adopted in the Sustainable Cultural Heritage through Engagement of Local Communities project, a USAID project that used archaeological fieldwork as a means of community development (Burtenshaw et al. 2019: 70). Another notable example is the Deep Past as a Social Asset in the Levant (DEEPSAL) project, which focused on engaging local communities in archaeology-centered activities to identify the best ways to support the region's economic growth and create new jobs there (Burtenshaw et al. 2019: 73–75). In recent years, the Heritage–Landscape–Community (HLC) project, along with other initiatives conducted in southern Jordan, has conducted a series of surveys to identify the needs, recognize the attitudes, and understand the expectations of local people in relation to the region's

archaeological heritage and its potential for archeological tourism development. The results of this research contributed to the creation of a local heritage-based development strategy and a long-term plan for cooperation with the local community (Radziwiłko 2019; Radziwiłko, Kutyło, and Kołodziejczyk 2020).

Although relatively new, as compared to other parts of the world, the projects in post-colonial Africa, e.g. in Sudan, have also gained prominence in recent years (Tully 2014). A major breakthrough in this regard came in the last decade, when the QSAP (Qatar—Sudan Archaeological Project) advised the archaeologists to invite members of local communities to collaborate at excavations. This has resulted in targeted community initiatives and numerous publications based on, among other things, interviews and interactions with local residents (e.g. Tully 2014; 2015; Tully and Näser 2016; Humphris 2017; Humphris and Bradshaw 2017; Näser and Tully 2019). Particularly noteworthy in this context are the projects in Amara West, which involved residents in ongoing archaeological activities using historical records and local oral histories (Fushiya et al. 2017; Ryan, Hassan, and Saad 2018; Spencer et al. 2024).

The recording of oral histories in Old Dongola began two decades ago, before the onset of the QSAP (Bashir 2003: 519). The project launched in Old Dongola in 2008 focused on the conservation of the mosque in order to make it available for tourists. It also aimed to raise the awareness of local history among the local community (Obłuski et al. 2013). More recently, in 2019–2021, the Archaeological Centre of Scientific Excellence (ArcheoCDN) project was implemented, focusing on community interaction, extensive communication, social development activities, and sustainable heritage management (Fushiya and Radziwiłko 2019; Fushiya 2021a; Larsen 2021; Obłuski and Dzierzbicka 2021; Fushiya 2025, in this volume). The community survey presented in this paper was conducted as part of the ArcheoCDN project.

The community survey aimed to better understand the Ghaddar community by identifying their needs and expectations regarding their daily lives, local heritage, archaeology, and tourism. The results confirmed the respondents' pride in their heritage and a strong sense of identity with their place of origin, where they felt comfortable and safe. Such a sense of identity with one's place of origin is crucial for heritage conservation and promotion. In addition, the survey confirmed the local community's familiarity with the Old Dongola site, although, as the respondents declared, their knowledge in this respect was fairly fragmentary. This may have been due to a sense of mistrust among the Muslim community, based on the fact that past research had long focused mainly on the Christian heritage (Fushiya 2021a: 95). The multicultural nature of the site can actually be an important asset in the development of archaeological tourism, a sector regarding which the respondents have high expectations, especially in terms of employment opportunities, improved infrastructure, and better access to water. Undeniably, archaeological tourism brings about a range of opportunities and is in itself highly esteemed in Sudan (Grabowska 2013: 76–77; Radziwiłko 2019: 100). It creates new jobs, leads to the develop-

ment of hotel and supply infrastructure, increases the income of both local governments and individuals, and contributes to the improvement of the public transport network (Mika 2007: 406–438; Grabowska 2013: 78). However, it is not only profits that the advancements in tourism bring about — the growing number of international visitors can have a negative impact on the socio-cultural setting by disrupting local harmony, threatening national identity, and generating interpersonal conflicts (Seweryn 2002: 94–95), risks that respondents do not seem to be fully aware of. The growth of tourism is also feared to fuel inflation, which in turn puts the local people's stability and well-being in jeopardy. Therefore, it is important to understand the concerns and expectations of the local community in order to introduce sustainable development measures (Page 1995: 178–179; Lewandowska and Chodkowska-Miszczuk 2019: 99–100; Larsen 2021: 92), in order to minimize the negative impacts of tourism development while maximizing the benefits it brings (Larsen 2021; Fushiya 2025, in this volume).

CONCLUSIONS

The 2019 community survey intended to better understand the needs, attitudes, and expectations of the local community regarding the region's cultural heritage. By collecting data from respondents in different parts of the village, the research contributed to increased social interaction between the local community and archaeologists. In the same year, the first activities to improve communication with the local community were launched. These were participatory in nature and, through meetings with archaeologists, workshops for children, and open days at the excavations, they inspired the residents to recognize and appreciate their own cultural heritage (Fushiya and Radziwiłko 2019; Fushiya 2021a). The results contributed to the development and subsequent implementation of local development strategies, fostered relations between archaeologists and residents, and raised awareness of the importance of local heritage (Fushiya and Radziwiłko 2019).

The data obtained can be further used to support the implementation and promotion of archaeological tourism in the region, which —especially in post-colonial countries— should be carefully developed in accordance with the principle of sustainable development. It is important to take into account not only the needs of tourists, but also the expectations and interests of local residents (Page 1995; Lewandowska and Chodkowska-Miszczuk 2019; Larsen 2021). A particularly important task is to prepare the local community for the development of tourism around archaeological heritage sites and to make them not only appreciate the profits but also recognize the risks involved. This is a long-term process that requires the involvement of stakeholders, financial resources, researchers, and the local community, whose voice should not only be heard but also taken into account in the region's heritage protection and management plans.

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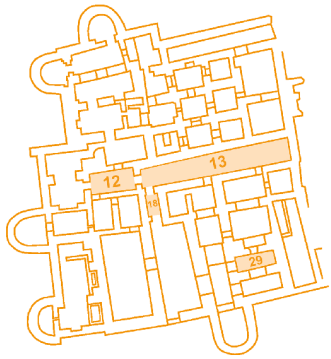
Impact of viewing time on aesthetic experience of Christian medieval Nubian wall paintings: an eye-tracking study with Sudanese and Western viewers



Abstract: Aesthetic experience may foster positive connections between visitors and heritage sites. However, the way people engage with and esthetically experience archaeological heritage is not yet well understood. To address this gap, in the present on-site study, we explored how viewers' cultural backgrounds might influence their aesthetic experience of Christian medieval Nubian wall paintings. Specifically, Sudanese and Western subjects were asked to view 17 paintings from the Monastery on Kom H in Old Dongola (Sudan) while their eye movements and fixations were recorded with a mobile eye-tracker. After the viewing session, participants reported which paintings they preferred and would select for a museum exhibition. Our analysis explored whether and how viewing time on the entire wall painting, and on its specific elements (faces of characters depicted in the paintings and areas outside the faces), mediated later aesthetic choices. The results showed that the viewing time partly predicts the aesthetic choices of participants from both groups. Interestingly, although both groups based their aesthetic choices on viewing faces, the Western viewers were more inclined to do so than the Sudanese participants. Overall, the study supports the idea that cultural background can influence how viewers visually engage with heritage, which in turn partly affects their aesthetic choices. In addition, the research outcome demonstrates that recording eye movements and fixations may foster our understanding of ways viewers engage with archaeological heritage.

Keywords: aesthetic experience, eye-tracking, Christian medieval Nubian wall paintings, cross-cultural studies, Sudanese and Western viewers

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INTRODUCTION

Heritage appreciation is an important aspect of building relationships between visitors and heritage sites. Alongside authenticity, cultural, historical, and personal connection, or cultural relevance, one of the factors enhancing heritage appreciation is aesthetic experience (Maitland and Smith 2009; W. Yang et al. 2022; Zhou, Chen, and Wu 2022; Ho, Szubielska, and Kopiś-Posiej 2023; Colwill 2024; Zheng, Wei, and Tasci 2024). Aesthetic experience boosts tourists' satisfaction and loyalty to natural and cultural heritage sites (e.g. Breiby and Slåtten 2018; Lu et al. 2020). Moreover, aesthetic appreciation plays an important role in creating memories of heritage site visits, as aesthetically pleasing artworks and the context in which they are displayed are more likely to be remembered than those lacking such qualities (e.g. Brieber, Nadal, and Leder 2015; Babo-Rebelo et al. 2022; however, see Davis and Bainbridge 2023 for contradictory results). Finally, it is the beauty of specific monuments or landscapes that makes tourists undertake hardships of long travels (Deng, Lin, and Chen 2021).

Recent studies suggest that personality type (Palumbo et al. 2025), gender (Cela-Conde et al. 2009), level of art expertise (Pihko et al. 2011), or cultural background (Ho, Szubielska, and Kopiś-Posiej 2023) may shape a viewer's aesthetic experience. However, what actually makes archaeological heritage aesthetically appealing to diverse groups of visitors remains unclear (see also Kirillova 2023 for a broader discussion on tourism research). To better understand the essence of aesthetic experience in archaeological context, in the present study we asked both Sudanese and Western visitors to the archaeological site to view a set of wall paintings and report their aesthetic preferences. We aimed to explore how the time spent on viewing wall paintings in the context of a heritage site influenced the aesthetic experience of people of diverse cultural backgrounds. By understanding this relationship, we hope to enhance our knowledge on how stakeholders of the Old Dongola archaeological site experience this historic place. Rather than evaluating a comprehensive theory of cross-cultural perceptual differences, our focus was on contributing to the site's experience for both the local and international community.

One of the methods to assess a painting viewing experience consists in recording where the viewers look, and for how long they keep looking there. Using eye-tracking to record the distribution and duration of eye fixations has proved to be a reliable method of measuring viewers' engagement in processing visual stimuli (Duchowski 2017), including visual processing of art. Visuo-cognitive literature provides evidence of a positive relation between aesthetic experience and viewing times. For example, Brieber and colleagues (2014) showed that paintings that elicited greater liking and interest were viewed for a longer time than those that were less appreciated. Similarly, a positive relationship between viewing time and aesthetic experience was demonstrated by Mitschke, Goller, and Leder (2017) in research on

the appreciation of street art, as well as by Ganczarek and colleagues (2022) in a study on visual processing of contemporary paintings (see also Holmes and Zanker 2012; Celikors and Sims 2019; Scott et al. 2020).

In the case of figurative paintings, the link between the viewing time and the aesthetic experience may be influenced by the presence of faces depicted therein. Among all visual stimuli, faces are indeed unique since they convey socio-cognitive information (e.g. Leopold and Rhodes 2010; Todorov 2012; Bayet and Nelson 2020) and their attentional prioritization has a neurobiological basis (Haxby, Hoffman, and Gobbini 2000; Tsao et al. 2006). For example, faces perceived as attractive capture and maintain viewers' attention (Maner et al. 2003). Slater and colleagues (1998) have demonstrated that even newborns tend to spend more time looking at faces that adults perceive as attractive, rather than at unattractive ones (see also Leder et al. 2010; Leder, Mitrovic, and Goller 2016 for an example of studies with adults).

Depictions of faces may influence the overall judgement of aesthetic quality of a painting. For example, in a study on visual processing of 19th-century portraits, Trawiński and colleagues (2021) found a positive correlation between portrait appreciation and fixation duration on faces. Similar results were reported by Savazzi and colleagues (2014) in a study on the appreciation of figurative paintings, showing a positive correlation between the longer fixation duration on the faces and the paintings' liking.

Nevertheless, there is also some evidence that features painted outside the face area may influence aesthetic judgements. In his research on the appreciation of 16th- to 18th-century portraits, Francuz (2013) observed that differences in viewing patterns between paintings regarded as beautiful and those categorized as non-beautiful were reflected in participants' fixations on features outside the face area (Francuz 2013: 287–295). Specifically, Francuz reported that, in the case of portraits classified as beautiful, participants spent more time looking at areas outside the faces than when viewing portraits classified as non-beautiful. This finding is partly supported by Trawiński and colleagues (2021), who suggested that salient features in the background may guide viewers' fixations toward faces. Thus, areas outside faces can actively contribute to aesthetic judgments even while they are not directly inspected.

Although visuo-cognitive literature provides robust evidence that aesthetic experience is related to where and for how long viewers focus their attention on paintings, little is known about how spectators of various cultural backgrounds aesthetically experience paintings that are an integral part of archaeological heritage. Cross-cultural studies suggest that cultural background impacts image perception. For example, Chua, Boland, and Nisbett (2005) reported that participants from collectivistic cultures (e.g. East Asian) perform balanced fixations to the focal object and background, whereas participants from individualistic cultures (e.g. Western) tend to focus more on focal objects (see also Goh, Tan, and Park 2009; Duan, Wang,

and Hong 2016; Šašinková et al. 2023). In the context of art recipients, research on cultural-match effects shows that viewers tend to appreciate historical art from their own culture more than art from other cultures (Bao et al. 2016; T. Yang et al. 2019; Ho, Szubielska, and Kopiś-Posiej 2023). This preference may be influenced, among others, by the presence of faces in historical artworks that match the viewers' ethnic backgrounds. Trawiński and colleagues (2023) showed that participants looked longer at faces corresponding with their own ethnicity than at those that did not (see also Trawiński, Zang et al. 2024). Hence, if the viewers' cultural background predicts the level of appreciation of artworks, then the time spent viewing specific areas of a painting may moderate the magnitude of this effect (Palumbo et al. 2025).

We tested this proposition by conducting a series of mediation models that considered the total fixation duration on paintings as a mediator of the effect of viewers' cultural backgrounds on their aesthetic choices. The wall paintings selected for this study were examples of the 11th to 13th-century Christian medieval Nubian art which depicted human figures with attributes. Considering the figurative nature of these paintings, we first analyzed the mediating role of total fixation durations to entire paintings to demonstrate the importance of viewing time in formulating aesthetic responses. Then, we conducted two additional sets of mediation analyses that tested the total fixation duration directed at the faces and the areas beyond them

Fig. 1. Fragment of painting No. 68 "Christ and College of Apostles" (A) and 46 "Apostolic College" (B) divided into Areas of Interest (pink — area of face, yellow — area outside face) (Photos and processing T. Michalik)

[*Fig. 1*]. Taken together, this analysis aims to enhance our understanding of how viewers' cultural backgrounds affect their aesthetic experiences and thus enhance our knowledge of the relationship between visual engagement in elements of archaeological heritage and viewers' aesthetic choices.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

PARTICIPANTS

Forty-eight Sudanese participants (34 males, 14 females; M=34, SD=12.7) and 19 representatives of Western cultures (9 males, 10 females; M=41.9, SD=13.4) took part in the study conducted in November–December 2022. The Sudanese group consisted of the members of the local community from towns located near the Old Dongola archaeological site, while the Western group included White tourists from the US and European countries and members of the archaeological mission. The inclusion/exclusion criterion for participation in the study was vision correction. We included only those participants who had no greater visual deficits than what could be corrected by lenses supplied by the eye-tracker (–5 to +3.5 diopters).

Most of the participants (N=49) saw the paintings for the first time and there was no difference between the Sudanese and Western participants in relation to prior exposure to the paintings (χ^2 (1, N=67)=2.13, p=.143).

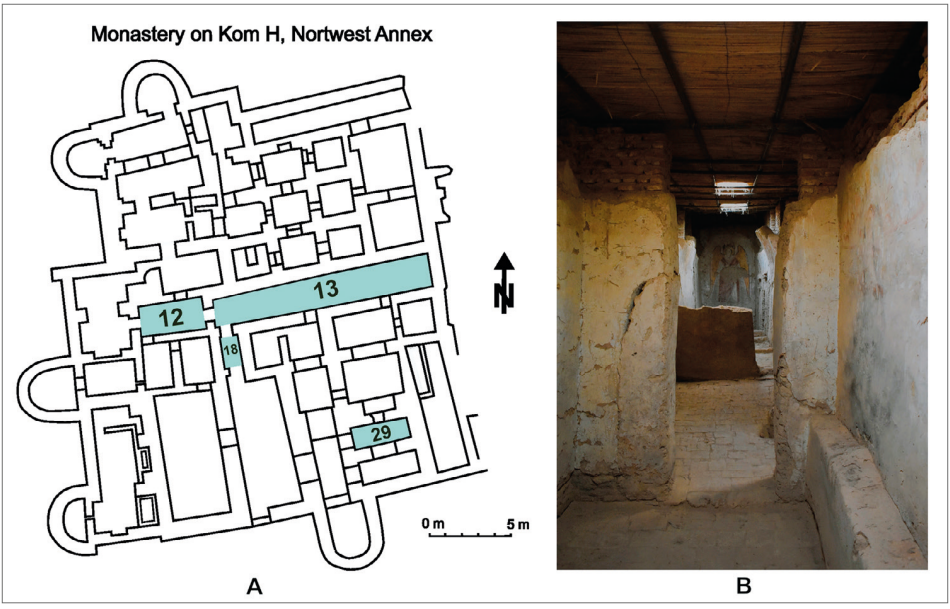

Fig. 2. Scheme of the Northwest Annex of the Monastery on Kom H. Green areas indicate the rooms where the eye-tracking study was conducted (A); view from Room 12 into Room 13 (B) (Photos and processing T. Michalik, based on a plan by M. Puszkarski | materials from the PCMA UW Archiving Department)

All participants gave their written consent prior to the study. The study was approved by the Committee for the Ethics of Research Involving Human Participants at the University of Warsaw (Identification code: 112/2021).

STIMULI

Seventeen paintings from four rooms (Nos 12, 13, 18, and 29) of the Northwest Annex of the Monastery on Kom H at the Old Dongola archaeological site were selected for the study (Martens-Czarnecka 2011: 54, see also [*Fig. 2*]). They date to the second half of the 11th century and the second half of the 12th/beginning of the 13th century and depict holy figures, biblical scenes, local Nubian rulers, and Church officials (Martens-Czarnecka 2011: 34–39). Most of the wall paintings selected as stimuli depict figures in static poses, with only three featuring more dynamic biblical scenes (see paintings Nos 24, 48, and 69; Martens-Czarnecka 2011). The most common figures in the paintings are archangels, Christ, the Apostles, the Holy Trinity, saints, as well as donors, bishops, and local Nubian rulers. The biblical scenes include the Story of Balaam, the Healing of a Blind Man at the Pool of Siloam, and the Three Youths in the Fiery Furnace. The wall paintings vary in their state of preservation; however, their original location provides a unique opportunity to explore the aesthetic experience of visitors in an authentic historical context [*Fig. 3*]. For a detailed description of the stimuli set, see Michalik and colleagues (in preparation).

In each painting we distinguished two Areas of Interest (AOI) — "faces" and "areas beyond faces". The AOI "faces" included the figure's face with any facial features (e.g. hair and/or beard) if present. The AOI "beyond faces" included the rest of the figure (body, clothes) and any attributes and contextual information accompanying the figure [see *Fig. 1*]. This could be either a surface with a uniform color separated from the rest of the wall by a line (see blue surroundings in [*Fig. 1:A*] and white surroundings in [*Fig. 1:B*]) or narrative elements (see, for example, clouds behind the authority figure in [*Fig. 3:A*]). Where the surroundings of the painting did not stand out from the rest of the wall, the background was not marked, and the AOI "beyond faces" included only body/clothes and attributes.

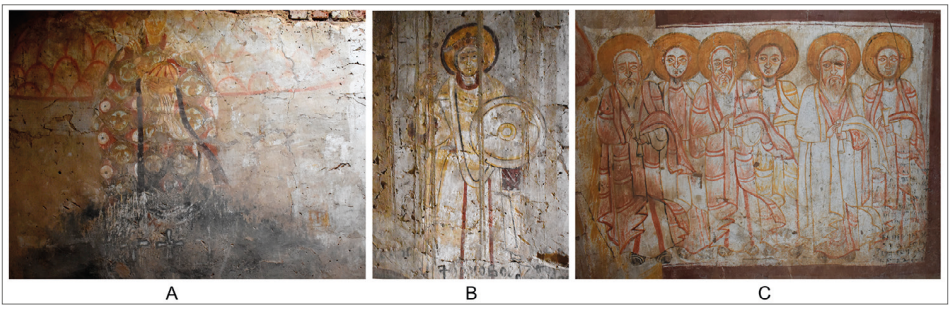

Fig. 3. Examples of paintings Nos 18, 66, 46 from the Monastery on Kom H used as stimuli: (A) Nubian king crowned by the Holy Trinity, (B) Warrior Saint, (C) Apostolic College (Photos and processing T. Michalik)

APPARATUS

The gaze behaviors of participants were recorded using Tobii Pro Glasses 3. Data were collected at a sampling rate of 100 Hz. The eye-tracker recorded both eyes using the corneal reflection technique and mapped gaze locations onto first-person video through the eye-gaze localization system (Holmqvist et al. 2011).

We used Tobii Pro Lab version 1.194.41215 to process the data. Fixations were classified with the I-VT Attention algorithm and mapped through the Tobii Analyzer Pro Real-World Mapping function. The mapped gaze data were manually reviewed and corrected as needed.

PROCEDURE

The study was conducted in two stages at fixed times of the day (morning and afternoon), ensuring good visibility of the paintings thanks to natural lighting provided by a skylight. Throughout the study the weather remained sunny and cloudless.

In the first stage, participants' gaze patterns were recorded using a mobile eye-tracker. In this stage, the participants were asked to attend and view the paintings without any specific instructions. In this way, we recorded gaze behaviors without priming them with a specific task to capture natural viewing patterns. Our primary goal was to determine whether such natural gaze behaviors would be related with subsequent aesthetic choices (see for example Brieber et al. 2014; Marin and Leder 2022), as the relationship between preference judgments and eye movements remains a topic of debate in cross-cultural studies (e.g. Ho, Szubielska, and Kopiś-Posiej 2023).

All participants started their viewing experience in the same place (near painting No. 18, Room 12) and visited Rooms 12, 13, and 18 (group 1) followed by a visit to Room 29 (group 2) [see *Fig. 2*]. Prior to visiting each group of the rooms, a calibration procedure was conducted, during which the participants were presented with a calibration card and were asked to fixate a black dot in its center. The participants were free in the way they viewed the paintings and could revisit the paintings if needed. After the viewing session, the eye-tracker was disassembled, and then the researcher and participant returned to the paintings for the second stage of the study. For a detailed account on the eye-tracking part of the study, see Michalik and colleagues (in preparation).

In the second stage, participants were asked to make aesthetic judgments by responding to the following instructions:

> "Imagine you are the director of a museum preparing an exhibition of the most beautiful paintings from the monastery. Your task is to select the most beautiful paintings from those you have seen. The number of paintings you choose is up to you but remember you must make a selection and cannot choose all of them. As you make your selections, please explain why you find each painting appealing."

The respondents' choices were marked on a monastery plan containing all paintings. The rationale behind their choices was recorded on a voice recorder and then transcribed. When needed, an Arabic-to-English interpreter assisted the participants.

In this study, we explore the relationship between viewing time and aesthetic choices, and thus focus on the eye-tracking data rather than verbal responses.

RESULTS

The results are presented in two parts. First, we provide a descriptive analysis of the data, and then the mediation analyses.[1]

DESCRIPTIVE RESULTS

The summary probabilities of aesthetic choice for the Sudanese and Western visitors across all paintings, plotted against total viewing time, are presented in [*Fig. 4*]. On average, the Sudanese visitors viewed each artwork for 14.31 seconds (SD=10.18), while for the Western participants the average viewing time was 17.45 seconds (SD=11.78). The mean probability of aesthetic choice was 0.14 for the Sudanese viewers and 0.28 for the Western viewers, indicating that the latter ones were nearly twice as likely to select paintings based on their perceived beauty. However, both groups consistently identified painting No. 65 (depicting Archangel Michael) as aesthetically appealing.

Interestingly, while total viewing time largely aligned with aesthetic choices for the Western participants, this relationship was less consistent in the Sudanese group. Specifically, the Western participants were more likely to make their aesthetic choices and spend more time viewing paintings they preferred (see data for paintings Nos 65, 68N, 18, and 46). In contrast, this pattern was not observed with the Sudanese viewers. Given these differences, we will now explore the extent to which viewing time mediates the relationship between cultural background and aesthetic choice.

MEDIATION ANALYSES

Mediation analyses were performed using the mediation package (v. 4.5.0; Tingley et al. 2022) in R (v. 2023.12.1.402; RStudio Team 2022). This method assesses the significance of the predictor's (cultural background: Western or Sudanese participants) indirect effect on the outcome (aesthetic choice) via the mediating variable (viewing time; Hayes 2018). We selected the aesthetic choice as a measure of viewers' preference decisions following the methodological framework established by Francuz (2013: 272–273; 277–278; see also Orquin and Mueller Loose 2013).

Full mediation is present when the indirect effect is significant, while the direct effect is not. Partial mediation occurs when both effects are significant. The mediation models tested are presented in [*Fig. 5*] below. Relationships between cultural background, viewing time and aesthetic choices were evaluated using a bootstrap mediation analysis, which generated bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals for the mediator's indirect effect based on 5000 bootstrap samples [see *Fig. 5*].

Total viewing time to the whole painting. The direct effect of cultural background on aesthetic choice was significant (b=0.72, SE=0.07, z=8.45, $p < .001$), suggesting that the Western participants made a greater number of aesthetic choices compared to the Sudanese participants. The indirect effects of Western and Sudanese cultural backgrounds

1 The eye-tracking data used in the analysis are available at https://osf.io/u8qzv/, DOI: 10.17605/OSF.IO/U8QZV (accessed: 28.05.2025).

were significant (b=0.014, 95% CI (0.004, 0.03), p=0.002; b=0.008, 95% CI (0.002, 0.02), p=0.002, respectively). Additionally, the proportion of the effect that is mediated was higher in the Western than in the Sudanese group (b=0.10, 95% CI (0.03, 0.19), p=0.002; b=0.06, 95% CI (0.02, 0.13), p=0.002, respectively). The proportion of the effect of cultural background on aesthetic choice that is mediated through total viewing time for the Sudanese was 6.15%, and for the Western participants 9.82%. These results suggest that total viewing time partly (and in a small amount) mediates the effect of cultural background on aesthetic choice, with a stronger mediating effect observed among the Western compared to the Sudanese participants. We will now explore whether the effect of cultural background

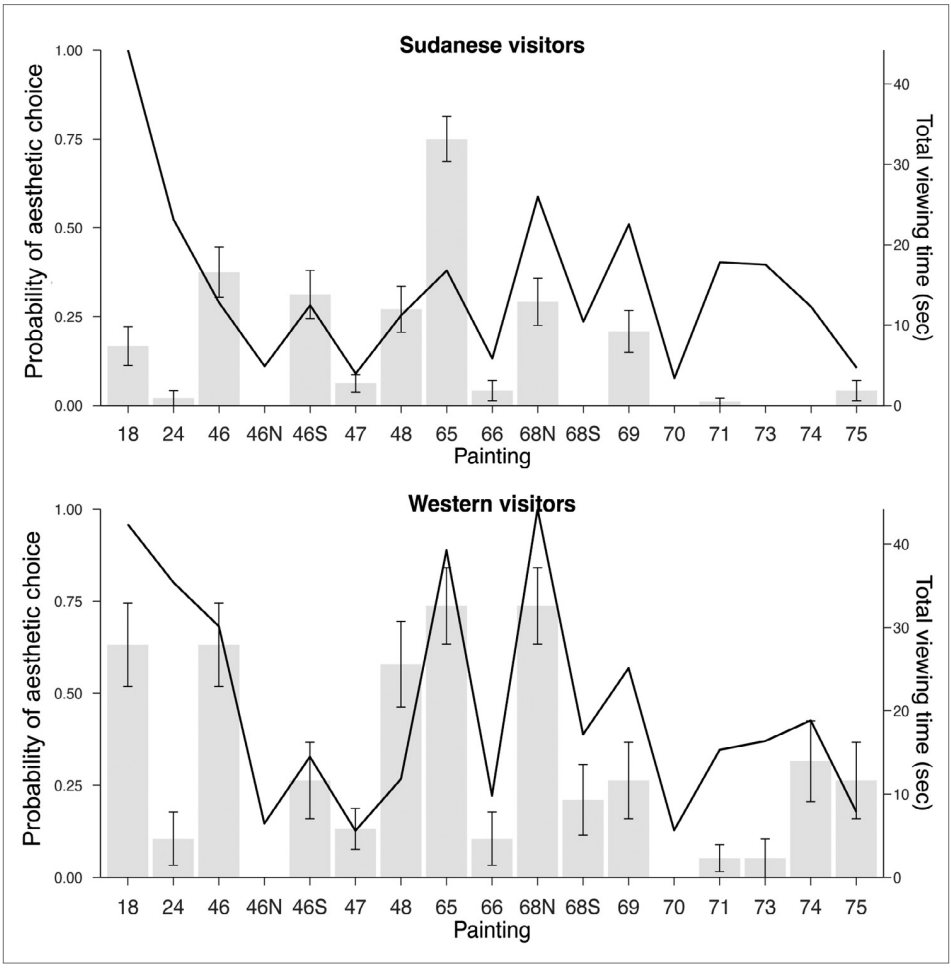

Fig. 4. Probability of aesthetic choice (indicated by bars) for Sudanese (top panel) and Western (bottom panel) participants across all paintings, mapped against total viewing time (indicated by solid lines). Error bars represent standard errors (SE) (Processing T. Trawiński)

on aesthetic choice is mediated by an increased time spent looking at faces or other areas of the painting.

Total viewing time to faces in the painting. For the model in which the total viewing time to faces was used as a mediator, we included 14 (out of 17) paintings, as only these contained faces. The direct effect of cultural background on aesthetic choice was significant (b=0.71, SE=0.17, z=4.16, p < .001) indicating that there was a higher frequency of aesthetic choices made by the Western participants compared to those made by the Sudanese participants. The indirect effects of both Western and Sudanese cultural backgrounds were also significant (b=0.03, 95% CI (0.01, 0.04), p < 0.002; b=0.02, 95% CI (0.01, 0.03), p < 0.001, respectively). The proportion of the effect mediated was higher in the Western group than in the Sudanese group, suggesting a greater dependence on the mediator in the Western cultural context (b=0.17, 95% CI (0.08, 0.31), p < 0.001; b=0.12, 95% CI (0.05, 0.26), p < 0.001, respectively). Furthermore, the proportion of the effect of cultural background on aesthetic choice that is mediated through total viewing time to faces for the Sudanese was 12.71% and for the Western participants — 17.12%. Given the relatively small proportion of the total effect accounted for by the indirect effect, when considering the total viewing time of the entire painting, these findings indicate an important dependence on facial information in the process of aesthetic decisions.

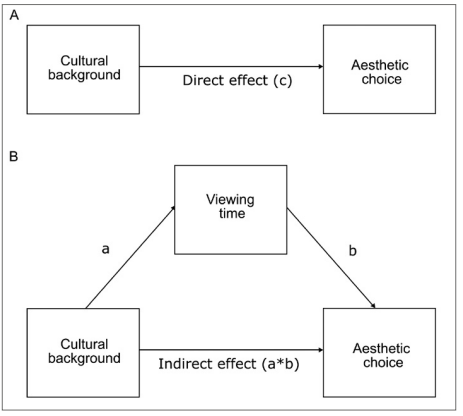

Fig. 5. Conceptual diagram of direct (A) and indirect effects (B) in the mediation model (Processing T. Michalik)

Total viewing time to areas beyond faces. The direct effect of cultural background on aesthetic choice was again significant (b=0.75, SE=0.10, z=7.45, p < .001). The Western participants made more aesthetic choices than the Sudanese participants. The indirect effects for both Western and Sudanese cultural backgrounds were also significant (b=0.013, 95% CI (0.007, 0.02), p < 0.001; b=0.009, 95% CI (0.004, 0.01), p < 0.001, respectively). Moreover, the proportion of the effect mediated was greater in the Western group compared to the Sudanese group, suggesting a stronger reliance on the mediator among the Western participants (b=0.09, 95% CI (0.05, 0.15), p=0.002; b=0.06, 95% CI (0.03, 0.10), p < 0.001). Nevertheless, the proportion of the effect of cultural background on aesthetic choice that is mediated through total viewing time to areas beyond faces was small: 6.11% for the Sudanese and 9.13% for the Western participants.

Finally, we compared the average proportion of the mediated effect across three mediation models. The results indicate that the model incorporating total viewing time to faces explains the largest proportion of the mediated effect (faces:

b=0.12, 95% CI (0.05, 0.26), p < 0.001; area beyond faces: b=0.08, 95% CI (0.04, 0.12), p < 0.001; entire painting: b=0.10, 95% CI (0.07, 0.15), p < 0.001). This suggests that the duration of participants' focus on faces had the greatest impact on how cultural background influenced their aesthetic choices.

DISCUSSION

In the present study, we explored how viewing time of Christian Nubian wall paintings mediates aesthetic choices in Western and Sudanese cultural groups. We assumed that viewers from various cultural backgrounds might visually engage with wall paintings in different ways, which, in turn, may influence their aesthetic experiences. Using a series of mediation models, we tested whether such relationships exist and explored how viewing specific parts of the paintings —faces or areas beyond faces— mediates aesthetic choices among participants from diverse cultural groups.

The analyses demonstrated that the viewing time partially mediated aesthetic choices in both groups. Moreover, we found that participants from both groups tended to base their aesthetic choices on a focus on faces. Our results also suggest that the viewing time had a stronger impact on aesthetic choices in the Western group, indicating potential differences in how the Western and Sudanese viewers built their aesthetic experiences. This indicates that cultural background, to some extent, influences how viewers visually engage with wall paintings, which, in turn, shapes their aesthetic choices. It also suggests that analyzing viewing behavior by eye-tracking may be a valuable method for understanding the aesthetic experiences of diverse stakeholders of archeological sites.

Contrary to our predictions, no evidence that viewing time fully mediates the effect of cultural background on aesthetic choice was found. One potential explanation for this partial mediation is that factors other than cultural background might also influence viewing time and aesthetic choices. As noted by Palumbo and colleagues (2025), the influence of viewers' openness to experience and a need for cognitive closure on aesthetic experience may be mediated by viewing time. For example, higher openness to experience fosters a greater curiosity and explorative behavior (including longer viewing time), which may, in turn, lead to a higher appreciation of ambiguous art, such as abstract art. Although Christian medieval Nubian wall paintings are figurative, the viewing time and aesthetic appreciation may be influenced by a viewer's personality alongside their cultural background.

Knowledge is another factor that might co-influence the viewing time. As suggested by the visuo-cognitive literature, experts differ from non-experts in their viewing behavior and aesthetic choices. Specifically, experts compared to non-experts take longer to look at structural and compositional elements of paintings and base their aesthetic evaluations more on these elements (Vogt and Magnussen 2007; Pihko et al. 2011). Furthermore, Harland and colleagues (2014)

demonstrated in their study that visual exploration of paintings is spatially and temporally limited for both experts and non-experts. However, they found that this exploration is directly linked to the verbal description of the painting and varies as a function of the task in both groups. Given that some participants were members of an archaeological mission, it is important to acknowledge that their prior knowledge may have influenced their viewing patterns and aesthetic choices. However, all Western participants had relatively higher familiarity with the subject matter of the paintings, as they depicted Christian motifs. Consequently, we expected a higher level of knowledge on this topic in the Western group compared to the Sudanese group. This highlights a challenge inherent in cross-cultural studies, which could be addressed by conducting fully balanced lab-based experiments where participants are asked to view paintings pertaining or not to their cultural backgrounds (e.g., Trawiński, Zang et al. 2024). However, given the naturalistic setting of our study, such an approach was not feasible.

Moreover, most studies on art appreciation to date have focused on paintings from the Renaissance to the modern era. Little is known about how viewers aesthetically engage with pre-Renaissance art. Research by Ho, Szubielska, and Kopiś-Posiej (2023) suggests that the historical period in which an artwork was created influences aesthetic appreciation. For example, contemporary art, compared to art of an earlier date, may be more challenging and less appreciated by some viewers. Yet it remains unclear how visitors engage with wall paintings located *in situ*, whose style and form differ from post-Renaissance depictions. Whether the time when a painting was created impacts the level of visual engagement and the aesthetic experience is still to be determined.

Aside from the presence of factors that may co-influence the viewing time and aesthetic experience, we found that cultural background plays an important role in the exploration of particular aspects of paintings and in shaping aesthetic choices. Searching for elements of a painting that influenced the aesthetic choices to the largest extent, we found that for both groups the time spent on viewing faces was the strongest predictor of the participants' preferences. These results are congruent with research by Trawiński and colleagues (2021) on appreciation of portraits, which suggests that the time spent on viewing faces positively correlates with their aesthetic appreciation. Our findings are also consistent with research outside the context of art, which indicates the longer viewing time on faces is related to their greater appreciation (Maner et al. 2003; Leder et al. 2010; Leder, Mitrovic, and Goller 2016). Thus, to some extent, the Western and Sudanese viewers constructed their aesthetic experiences of Christian medieval Nubian paintings based on facial information in the paintings. However, we also found that for the Western participants the viewing time on faces had a stronger impact on aesthetic choices than it did for the Sudanese visitors. There are three possible ways to explain this difference.

Firstly, the longer time spent viewing

faces in the case of the Western viewers may be related to their greater familiarity with the themes presented in the wall paintings. Although we did not assign any specific task to the participants, we assumed that, while viewing the paintings, they would attempt to interpret the scenes depicted. One of the ways to understand the depicted scenes is through recognition of the depicted characters. Considering that the Western viewers were likely more familiar with biblical stories, as Christianity is culturally more present in Western societies than in contemporary Sudanese society, focusing on the figures' faces may have been an effective strategy for understanding the depicted scenes.

Secondly, a greater exposure to conventions of depicting biblical characters might enhance the aesthetic experience when viewing these paintings. As suggested by research in social psychology, exposure to a stimulus positively impacts its likeability (Zajonc 1968; Bornstein 1989). Research in aesthetics further suggests that this effect may extend not only to repeated stimuli but also to similar, previously unseen, stimuli (Zajonc 2001; Cutting 2003). Thus, a possible influence of the Western viewers' greater exposure to painting conventions in depicting holy figures in Christian art on their aesthetic experience cannot be excluded.

Thirdly, the artistic conventions used by Nubian artists, which aligned with cultural biases to engage viewers more with faces matching their own ethnicity (see Trawiński et al. 2023; Trawiński, Zang et al. 2024) may also have played a role. Martens-Czarnecka (2011) argues that skin color was an important means of artistic expression for medieval Nubian artists and the holy figures were depicted with a fair complexion, while local officials were depicted according to their actual appearance. In our stimulus set, most of the paintings (14 out of 17) depicted figures whose appearance was more congruent with the ethnicity of the Western rather than the Sudanese viewers. This may have encouraged the Western viewers to a prolonged viewing.

The differences in the impact of face viewing time on aesthetic choices may also result from the collectivistic nature of Sudanese society (Pelham et al. 2022). There is some evidence that viewers from collectivistic cultures process visual scenes differently than those from individualistic cultures (Chua, Boland, and Nisbett 2005; Goh, Tan, and Park 2009; Duan, Wang, and Hong 2016; Šašinková et al. 2023). Given that faces are important to individuals' recognition, the lesser impact of viewing time on faces in shaping the aesthetic experience for the Sudanese visitors may result from their propensity for paying more attention to relationships between figures rather than the figures themselves. However, we did not observe a greater impact of viewing time on areas outside the faces on aesthetic choices among the Sudanese viewers, which could be expected given research on the influence of collectivism and individualism on visual processing. In both groups, the viewing time on areas outside the faces had the least impact on the participants' aesthetic choices. Furthermore, the viewing time on areas outside the faces had a stronger mediation effect

in the Western group. We suggest that the strong emphasis on visual exploration of the areas outside faces among the Western viewers may be related to their greater familiarity with and knowledge of Christian art.

To further investigate this issue, a direct comparison of viewing strategies between the Sudanese and Western viewers would be necessary. Differences with regard to focusing on faces have been reported by Michalik and colleagues (in preparation). We have not included detailed analyses here, as the primary focus of the present study is to examine the functional role of viewing time in aesthetic decision-making.

Given the potential limitations and directions for future work, we acknowledge that some of our results need future research. First, our stimuli set was limited to 17 paintings from four rooms of the Monastery on Kom H. Although the number of paintings we used is comparable to that in other eye-tracking studies in empirical aesthetics (Trawiński, Palumbo et al. 2024; Palumbo et al. 2025), it would be interesting to examine the aesthetic experiences of diverse visitors using a more varied set of paintings. An aspect that needs further exploration is the role of congruence between the appearance of figures depicted in wall paintings and the appearance of the viewers, and how it affects their viewing time and appreciation. In particular, it would be interesting to examine whether a larger set of paintings depicting local Nubian rulers would increase the viewing time of faces among the Sudanese group and influence their aesthetic choices.

The above results need to be regarded with caution due to the paintings' state of preservation. Since the paintings used in this study vary with regard to their preservation state, it may be interesting to test how this influences their aesthetic appreciation. Fontoura and colleagues (2023) reported that restored artworks encourage more explorative visual behavior (i.e. higher fixation count). Thus, finding out how the preservation state of paintings might influence viewing patterns and aesthetic appreciation could provide empirical evidence that may support conservation efforts.

Another aspect is the sample size. In the present study, we were interested in aesthetic appreciation among those who are stakeholders of the Old Dongola archaeological site. Thus, we focused on the local community, foreign tourists to the area, as well as members and collaborators of the archaeological mission. Although the sample was limited in number, still the impact of cultural background on viewing time and aesthetic appreciation could be identified; assumedly, a larger sample might allow to generalize our findings beyond the context of the stakeholders of the archaeological site.

Finally, we acknowledge the limitations of conducting research outside laboratory and art gallery settings. Research in uncontrolled environments involves reduced control over external factors such as weather conditions. However, our primary goal was to maintain high ecological validity, as we aimed to understand the aesthetic experience of visitors in the context of the place where the wall paintings were originally created.

CONCLUSION

In this study, we investigated how viewing time mediates the relationship between viewers' cultural background and their aesthetic preferences when engaging with Christian medieval Nubian wall paintings. Using a series of mediation models, we found that viewing time partially mediated aesthetic choices of the Western and Sudanese viewers, with a stronger reliance on facial information in the Western group. Contrary to our predictions, the viewing time did not fully mediate the effect of cultural background on aesthetic choices, indicating the influence of some additional factors. Nonetheless, our findings highlight the role of cultural context in shaping visual engagement with art and demonstrate the value of eye-tracking for understanding diverse aesthetic experiences, offering insights for the study of art perception and culturally inclusive heritage interpretation.

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Old Dongola and the foundations of practicing public anthropology – a case of own research

Abstract: Although public engagement has a long tradition in anthropology, the public role of anthropology is still a largely unorganized and informal specialization, not free from controversies due to the entanglement of science in historical processes and the subjective nature of social phenomena. The paper examines some activities of an engagement nature (social interaction, interest in local culture, education, and social criticism) that resulted from the systematic ethnographic research on the occasion of archaeological work in and around Old Dongola. The paper aims to look for connections between ethnographic research and public engagement and their possible outcomes.

Keywords: Old Dongola, ethnographic research, public anthropology

Public engagement has a long tradition in anthropology. It is often claimed that, from the beginning of its existence as a scientific discipline, anthropology has been involved in socially important issues relevant to the studied communities (Low and Merry 2010: 203). Regardless of the nature of this involvement and the ambiguity of the term itself (involvement, engagement, and applied, public, or practical anthropology), this type of social activity has changed over time: from political

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manipulation in colonial times to participating in transformation processes, asking socially important questions, or giving a voice to local communities later on (Sochacki 2010). This process runs along the same path anthropology itself has taken, from ethnocentrism to cultural relativism (Bodley 2020: 27). The fundamental distinction between emic (cultural meanings derived from inside a local culture) and etic (cultural meaning as translated for an outside perspective) is the starting point for engaging initiatives. Therefore, despite allegations of bias (Hastrup and Elsass 1990), the awareness of the public power of anthropology has increased today to such an extent that we talk about a specific subdiscipline — public anthropology (sometimes also referred to as "engaged" or "activist" anthropology), which focuses on the interplay between anthropology as an academic discipline and a broader public that supports and, ideally, finds much value in it (Borofsky 2020). Carole McGranahan (2006: 256, after Brocki 2018: 22) points out that public anthropology is a largely unorganized, informal trend, not associated with any specific theory or scientific specialization, claiming that "…public anthropology is most simply understood as an anthropology engaged with public, real-life problems and issues".

My fieldwork, conducted in both Sudans since the onset of the 21st century, makes for an exciting example of intrinsic bonds between anthropological practice and public engagement. Old Dongola plays an important, one might even say, formative role in this respect, as it shaped my style of fieldwork both methodologically and scientifically. The ruins of Old Dongola were the terrain (to use the language of sociology) through which the trajectory of my fieldwork in this corner of Africa unfolded. It was the place I kept coming back to for research (in 2003, 2004, 2010, and 2014), where I set up a kind of real and metaphorical agenda of fieldwork in Sudan, including the willingness to deal with problems relevant for the local communities and participatory activities for both communities and their members.

In this article, I would like to focus on ethnographic research from a perspective of public-engaged practices. Anthropological tradition (similarly to archaeology) advocates long-term research, and scholars often recall field reports and experiences, thereby gaining an additional "inner perspective" (Bruner 1986: 9). This approach, often called auto-ethnography, occupies an important place in anthropological reflection (Holman Jones 2005; Kafar 2010; Rabinow 2010; Kacperczyk 2014; Buliński and Posern-Zieliński 2021). I would like to focus on my field experience as a way to examine the public consequences of such actions. While carrying out my research in and around Old Dongola, I did not engage in any formal types of social activism like linking local communities and research problems and taking intentional action to bring about social or political change. Still, I was able to see the potential of such activities, precisely indicating their location and paving the way for their implementation in the future. This article, therefore, reflects on the nuanced context of fieldwork, which led, over time, to the involvement of specialists, including archaeologists and anthropologists,

to make their research more visible and accessible to the public and to ensure that the knowledge produced was as useful as possible in improving people's lives.

Let me briefly mention a few aspects of such fieldwork. Anthropology distinguishes several forms of engagement: (1) sharing and support, (2) teaching and public education, (3) social critique, (4) collaboration, (5) advocacy, and (6) activism (Low and Merry 2010: 204). My public fieldwork has also taken many forms, from everyday social interactions through intercultural educational practices to social critique. It was driven more by a desire to study rather than to look for actual problems. It has aimed at establishing relations, engaging specialists, and initiating essential conversations and scientific collaboration in heritage maintenance, history, archaeology, and anthropology. After years of fieldwork, I see and feel a growing need to engage in the issues of the communities I study, stimulated internally by cultural competencies and "intimate experience."

In my case, being institutionally associated with the Polish archaeological missions in and around Old Dongola, a relatively universal ethnographic dilemma of involvement by assuming the function of a local community's representative quickly became apparent. "Speaking on someone's behalf" is deeply rooted in anthropological epistemology. At the same time, as said earlier, it is one of the factors conditioning its public involvement (Kellett 2009). My involvement also resulted from a desire to expand the archaeological work to include the ethnographic context and the recent past. For a young ethnographer like myself at that time, this seemed cognitively attractive and ethically necessary. In retrospect, my motivation paved the way for the engaging activities undertaken in Old Dongola and its surroundings in recent years.

A SHORT HISTORY OF MY OWN RESEARCH IN AND AROUND OLD DONGOLA

Back in 2000, while still a student of ethnology and archaeology at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, I made my first trip to Sudan to participate in the Joint Polish Archaeological Expedition on the right bank of the Nile between Old Dongola and Zuma, led by Bogdan Żurawski [*Fig. 1*]. At that time, the expedition rented a house in the village of Bokkibul, located just a few kilometers from the ruins of Old Dongola and inhabited by descendants of former dwellers of Hillat Dongola, the "Abandoned Village". My interest in Old Dongola continued when I returned to Sudan for the second time, in 2001, when I worked and lived in the village of Banganarti — on the so-called "Tangasi Island". Old Tangasi, once located on a Nile island, is a fascinating archaeological and ethnographic area, largely unexplored, located only a few kilometers upstream from Old Dongola. Back in 2001, it featured ruins of a church located among mostly deserted houses, which, according to local residents, survived only thanks to its use as a mosque

[*Fig. 2*]. In 2004, I took part in an archaeological mission in Old Dongola under the leadership of Stefan Jakobielski, conducting my first ethnographic field project, funded by the Committee for Scientific Research (KBN), at the same time gathering material for my master's thesis in archaeology, devoted to domed tombs. In Sudan, Sufi sanctuaries —most notably the distinctive domed tombs— are often located on the sites of older, pre-Islamic places of worship (e.g. Diffar, Jebel Barkal, Soba, Deiga, Old Dongola). Therefore, they struck me an ideal subject for ethnoarchaeological research. The ethnographic project concerned everyday life practices of rural communities from the area of Old Dongola: their religious rituals, consumption habits, ways of farming and spending free time. The research area covered the adjacent village of Ghaddar, the "Abandoned Village", and the necropolis of holy men located nearby. With the help of local friends I practiced itinerant anthropology — walking around the area, I was able to experience the ruins of Old Dongola firsthand. It turned out to be a precious experience to learn about the sacred landscape of this region. Pre-Muslim ruins —in a sense abstracted from the local cultural context— are seen as magical places where jinns and sorcerers are believed to dwell. Sometimes, the ruins are directly associated with evil. In Old Dongola, there is *Arjum al-sheitan*, that is, "stoning the devil", ارجم الشيطان — a cursed place where a passer-by is obliged to throw a stone as a gesture of renouncing the devil. Almost every village has such a place, usually located on the outskirts, near abandoned houses (Kurcz 2007). The conceptualization of archaeological sites in Sudan is not fixed but exists along a continuum — from sacredness and taboo to fear and hostility. As part of this Old Dongola experience, I met, among others, a "mad dervish", who should perhaps be considered the last "resident" of the ruins. In 2004, during one of the Islamic festivals, I participated in an ecstatic Sufi celebration and had an opportunity to taste some local dishes, including a highly unorthodox dish made of raw sheep offal — the so-called *marara*. The ethnographic research was so inspiring, and the relations with the locals so cordial, that I returned to Ghaddar two more times — once in 2010 with a group of ethnology students from the University of Silesia in Katowice.

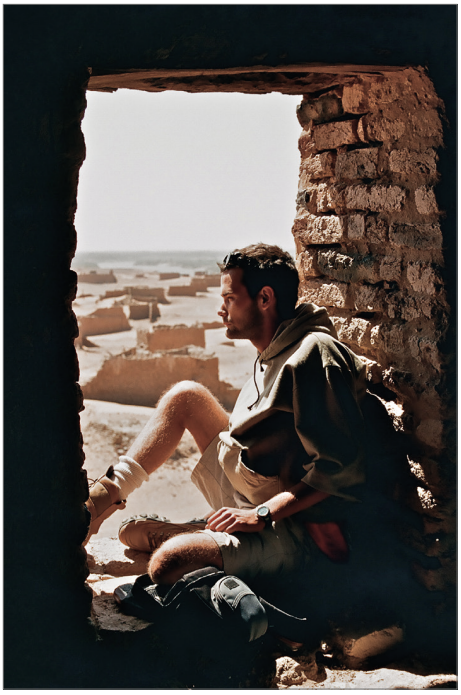

Fig. 1. The author in one of the windows of the old mosque at Old Dongola, 2001 (Photo M. Kurcz)

SHORTENING THE DISTANCE

Thanks to the almost uninterrupted presence of Polish archaeologists in the Old Dongola region since the 1960s, in my case, access to the local community —one of the fundamental difficulties of ethnographic research— could be overcome relatively quickly. From the beginning, I benefitted from the credit of trust and positive image of Polish archaeologists, embodied by the long-time director of the Polish archaeological mission in Old Dongola, Stefan Jakobielski. The local population valued small courtesies, everyday interactions, and respect for local customs and religion, which the Polish archaeologists demonstrated. Incidentally, no one treated these matters as "public engagement", but as ordinary human cordiality and good neighborly practices. The archaeological mission house in Ghaddar was an ordinary Nubian mud-brick house on the village outskirts. Not only did it not stand out from the surrounding houses in any way, but with time it became run down to a point of being less functional and comfortable than other buildings. Still, it used to be a place for neighborly meetings and help, as well as formal public engagements. The house was a social space that integrated archaeologists with the village community, making the archeological team an episodic, but still normal, element of the local reality. Incidentally, the ingenuity of Polish archaeologists in the vicinity of Old Dongola is an engaging example of the integration of foreigners with the local community, achieved

Fig. 2. "Mosque-church" on Tangasi Island, 2013 (Photo M. Kurcz)

in various ways. This topic, however, deserves a more detailed study. One of these ways was participation in countless social gatherings —Friday breakfasts, courtesy visits, and wedding celebrations— that usually took place in the colder months and during religious holidays. For archaeologists, they were distractions from the field routine — for me, opportunities to observe, talk to, or simply tighten relationships with the ordinary people. The Durkheimian tradition looks for deeper social meanings in such phenomena. I am referring here to wedding ceremonies, which undoubtedly occupy a central place in folk rituals, integrating the local community and affirming its existence as a social entity. Some seemingly small gestures which also aimed to integrate the team with the community included wearing local costumes, headscarves in the case of women, and decorating the body with henna or Sufi amulets. Expedition members usually developed their own forms of non-verbal interaction with the local culture.

All of the above practices shortened the distance. As I have already mentioned, the ongoing archaeological research initially made my work easier. I did not have to convince anyone to talk to me or look for gatekeepers. This trust, resulting from the enduring presence of Polish archaeologists in this area, had to be extended to ethnographic research. Not everyone understood my work — and why I was not taking part in daily archaeological responsibilities. The ethnographic method required more intensive interactions from me than the locals were used to, which, after some time, became the cause of a crisis in their perception of my person. I conducted ethnographic research, but I was still perceived as a member of the archaeological expedition. Although I was, in fact, a member of the archaeological team, this caused some confusion among the locals. Before they reached a new understanding of my work, I was doomed to various perturbations, sometimes unpleasant, at other times humorous. Fieldwork is a dynamic and long-term process of gaining acceptance among the studied community — a process that never ends, nor does it concern all community members to the same degree. We could raise the question at this point what the term local community really means? Fortunately, over time, I finally achieved a status that allowed me to work comfortably. I do not remember doing anything special to gain people's trust. I was just nice and kept doing my work. In the eyes of my interlocutors, I was no longer an archaeologist, but a member of the expedition conducting my own research, more or less understandable, yet still scientific. Over time, my status in the eyes of the local community evolved to a point where I was regarded as a "harmless lunatic" — someone who deviates from the social norm but, although not particularly intelligent or well-mannered, can still be considered completely harmless and, at times, even likeable. This is how I would describe —half-jokingly— the way I was perceived by the local community at that time. My status had at least one more serious consequence, which today, when I cooperate with archaeologists in the field, seems particularly important to me. I came to play the role of an intermediary —a kind of metaphorical shaman—

someone in-between archaeologists and the local community, not being actually part of either group. In times when archaeological work in Sudan almost always touches upon social issues, such as difficult heritage, natural resources, and land rights, to name only the most current ones (Bradshaw 2017; Fushiya and Radziwiłko 2019; Fushiya 2021), the intermediary status of my role in the research grows in importance.

Gaining access to the community was hardly an effortless endeavor. One of the factors that contributed to my reception was a certain local dish called *tarkin* in Nubian. Anthropological studies include research into kinship systems, rituals, and beliefs, along with experiencing the local smells, tastes, and textures. Nothing escapes an anthropologist's attention in the field, including themselves, which helps interpret seemingly insignificant matters or individual stories taking into account the complexity of relationships of human experiences and the depth of their meanings. That is why sharing meals with local people was part of my everyday field activities. In this context, it needs to be explained that *tarkin* (*meluha* in Arabic) is not just an ordinary dish, and neither is it easy to consume. It is a paste made of fermented fish, with a pungent smell that indeed makes the dish controversial — to say the least. For the Nubians, preparing and eating *tarkin* is a matter of good taste, sophistication, generosity, tradition, and health, while other Sudanese, or even Nubians living in the diaspora, treat it rather with disgust. Food of this kind —one that can be labeled extreme or liminal— expresses familiarity and otherness at the same time. This dish today serves as a social boundary in Nubia, including the vicinity of Old Dongola, emphasizing the differences between the Nubians and other Muslim communities inhabiting Sudan. It is also of particular importance for the diaspora living in the capital and is treated with nostalgia as a modern symbol of identity. Sigmund Freud (1961) ironically called the phenomenon of manifesting and exaggerating differences in an environment where there are close similarities between groups "narcissism of small differences". In Sudan, however, this phenomenon is more complex. As we know, people often define themselves through refusal, or we deal with "structures of refusal", in the words of Marcel Mauss. A decision whether or not to accept a given institution has a deeper dimension (Graeber 2013). As noted by David Graeber and David Wengrow (2022: 175), it reflects questions about values and identity. In Islam, food is a vehicle for creating group identity and evaluating moral worth in terms of religious axioms (Eickelman 1989). In Sudan —a country inhabited since its inception by diverse communities— food has become particularly important in creating a network of social boundaries, especially the one between Islamic and African identity — an issue fundamental to modern political processes. Meals can also be viewed as extremely expressive, perfectly fitting the role of "silent communication" (Matejowsky 2013). In my case, I noticed that my preference for unorthodox food made my research more understandable to people, thereby boosting my credibility. In their eyes, I became a representative of a foreign culture who not only wants to understand

their lifestyle, but can also appreciate it. In this way I also gained some authority among them. Local cuisine can often become a source of pride and satisfaction, especially when foreigners appreciate it. The fermented fish paste influenced my research in a very positive way. Thanks to it, among other things, I was often invited, subjected to (culinary) tests, and consequently also appreciated. Extreme food affects access to the studied community. One of my informants put it bluntly: "If they make *tarkin* for you, it's a sign that you are welcome."

ETHNOGRAPHY OF AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE

In my work in Old Dongola, I did not anthropologize its history, but tried to reconstruct the past, searching for new threads in its interpretation. My interest at that time, which may seem somewhat anachronistic today, was entirely focused on folk culture — the so-called *Volkskunde*. The focus of my attention was the ruins of Old Dongola, which I treated as a still-living place, full of little stories and case studies, and part of religious folklore [*Fig. 3*]. The ruins were also, to some extent, a discursive space, especially in relation to memory and identity. My "interview research partners" (to quote Sharon E. Hutchinson (1996), an anthropologist working with the Nuer) were ordinary residents of the surrounding villages, especially Ghaddar.

As James Clifford (1997: 54) demonstrates, the "field" is created as a consequence of historical, political, and scientific conditions. This applies to archaeologists and ethnographers alike. For me, the ruins of Old Dongola became not so much an archaeological site —exclusive and abstracted— a no one's place, connected with a magnificent past and a colorless present — but a place still alive, shaped by the people and rooted in

Fig. 3. View of the cemetery of "holy men" in Old Dongola, 2001 (Photo M. Kurcz)

the local mystical geography as an ambivalent space associated with the activity of various supernatural forces. For the local community, it was primarily a space that evoked a certain anxiety linked to jinns and Satan. It was therefore rarely visited, especially at night. At the same time, in line with the broader understanding of ruins in Sudanese culture, it was a space of magical rituals or practices related to the memory of the dead — something I became fully convinced of during Muslim festivals.

With this in mind, as I reported, I made the cemetery of holy men in Old Dongola, famous in the whole of Sudan, the focus of my research. Tombs and places associated with Islamic religious leaders had not been subject to any systematic research, with one significant exception: Salah Omer As-Sadiqa (1996), *The Domed Tombs of Eastern Sudan*. This unique and still-living form of sepulchral architecture is an essential element of individual and group identity, symbolizing the Sudanese Islam and the national culture. The necropolis in Old Dongola is exceptional in this respect. Right next to the remains of the "Abandoned Village" is one of Sudan's largest necropolises of holy sheikhs. According to tradition, 99 "saints" are supposed to rest there. It is primarily a place of various visits in moments of crisis, but also during holidays or major family celebrations. I diligently observed and recorded these visits, which was greatly appreciated by the local population, who were rather accustomed to foreigners being interested in a more distant past (Kurcz 2002).

Old Dongola also made me realize that ruins, cemeteries, and deserted places are associated with the unorthodox Sudanese: sorcerers, rainmakers, prophets, and "living saints". In Nubia, these are people of the Sufi faith, most often called dervishes. They lead lives that differ significantly from the normative model (they have no wives, children, or homes), and they can be found, among other places, in necropolises where venerable religious men are buried, as in the case of the Hamad el Nil cemetery in Omdurman or Old Dongola itself (Trimingham 1965). In the oral tradition, many ruins are associated with mysterious dervishes or have become their eternal resting places (Old Dongola, Jebel el Alim, Abkur, Diffar, Bahit, Deiga, or Jebel Barkal). A case in point may be the medieval fortress in Abkur, situated on top of a panoramic hill called Jebel el Grenn, after a Muslim mystic who, allegedly, lived there in the 19th century. Similarly, in Jebel el Alim, located in the village of Banganarti, where the hill is named after Sheikh el Alim, who once lived there, and his domed tomb is located nearby.

A reinterpretation of the ruins was essential for intensifying cooperation with the locals and Sudanese archaeologists, who also saw the importance of the folklore aspect for their archaeological work. In my research at Old Dongola, I was fortunate to work with three Sudanese archaeologists: Nahla Mustafa, Mustafa el Sharif, and Mahmoud Suliman Bashir. They were delegated *ex officio* by the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums (NCAM) to work with the Polish archaeological missions in 2000, 2001, and 2003, taking on, disinterestedly, the task of interpreting.

Mahmoud Suliman Bashir, who conducted his ethno-archaeological research in parallel with me, was indeed exceptional in this respect. In 2000, during archaeological field reconnaissance, he collected specimens of oral tradition related to archaeological sites such as Old Dongola, Abkur, Diffar, Bahit, Deiga, and Jebel Barkal (Bashir 2003). My cooperation with local scientists, dictated by the objective need to communicate with the local community, became the cornerstone of an agenda of expanding archaeological work to include ethno-archaeological issues and to use the knowledge of the local people to a greater extent. It is worth noting that a great supporter of this approach is the Sudanese archaeologist Ali Osman M. Salih (1982), who attempted to understand the history, politics, and culture of the Middle Ages from the perspective of Nubian folk culture. Over the years, his approach gained popularity with a number of archaeologists working in northern Sudan (e.g. Edwards and Soghayroun 2011).

TEACHING AND PUBLIC EDUCATION

Teaching is an engaging practice that takes many forms: school lessons, group discussions, professional training, and other pedagogical and didactic activities. Engaging students in their own research or social activities is another facet of this practice (Low and Merry 2010: 208). The project "Nubia, Corridor to Africa. Ethnographic fieldwork of students of the University of Silesia in Africa" (named after the famous book by William Adams, *Nubia: Corridor to Africa*) started in November 2010, with a group of ethnology students visiting Sudan under my supervision [*Fig. 4*]. It was a field reconnaissance of selected areas of northern and central Sudan: the Khartoum agglomeration and, above all, the villages on the Nile, in the area of Old Dongola, where I had conducted my fieldwork in the years 2000–2004. During the trip, the students collected data for their theses by conducting conversations and observations, but also, quite simply, learned about the Muslim culture in its living, local dimension. We were interested in how African folk culture "works" in a borderland situation, a centuries-old location at the junction of two great civilizations: the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa. The object of scientific observation was selected spheres and cultural institutions of everyday life of the Sudanese Muslims, which seemed to be related to the "borderland" experience: the institution of female genital mutilation, *zaar* exorcisms, beliefs related to the Nile, or the issue of ethnic stereotypes. On top of acquiring hands-on experience with ethnographic methods, the students also had the opportunity to make friends with the inhabitants of Ghaddar, where we worked and lived. Neighborly visits or solemn wedding ceremonies facilitated this. It seems that the local community was especially impressed that my fieldwork could have a practical dimension and lead, among other things, to instilling respect and sympathy for Nubian culture among young people.

OLD DONGOLA AND SOCIAL CRITIQUE

Social critique, in its broadest sense, refers to anthropological work that uses its methods and theories to uncover power relations and structures of inequality (Low and Merry 2010: 208). In my opinion, archaeological research is an excellent opportunity for anthropologists to be involved in the process of knowledge production and in the translation processes between local communities and the global scientific community. In Sudan, local people were consistently ignored and devalued in their rights to historical heritage (the names of sites such as Jebel Barkal or Meroe can serve as an example). At the beginning of the 20th century, after a period of robbery and clandestine excavations, many Sudanese ruins became "archaeological sites" with their own borders and legal protection. In a sense analogous to game reserves, they became spaces with severely restricted access.

On the one hand, representatives of local communities were made responsible for the sites' physical protection, on the other, they were perceived as the greatest threat to this heritage. The ruins of Soba —the former capital of medieval Alwa— are a case in point. Only selected past events were considered valuable — others were condemned to slow agony. Much has been written on this subject

Fig. 4. Participants of a student ethnography camp in Sudan and their hosts in Ghaddar, 2010 (Photo M. Kurcz)

(Daly and Hogan 2005; Bradshaw 2017; Kurcz and Drzewiecki 2022; and others). Old Dongola is part of the "authorized heritage discourse" in Sudan and —as a place of particular importance, primarily from local and regional perspectives— an area inhabited by people who still call themselves Nubians (e.g. the Danagla community[1] and other riverine groups popularly called "children of the Nile" in Sudan). In this sense, the archaeological site in Old Dongola does not belong to any particular group — just as it is not absent from official narratives about the country's history. A manifestation of this "presence" is the old mosque in Old Dongola — a former throne hall of the Makurian kings, commonly known among the Sudanese, for example, from history textbooks. This monument —especially the medieval inscription informing about its conversion into a mosque in 1317— currently symbolizes the end of the times of "ignorance and darkness" —the so-called *jahiliyyah*— and the beginning of a new era of Islamic and Arab Sudan. Let us remember, however, that there is no heritage without controversy. The pyramids of Meroe, the ruins of Soba, or the tomb of Sheikh Idriss Wad Mohamed el Arbab in Eilafun are all places "... haunted by many different spirits hidden there in silence, spirits one can "invoke" or not" (de Certeau 1988: 108). This is due to phenomena from the past (colonialism and imperialism) and from the present (armed conflicts, economic crises, nationalism, racism, and chauvinism). Old Dongola raises some controversy due to the imperial burden of archaeological research in Sudan (Näser and Kleinitz 2012). As I have already indicated, archaeology at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries was strongly connected with European imperialism. It often served to favor Europe and its heritage over the "colonized others" (Bradshaw 2017). "Colonial archaeology", like "Victorian anthropology" of that time, was not exempt from establishing hierarchies and classifying non-European cultures (Meskell 1999). In this way, science was only a camouflaged form of the "divide and conquer" policy. For a long time, European scholars believed that the exciting achievements of Sudanese cultures were the monuments influenced by ancient Egypt and, later, the Christian period, which, in turn, came to be seen as noteworthy in contrast to the more recent past (Giffen 1905; Reisner 1918; Moorehead 1960; 1962; Mohammed and Welsby 2011). Although this situation is changing rapidly today, as evidenced by Old Dongola and research on the post-medieval remains of the city, it is still primarily a "Christian site" for an average Sudanese, with a clearly outlined identity (religious and ethnic). For many, it is a source of distance or even hostility. This state of affairs, going back to at least the 1990s, has been further worsened by the Sudanese policy of promoting a single normative model of national identity based on Islamic and Arab values, in which the culture of the minorities or the "distant African past" are somewhat doomed to marginalization. The Christian heritage of Nubia is reduced in this narrative to the role of a final page of the African history of this corner of Africa.

1 An ethno-linguistic branch of the Nubian community.

CONCLUSIONS

An anthropologist in the field cannot stand aside (e.g. Barth et al. 2005). This is due both to the pressing social questions they are expected to address and to the nature of ethnographic research, which requires engagement in a network of social interactions that often continues long after the fieldwork has ended. Social involvement of anthropology manifests itself in various ways, from emotional support to various forms of activism aimed at providing real help to groups at risk of exclusion. This becomes especially challenging when social activism becomes the primary goal of one's actions, as scientists —including anthropologists— are generally expected to demonstrate objectivity and impartiality rather than humanism or ordinary empathy. Social involvement of anthropology becomes even more complex when cultural differences come into play or when one is confronted with methodologies from other scientific disciplines. In such situations, the anthropologist should act less as an advocate and more as a moderator. The anthropologist-as-moderator can play a crucial role in translating universal discourses for representatives of local communities, shaped by their own specific experiences, and in generating effective forms of communication between individual actors. Finally, Western researchers working in the Global South —regardless of their discipline— should be particularly sensitive to the legacy of colonialism and imperialism. Given historical conditions, it is essential to consider parallels between even progressive and universally valued actions and "civilizational processes" rooted deep in colonial times.

The current armed conflict —unprecedented in Sudan's history— will likely bring new challenges for social engagement, including the appreciation of historical heritage. Local communities draw on the past to organize everyday life and to respond to changing political, economic, and ecological realities. A future full of hope will matter even more, as a desired social category associated with progress, modernity, and prosperity. Colonial times and the years that followed were marked by "cultural wars". Today, we are witnessing new wars that have brought about dramatic devastation — such as the destruction of Sudan's largest museums. These acts of violence against the most vital elements of national cultural heritage are not merely acts of common vandalism but rather deliberate expressions of hostility. Yet many questions remain unanswered. When the war (finally) ends, which past events, places, or sources will still hold value and meaning for the Sudanese — and in what ways will they continue to function? Is a more nuanced "national heritage discourse", one that includes the heritage of remote communities, possible?

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