

An astounding discovery by Polish researchers in Sudan

# Storks, Locusts, and Nero's Spies



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Asst. Prof. Bogdan Żurawski is one of the world's leading archeologists specializing in the study of the Middle Nile Valley.

**Archeologists from Poland have discovered the largest known royal palace of the ancient kingdom of Kush in North Sudan. Aside from their intuitions, the researchers were helped by a device called a fluxgate magnetometer**

In February 2013, archeologists from the Polish Center of Mediterranean Archeology at the University of Warsaw, led by the present author, embarked on a research mission to the village of Soniyat on the right bank of the Nile, halfway between the 3rd and 4th Cataracts. We were returning to a site where 15 years earlier we had discovered a temple and an unknown city from the period of the Kingdom of Kush. This time, however, we joined forces with geophysicists from the PAS Institute of Archeology and Ethnology, led by Tomasz Herbich. Our combined efforts brought a discovery that shook the foundations of modern nubiology, the study of the ancient region of Nubia, Egypt's southern neighbor.

## The sands of Soniyat

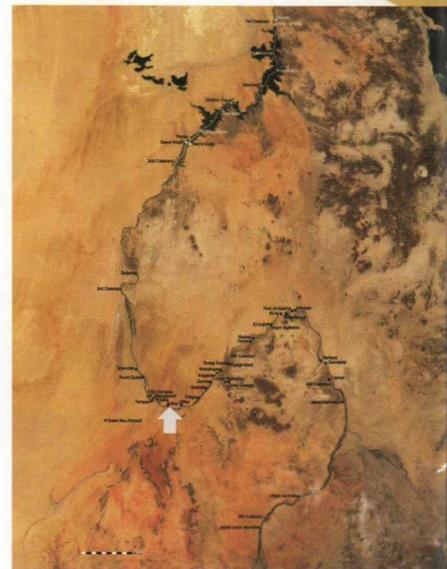
The discoveries we made in Soniyat in 1998-2001 had only sharpened our appetite. Finding a hitherto unknown temple was by all means a sensational discovery, but we were still nagged by the conviction that even greater mysteries were hidden in the sands of Soniyat. Built of 112x56x36 cm sandstone blocks joined together with wooden dowels, the temple was erected when the Kingdom of Kush was already past its heyday. It was 18.35 meters wide

(the exact equivalent of 35 Egyptian royal cubits). Back in 1998, the eastern part of the building was located on private property, so we were unable to pin down its exact length. Located 660 km away from Meroë, at that time the capital of the kingdom, the temple catered to the modest needs of local inhabitants, predominantly traders and farmers. But we only needed to walk 100 meters away from the ruins to realize that Soniyat's residents in still earlier times had erected buildings in a much grander style, requiring much greater resources. We could tell that from two huge blocks of eroded sandstone (each weighing around 4.5 tonnes) that lay next to each other, apparently leftovers from the demolition of a huge building that was probably erected much earlier, when the kingdom's capital was still in Napata, 120 km upriver of Soniyat. This was the golden age of Kush: in the mid-8th century BC, the Kushites invaded Egypt and ruled it for nearly 100 years.

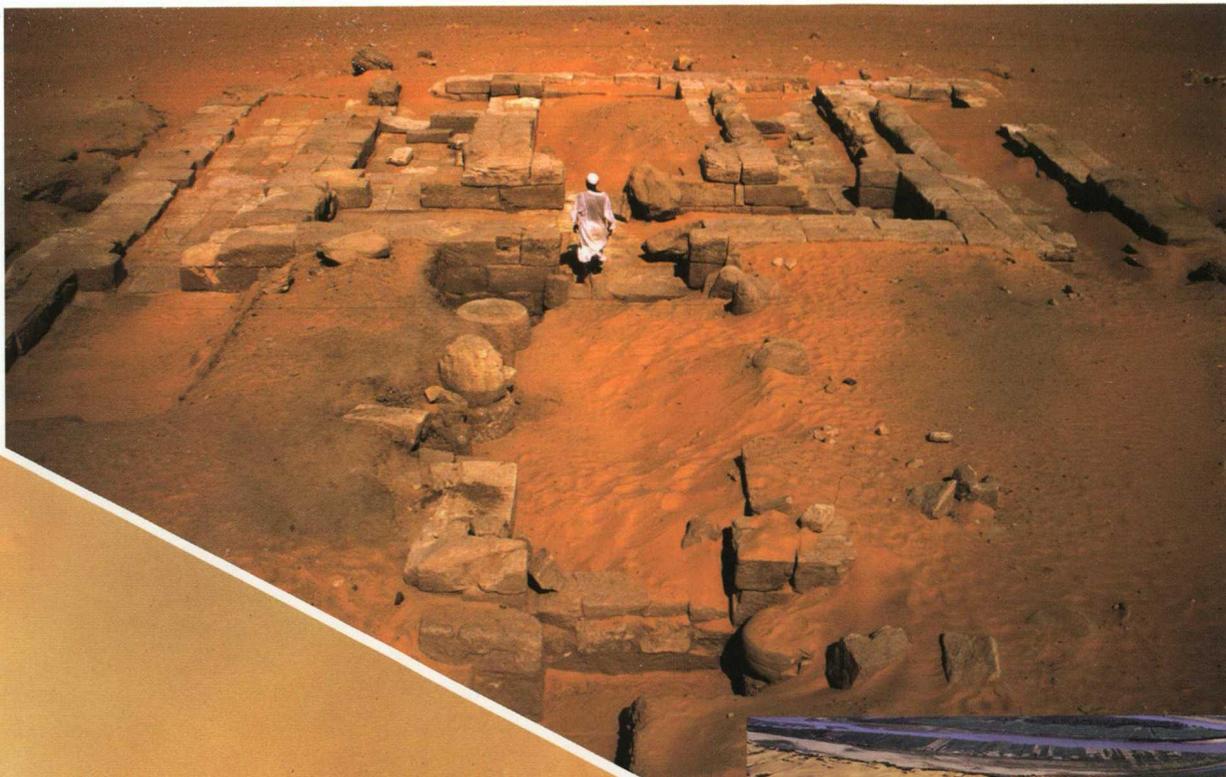
Back in 1998, our main task was to compile an archeological inventory of the Middle Nile Valley, so we were forced to postpone any deliberations as to who had erected megalithic buildings in Soniyat and when.

## Nero's spies

Even the most precise maps of Sudan do not show the name Soniyat, noting only the local *mantiga*, a middle-tier administrative unit in Arabic. On the right bank of the Nile, there is an 8 km stretch called Tergis. In 1973, German Egyptologist Karl-Heinz Priese even hypothesized that Tergis was in fact the ancient city of Tergedus. In addition to the similarity of names, his argument was backed up by the topographic



A satellite image of the Middle Nile Valley (Soniyat indicated by the arrow)



Bogdan Zurewski

The temple of Soniyat,  
partly uncovered

The Soniyat temple,  
a bird's eye view.  
A collage of several  
vertical photos from  
a kite (two sandstone  
monoliths visible in  
the upper left-hand  
corner)



facts mentioned in the description of the journey of Nero's centurions to the Kingdom of Meroë in 60 AD, contained in Book VI of Pliny's *Natural History*. The centurions showed amazing precision in using steps to measure the distance between individual cities. When traveling from Tergedus to Napata, they walked 80 Roman miles, or 120 km. And this is the exact distance from Soniyat to Karima, a town built on the ruins of Napata.

Visited by Nero's spies in 60 AD, Tergedus was very conveniently situated on the right bank of the Nile, nestled up inside a great meander where the huge valley of Wādī al Malik falls toward the Nile, along what used to be a caravan route into the hinterlands of Africa. Back in 1998, we had no knowledge of the city's size or history before 60 AD. But the relics of the monument situated 100 meters away from the temple indicated that Tergedus dated even

further back in history. Since we could not find the information we needed at the site, we began searching through Egyptian texts related to Kush. It turned out that Pliny's *Natural History* was not the only source. A much more interesting reference point was a stela (stone slab) with the inscriptions of Pharaoh Psamtik II from Dynasty XXVI found in Tanis, in the Nile Delta of Egypt. It describes the history of an Egyptian expedition south undertaken by Psamtik II in 593 BC, chiefly with a view to bolstering the ruler's authority. There were no plans of territorial acquisitions, because the enemy was too strong. Psamtik had no intention of conquering or plundering the still powerful Kingdom of Kush. He decided to invade one of the smaller kingdoms located on the border between Egypt and Kush and controlled by the king in Napata. He targeted the kingdom of Šset (appearing in the Egyptian

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consonantal writing system as Šs or Šst). Its capital was the city of Tergebe (*Trgb*), which hosted the palace of the local ruler, referred to as a *kur* (king) in the Egyptian inscription on the stela. One could hardly resist the impression that the similarity of the names Tergedus and Tergebe was no coincidence. Information from the stela suggests that Šeset was situated upriver of the city of Pnubs, or today's Kerma, close to the 3rd Cataract.

### Ramesse's leg

Composed chiefly of Greek, Jewish, and Phoenician mercenaries, the Egyptian army set out from the Elephantine area toward the south, accompanied by an armada of Nile barges. They advanced without any major problems until they reached Kerkis. But where was that? We found the answer to the question in the inscription that Psamtik's Greek mercenaries left on the leg of the statue of Ramesse in Abu Simbel upon their return to Egypt. They wrote that the expedition had advanced as far as

Kerkis but could not go any further, because "the river wouldn't permit."

They would seem to be referring to one of the Nile's cataracts. But can we be so sure? When foraging upstream, the Egyptians must have taken into account the necessity of overcoming the cataracts. Psamtik must have realized that, too, if he decided to go to war during the

reasoning is correct, then Kerkis must have been located somewhere close to Soniyat!

Without boats to carry siege engines and food supplies, the army could not go much further. According to the stela, the army reached the city of Dehenet (*Dhnt*), where the Egyptians and their allies fought their last victorious battle.

But there is yet another Egyptian document that mentions a royal palace located halfway between the 3rd and 4th Cataracts, which means close to Soniyat. It is a stela of Amanineteyerike (a Kushite king from the 5th century BC) found in Kawa. It includes a hieroglyphic description of the king's crowning pilgrimage to the most important temples of Amun in the Kingdom of Kush. It points to the existence of a *nom* (region) called Kereten (*Krtn*) halfway between Napata and Kawa, which means more or less between the 3rd and 4th Cataracts, on the right bank of the Nile. When the king's barge reached the site on the eighth day, the king disembarked from the boat and went to a royal palace! The building must have been heavily fortified, because it was located in a dangerous region, with nomads from the warrior tribe of Meded (Medjay) venturing close to Kereten. This time, they were also quick to appear at the walls of the palace. According to the inscription, however, they fled in chaos when they saw the face of the king (or rather his army). On the 17th day of its journey, the king's barge reached the temple of Amun in Kawa.

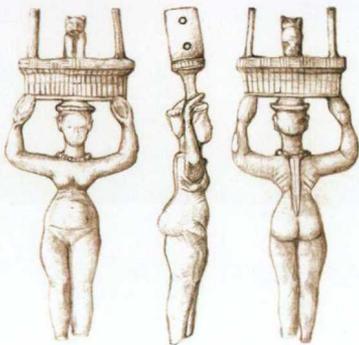
### Might the stelae be lying?

Simple calculations of the time of the journey show that Napata was located closer to Kereten than Kawa, which means that the city should have been situated exactly at the site of today's Soniyat. Does this mean that Amanineteyerike stayed in the palace mentioned in the stela from Tanis? If so, Tergedus and Tergebe were one and the same city. And Kerkis and Kerten were also the same *nom*. I first advanced this thesis back in 1998. But it was still necessary to prove that the stelae from Tanis and Kawa were telling the truth. And that meant finding the royal palace they mentioned.

On 27 February 2013, we found ourselves in Soniyat near Abkur for yet another time. Our mission had a very busy schedule: we



Drawing Paulina Teremdy, photo Bogdan Zurawski



The handle of a *sistrum* (a musical instrument) in the shape of a woman dressed only in a necklace found in the Soniyat temple

flooding of the Nile, when high water levels make the river navigable for boats. So what could possibly have hindered the Egyptian fleet, if not a cataract?

It appears that it may have been the wind from the north and the strong current of the Nile. Before reaching Soniyat, the Egyptian fleet sailed against the current but with the wind, which blows from the north for most of the year in Sudan. It proved impossible to sail further south, because the river bent at an angle of nearly 90 degrees toward the north. With their rather primitive sails, Egyptian boats would have been forced to sail upstream, upwind and against the current, which was obviously impossible. If this



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### The first day of work in Soniyat

carried out excavation work in Banganarti and Selib, preliminary rescue surveys in connection with the plans to build more dams across the Nile, and a geophysical survey of Soniyat. All this against the backdrop of an amazing scenery that appeared to blur the lines between the real world and literary fiction, with the last storks flying north above our heads in V-shaped formations, frightened by the Polish An-2 aircraft from the Hassa-Heisa base on the Blue Nile, which in late February was struggling to combat the largest locust plague the region had seen in 30 years. Amid those surreal landscapes, we kept searching for a royal palace that had been burned down by the army of an Egyptian pharaoh.

When geophysicists marked out their testing ground and started to measure the intensity of the Earth's magnetic field around two enormous blocks of sandstone that lay in the sands, I tried to dispel the fears of *fellahs*, assuring them that these measurements were not the first signs of their land being taken away. My persuasion and explanations proved effective: they allowed us to continue to work without interruption. Every day after hours, we could see the act of creation progressing on computer screens for two weeks in the base of Banganarti ("Island of the Locust" in Nubian). Every day brought more anomalies that emerged in straight lines, ultimately turning into the regular blueprint of a huge building. The two megaliths from which we started our survey proved just a tiny piece of a huge jigsaw puzzle. On 28 February, we already knew that the building, whose walls

were 2 meters wide, covered 5,000 square meters. We realized that we had discovered the largest Kushite palace in the Middle Nile Valley.

### Royal palace in a village

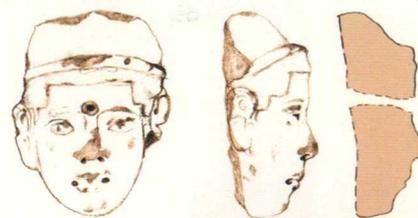
The huge palace was the missing piece of our jigsaw puzzle. Everything became clear: Tergebe a.k.a. Tergedus a.k.a. Soniyat was a royal seat, the most important city in the Šeset kingdom. It turned out that the stela from Tanis provided an accurate description of the topographic and political situation in the Middle Nile Valley in the early 6th century BC. Confirming the existence of the Šeset kingdom is a strong argument in favor of a federation-based structure of the Kingdom of Kush, which was composed of smaller states controlled by the king of Napata in the twilight of its military power. Such a system of governance survived in Sudan until the modern times.

In addition to the royal palace, the temple, and other unknown buildings, the map of magnetic anomalies created during the survey shows two clear riverside lines of an oxbow lake of the Nile, leftovers from the reverse erosion of the riverbed toward the south. Such a process has been confirmed by oral reports gathered in the neighborhood for over 100 years. According to age-long traditions, the Nile here once flowed north of its current location.

Memories of the royal roots of Tergis, where the Kushite kingdom of Šeset flourished some 3,000 years ago, survived in the name Wādī al Malik, a "valley of the king" leading into the Nile. The Kushite title of *kur*, mentioned in such sources as the stela of Tanis, is also preserved in the name of the fortress and the village of Abkur, one mile away from the Kushite palace. ■

#### Further reading:

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 Żurawski B. (1998), Pliny's "Tergedum" discovered. *Sudan & Nubia* 2, 74-81  
 Török L. (1997), *The Kingdom of Kush. Handbook of the Napatan-Meroitic Civilization*, Leiden, New York, Cologne: Brill.



Drawing: J. Bogdaniska, photo: K. Kotłowski

A terracota mask  
from the Soniyat  
temple