

Antiquity

VOL. XXIV No. 94

JUNE 1950

Editorial Notes

OF all the modes of travelling a journey on a river-boat is perhaps the most pleasant, combining comfort with an ever-changing scene. These notes are being written on the 'Kirbekan', an ancient steamer that plies on the Nile between Karima and Dongola—a distance of about 160 miles, between the 4th and 3rd cataracts. It is an almost rainless region with a winter and spring climate that would be perfect if it were not for the nimitti, a kind of biting midge that swarms in the Dongola reach at this time of year; and even the nimitti are less tiresome on a boat. There are frequent halts to embark passengers and cargo (chiefly sacks of dried dates), and opportunities for short excursions. The speed of the 'Kirbekan' is not great, and we have twice gained time for visiting ancient sites by disembarking and rejoining further on. The whole region is archaeologically almost unknown; the sites of some of the principal antiquities are known, but many of them have been seen perhaps once only, and that not for more than a century. There are no plans of any of the sites, and the only descriptions are those of travellers whose visits were (like the present writer's) too brief to be adequate. The best general account is still that of Lepsius, who passed through the region nearly a century ago.



The remains belong to three periods: those of the Ethiopian kingdom (*circa* 750 B.C.—A.D. 350) whose capital was at Napata, now Merowé (not to be confused with the later Ethiopian capital Meroe much higher up the Nile near Shendi); those of the Christian Kingdom of Dongola (*circa* A.D. 550–1350); and those of the Fung period (*circa* 1504–1820). Between each was a Dark Age of some two centuries. The Napatan sites have been excavated by Dr Reisner, and publication is expected shortly. They are confined to the neighbourhood of Merowé and consist of pyramids and temples. The Christian sites are scattered throughout the whole region and consist of churches and forts. The Fung remains are of mud and stone castles.



We disembarked at Khandaq where on a rocky bluff above the river are the remains of a gaunt castle of rough stone whose ramparts are reinforced by buttresses and walls of unburnt mud brick. The ground is thickly strewn with painted and other potsherds

ANTIQUITY

of the kind called 'Christian', but not otherwise datable. In the lower parts of the tower are squared ashlar blocks of sandstone, probably reused from some earlier building. Round the castle is a small village. It was once an important place of call on the great caravan route from the south to Egypt, but like all the Dongola reach it is now by-passed and decaying. After examining the castle we took the bus that plies regularly between Omdurman and Dongola (300 miles, of which the first 200 are across the desert to Debba). Bus travel is always entertaining and the passengers were helpful in pointing out the sites of places named by travellers but not marked on the only existing map.

This map deserves a word of description. It is on a scale of 1 : 250,000 (roughly 4 miles to 1 inch), covers the whole Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, and is the largest scale map available. Field-work with a map on so small a scale would be very difficult even if the map were up-to-date and accurate, but it is not. It is particularly inaccurate in its representation of the numerous Nile islands, which are constantly disappearing or appearing elsewhere. Consequently it is often difficult to locate one's position on it. A country that has no adequate maps must be difficult to administer; and one would have thought that a programme of air-survey might have had priority over some other forms of expenditure.

The outstanding site is Old Dongola, now a wretched village only. Here was once a large town, for 800 years the capital of a Christian Kingdom whose northern frontier was at the 3rd cataract. Old Dongola is 70 miles above the modern town which has appropriated its name and which dates only from the Turkish conquest of 1820. As one approaches from the south one sees a great bare berg hill on whose flat top sits a small and featureless but massive square building. This is an ancient church still intact and used as a mosque. Our boat did not stop there, and in order to see it we had to disembark at Amentigo, cross the river to Rumi, ride in a car (which by good luck happened to be available) to Sellenarti and recross the river. The ferry at Amentigo was one of those flat-bottomed boats described by Hornell (see *ANTIQUITY*, 1943, xvii, pp. 27-41). The sail is wound and unwound by a simple but effective device. The car ride is best forgotten. The driver was 'full' and the radiator empty. We bumped and roared over a succession of cultivation-banks and entered a howling wilderness of sand and mirage. Fortunately we did not stick and it was only about 12 miles to the river again. We hailed a ferry-boat which put back and picked us up. From where we landed on the right bank it was about a mile and a half to Old Dongola. We had to walk quickly as we had only a couple of hours before rejoining the 'Kirbekan' at Ghaddar. The air was brilliantly clear and the famous old hill with its church stood out well. As we neared it we passed through a maze of low mounds covered with broken red bricks characteristic of Christian sites all over the Sudan. Here was the town, and the ground was covered everywhere by thousands of potsherds, many of them of the typical painted kind that seem to date before the middle of the 14th century, but may be much earlier also. At the foot of the hill are the granite columns of a church, the capitals, with faintly discernible carved designs, lying near by. Here too are the wind-eroded remains of post-Christian houses, their sun-dried bricks full of Christian potsherds.

EDITORIAL NOTES

We climbed the hill and were conducted into the building. The church, still in use as a mosque, is on the first floor, and below it are some vaults that contain a well, but there seems also to be much space unaccounted for. In the church are five granite columns (the sixth replaced by a wooden substitute), supporting the flat roof that has taken the place of the original dome. The walls are covered with plaster; but where parts of it have been removed on the west and north walls, the remains of rather weathered paintings can be seen—two heads on the west wall, but nothing definite elsewhere. The light is dim, and in a better light one might see more. Across the nave has been built a mud wall with a *mihrab* niche and on it is a dated inscription in Arabic stating that the building was converted to the use of Islam in A.D. 1317. (None of the books referring to this inscription give the actual text or a translation of it). There is a semicircular apse at the end of the church. The east wall is seen on the outside to be built of the typical baked red brick.



The whole site calls aloud for a detailed survey on modern lines, with plans and photographs (including air-photographs). It is one of the most important in the Upper Nile region, and the church one of the oldest in Africa still extant and more or less intact. If the plaster were removed it seems certain that a whole mass of paintings would be revealed, and good hope, from what is now visible, that they may have been left undamaged. The removal of the plaster, however, is obviously not to be undertaken without adequate safeguards for the future.



Our boat had the excellent habit of tying up at night, so that one did not miss much of the scenery. Two days later we passed Korti and entered the Shaigia reach where the Nile flows south-westwards for over a hundred miles. The Shaigia are Arabs, and the only people who made any attempt at resisting the Turks in 1820. The decisive battle (which they lost) was fought at Jebel Dega, now called Jebel Ibn Auf. From here onwards the right bank is fringed with palms, through which one can just discern the low sandstone cliffs, and catch a glimpse of the granite columns of a ruined church. We reached Maqāl and tied up at sunset, but there was just time to visit a fine fortress on the low hill there, immediately above the boat station. It is rectangular with 18 semicircular towers round the walls, which are 16 feet thick, or more in places, and consist of a thick wall of dry stone on each side, enclosing a core of red and burnt brick. Across the spur on the N.W. (or land) side are two deep trenches, the outer one at least 12 feet deep, resting on small khors on each side. The castle thus resembles a promontory fort. Its age is indicated by the red brick core and quantities of Christian pottery. Forts of similar construction have been recorded at Kubinat and El Kab above the 4th cataract. Nothing is known about their builders.



At Merowé, in the old village on the right bank, are the remains of four Shaigia mud and stone castles. These are much later and of an entirely different type. Essentially they are enlarged and strengthened versions of the courtyard house which is still today

ANTIQUITY

normal in the Nile valley between Berber and Shendi. It consists of a rectangular mud wall incorporating several single-roomed buildings. In the castles these have more than one floor and take on the semblance of towers. But there is no symmetrical disposition of the towers, as in the earlier forts. The courtyard house is, in plan, simply a mud, or mud and stone, version of the primitive African zareeba dwelling or kraal, with the conical straw huts transformed into flat-roofed mud buildings, and the enclosing thorn zareeba replaced by a mud wall. Examples of the courtyard type of house are to be seen from the train window between Damer and Shendi as these words are being written. At the Turkish conquest in 1820 these Shaigia mud castles were still inhabited by the tribal chieftains, and full descriptions of them are given by the travellers who accompanied or followed behind the Turkish army—Cailliaud, Waddington, English and Hoskins. The largest at Merowé was taken over and used by the Turks, and the fact is still remembered locally and recounted on the spot. No plans of any of these castles have ever been made, and it is most desirable that this should be done before they have fallen into complete decay.



Our river-trek was one of the most enjoyable archaeological excursions that can be imagined. The scenery is varied and in places very beautiful. The early mornings, before the flies began to torment us and while it was still cool, were delightful. In this dry region the air has a clarity that gives an added beauty to the landscape—the bright yellow sand on the right bank with its brilliant green trees, the morning star casting its reflection on the calm water, and the purple hills beyond. The river is everywhere very wide, sometimes as much as half a mile, and the air therefore cool, even at midday. Even the minor discomforts are offset by the joy of making an occasional new discovery.



These rather disorderly notes cannot close without some expression of gratitude for the kindness and hospitality of the people we met during our travels. More than once we were pleasantly surprised to meet a reader of *ANTIQUITY*, even in the remotest place we visited; and it was most gratifying to find so much real interest in the archaeology of the Sudan. On the return journey the writer was entrusted with two newly found Meroitic pots which were brought to the train to be conveyed to Khartoum Museum. Thus concluded a most successful tour.



A postscript written in the flying-boat over Sicily about 25 miles west or northwest of Catania. On a sloping mountainside still cultivated the unmistakable rectangular pattern of Roman centuriation is plainly visible. The upper limit is a broad belt running for several miles along the slope some distance below the top of the ridge and parallel with it. The ancient lay-out is recognizable by straight lines, broken in places, but plainly once continuous. The system resembles that near Split described by Mr John Bradford (*ANTIQUITY*, 1947, XXI, pp. 197–204), but it is rather less striking. This is the first time centuriation has been observed in Sicily.