

The medieval period in Nubia, roughly equivalent with modern Sudan, from the ca. 6th c. CE into the 14th c. CE is defined most prominently by the progressive introduction of Christianity, initially through direct intervention by Byzantine envoys beginning in the 6th c. CE. During the medieval period in Nubia three distinct kingdoms developed, with Nobadia in the north, Makuria between the Third and Fifth/Sixth cataracts of the Nile River, and Alwa in the south.

Occupied between the ca. 5th and 14th c. CE, the Makurian capital of Old Dongola (18.223056, 30.743889; ca. 242 masl) is the most extensively documented medieval Nubian archaeological site to date. Located on the east bank of the Nile River directly adjacent to the terminus of the Wadi Howar, a known trade and travel corridor, Old Dongola was a major entrepôt for both surrounding areas and more distant regions, forming a cosmopolitan hub at the centre of the Makurian Kingdom that served a vital socio-cultural and governmental function.

Comprising a ca. 200 ha. site, excavations at Old Dongola were initiated by Kazimierz Michałowski in 1964 and continue into today under the direction of Artur Obłuski of the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw (PCMA UW). Excavations at Old Dongola have documented distinct city planning, churches, monasteries, administrative infrastructure, and two prominent cemeteries: a later Muslim necropolis with domed structures (*qubbat*) and a contemporaneous medieval Nubian Christian cemetery, attesting to the large population and truly metropolitan nature of Old Dongola as an ever-evolving city. The “Life in the Makurian Metropolis: A Bioarchaeological Inquiry into Medieval Old Dongola, Sudan” project seeks to contribute to the deep knowledge of Old Dongola by documenting the lived experiences of individuals interred in the Christian cemetery, an as yet uninvestigated avenue of inquiry. This research will provide insights to the population structure and lived experiences of the medieval inhabitants of Old Dongola using assessments of age, sex, stature, and epidemiologically grounded modelling of pathological conditions in conjunction with isotopic assessments of diet and mobility to Old Dongola, an undoubted destination of migration, along with providing temporal resolution to cemetery development and variation in use over time. Adopting a biocultural approach this project will provide a humanising voice to the extensively documented physical remains of this capital city.

To accomplish these goals, this project will adopt three primary avenues of inquiry facilitated through bioarchaeological excavation and associated laboratory analyses: AMS dating, isotope analyses (carbon, nitrogen, oxygen, and strontium), and a bioculturally grounded assessment of burial variation, entailing excavation and analyses of a representative series of burials from discrete areas of the Christian cemetery at Old Dongola. AMS dating will allow for temporal resolution for assessing cemetery use and contextualising burial practices over time within the large Christian burial ground, helping to provide deeper insights to variations in eschatological and socio-cultural views of medieval Old Dongola society. Isotope analyses of drinking water from the Nile River and groundwater sources, and archaeologically recovered dietary products will help to define the landscape of Old Dongola from an isotopic perspective. Such local landscape defining isotopic data will then be utilised to gauge variations in diet and mobility based on preserved values in human skeletal remains. In conjunction with the derived insights from isotopic analyses, the osteobiographical data of age, sex, stature, and pathological conditions will be integrated with isotope data to form nuanced assessments of the lived experiences of medieval inhabitants at Old Dongola, allowing for insights to what life was like in the medieval Makurian metropolis.

The significance of this project is in its ability to provide personalised insights to the nature of life in a major medieval African capital city. Old Dongola served as a key site of interconnectivity between regions, both within Nubia and further afield. By being able to examine the nature of life in this metropolis the data derived will be of great value not only to researchers focussed on Nubia, but more broadly within discourses on urbanism and transnationalism, palaeodiet and palaeomobility; eschatology, burial archaeology, and landscape studies. In particular, given the challenges of confidently identifying “local” vs. “non-local” values in isotope studies, the ability to gather data on the physical environment of Old Dongola from an isotopic perspective will be of great benefit for advancing regional research utilising isotope analyses to assess diet and mobility. The results of the proposed research will complement and enrich current understandings of Old Dongola as a focal point of medieval Nubian society and what life was like in a major urban settlement during a currently comparatively little-known period in global history.