

This project presents the first comprehensive study of Arabic texts written on paper and pottery shards discovered in Old Dongola, a significant medieval city situated in present-day northern Sudan. For over sixty years, archaeological excavations primarily conducted by Polish research teams have uncovered a unique collection of approximately fifty Arabic paper documents and thirty other inscribed items, including potsherds, wooden and stone artifacts, and even eggshells. These texts originate from everyday life rather than official monuments, offering a rare and intimate glimpse into the culture, economy, and beliefs of people who lived in Nubia between the 14th and 18th centuries. Especially the first half of this period, sometimes referred to as Sudan's "Dark Ages," is exceptionally poorly documented in written sources, which makes the analyzed texts particularly valuable for scholarly research. They constitute a unique source of information on the social, legal, and religious realities of this little-studied time and place, offering deeper insight into the functioning of local communities during the transitional era between Christian Makuria and the later domination by external colonial powers, such as Ottoman Egypt and the British Empire in the 19th century.

These documents include private letters, legal contracts, religious texts, and administrative notes. Some were found in elite residences, others in simple homes, or discarded in garbage pits, each discovery telling a different story, together forming a broader narrative about the entire city. Although written in Arabic, the texts show influence from local languages such as Old Nubian and regional dialects, particularly Sudanese Colloquial Arabic. Many were likely authored by Muslim holy men (fugara), who played key roles in education, spirituality, and community leadership in precolonial Sudan.

The project is led by a researcher with training in Arabic papyrology and archaeological excavations. He will read, translate, and analyze these documents using a combination of historical, linguistic, and archaeological methods. A new digital platform will be developed to publish the results online. It will include translated texts, high-resolution images, and interactive site maps showing where each item was found. Most importantly, the platform will feature a public comment section where Sudanese Arabic speakers from around the world can suggest alternative readings, translations, or cultural interpretations. This collaborative model enables local communities from Sudan to have a real impact on the process of creating historical narratives and the scholarly interpretation of traces of their own past.

In addition, the project will compare the Old Dongola texts with other document collections from nearby sites, such as Qasr Ibrim and Kulubnarti, as well as with travel accounts written by visitors to Nubia prior to the colonial era. This will help situate the documents in a broader historical and cultural context. The results will be shared in a monograph, academic articles, and an open-access digital corpus. By combining traditional scholarship with public participation and digital tools, the project aims not only to shed light on a little-known chapter of African history but also to create a new, inclusive model for research in the humanities.