The beginnings of the Alwan capital of Soba in light of new archaeological evidence

Abstract: The beginnings of Soba, the capital of the medieval Kingdom of Alwa, are usually dated to the 5th–6th centuries AD. Despite the consensus on the date, the question of what the city looked like during the initial period of its existence is still under discussion. The data on the early settlement at Soba is fragmentary. The results of recent excavations in the 2019–2020 season, including new radiocarbon datings, have provided additional information. Remains of early medieval brick architecture in Area CW and an early dating of Mound OS have been cross-referenced with archival data, leading the authors to hypothesize about the beginnings of Soba as a polycentric city with several areas featuring permanent buildings (of stone and/or brick) and vast areas dominated by frequently changing wooden architecture.

Keywords: Alwa, Soba, urban planning, medieval city, polycentric city

Soba was once the capital of a medieval Nubian state, the Kingdom of Alwa, which existed from about the 5th/6th to the 16th century AD. The archaeological site is located on the right bank of the Blue Nile, 19 km south of the center of Khartoum in Sudan. The first monuments, dating back to the beginnings of Soba, were described already in the 19th century, when Frédéric Cail-

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Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean 30/2
Drzewiecki and Michalik 2021: 419–438
https://doi.org/10.31338/uw.2083-537X.pam30.2.09

Acknowledgments
The authors would like to thank everyone who helped the expedition during the fieldwork as well as the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums of Sudan and Khartoum State Authorities for their support.
The project is funded by the National Science Centre (Poland) grant UMO-2018/29/B/HS3/02533. The host institutions are the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw (leader) and the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology, Polish Academy of Sciences (partner).

liaud, a French traveller and naturalist, discovered in 1821 a stone figure of a ram (considered for a long time as evidence of early, pre-medieval settlement in Soba[1]) and remains of stone columns from Soba's oldest hitherto known churches (Cailliaud 1826/II: 206). Numerous studies have been conducted at the site of the capital of the Kingdom of Alwa in the nearly 200 years since Cailliaud's discovery (Budge 1907; Clarke 1912: 34–38; Shinnie 1955; Welsby and Daniels 1991; Welsby 1998; Mohamed 2000), but the city's origins continue to be an issue for extended debate.

Among the most important reasons for this is the scarcity of written sources conerning the beginnings of the city. The Kingdom of Alwa appeared in the historical record at a relatively early date (in the 6th century AD), but written records from this period are silent about its capital. The Byzantine chronicler John of Ephesus reports the king of Alwa being converted to Christianity by the missionary Longinus in AD 580 (Vantini 1975: 17) but he fails to mention Soba. Direct mentions of the Alwan capital come from a period of prosperity at a later time, that is, the 9th and 10th centuries AD.[2]

Despite the input from archaeological sources, recognition of the earliest development phases is incomplete, this in view of the size of the site, one of the largest in Sudan (estimated at 240–275 ha), of which only about 1% has been investigated so far (Welsby 1998: 21). Moreover, extraction of bricks for construction works in Khartoum, from the 19th century onward, have disturbed the stratigraphy at many locations across the site (Lepsius 1853: 162–163; 1913: 347). This has restricted interpretation of the early settlement phases.

While there are still many questions about Soba's origins, recent archaeological work and radiocarbon dating results have shed new light on the city's early development on the banks of the Blue Nile. The body of evidence on the subject has recenty been expanded by the discovery of early mud-brick architecture, tentative remains of one of the core settlements located around the church with stone columns (Church C), as well as traces of an early settlement on Mound OS.

OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH ON THE ORIGINS OF SOBA

The record of the religious conversion in AD 580 suggests that the Kingdom of Alwa—and possibly its capital—existed well before this event. However, the actual date of its establishment, as well as its assumed relationship with earlier non-Christian settlements remain unexplained (Sakamoto 2016).

1 Today the statue is traced to the 1st-century-AD Meroitic temple at El-Hassa (Rondot 2006: 40–41). The circumstances of its transfer to Soba still remain to be explained.

2 The first known use of the name of Soba to designate the capital of the Alwan kingdom comes from the writings of the Arab traveler Al Yaqubi, dated to AD 891 (Shinnie 1955: 12). A detailed description of Soba can be found in the 10th-century writings of the Egyptian diplomat Ibn Salim al-Aswani, featuring large monasteries, churches with rich furnishings, gardens, and sturdily constructed houses (Vantini 1975: 615).

Studies relating to the city and the foundation of the kingdom concentrated for a long time on artifacts found in Soba and various inscriptions, linking the region to the pre-Christian period. The oldest written sources come from the 4th century BC. Karola Zibelius (1972: 87–88) suggested that the toponym *ʿIrt*, describing a land ruled by a Kushite leader Nastaseñ (second half of the 4th century BC), could be interpreted as the region of Soba and should be read as "Aloa". Alongside this interpretation, *Fontes Historiae Nubiorum* proposes an alternative version of this word, namely *ʿI-r3-t*, which is transliterated as "Are" (Eide et al. 1996: 479, No. 84, Line 16). The pronunciation and meaning of the toponym are therefore ambiguous.[3] Considering the current state of knowledge, it is fair to say that these names are unlikely to refer to Soba.

Once again, a toponym sounding like the name of the medieval kingdom appears in a text on the Geza Agumaï stele (Ethiopia), which presents the deeds of the Axumite ruler Aezana and dates back to the mid-4th century AD, that is, about 700 years after the previously discussed text. The text on the stele speaks of the brick cities of Alwa and Daro and reports their capture by the Axumites (Shinnie 1955: 11). It is debatable whether Soba is the city referred to in this text. It is rather the area where the waters of the Nile and the Atbara rivers meet. This area was recognised as the present-day El-Moqran and is also identified with Alabe and Orba, both mentioned by Pliny the Elder, citing Juba and Ptolemy, respectively (Eide et al. 1998: 1098). According to Peter Behrens (1986), the toponyms Alwa and Daro might even indicate areas much closer to the Axumite heartlands, in the Sudanese–Ethiopian frontier zone. Therefore, it seems that despite the similarity in the wording of the toponym, it does not refer to the city on the Lower Blue Nile.

Archaeological research carried out in Soba has led to the identification of several features from the pre-Christian period. Karl Richard Lepsius visited the site in the mid-19th century and reported seeing a stone statue of Osiris and a figure of a lion (Lepsius 1853: 162–163). Archaeological research in the 20th century took up the issue of Soba's Meroitic origins. In 1950–1952, an expedition led by Peter L. Shinnie unearthed several artifacts reminiscent in style of the pre-Christian period: glass beads, an arrowhead and fragments of archer's looses similar to Meroitic examples, as well as scarabs made in the Napatan style (Shinnie 1955: 53, 57, 58–59). Investigations by Derek A. Welsby in 1981–1986 revealed more artifacts of pre-Christian origin, such as fragments of a glass lion and stone blocks, one depicting the head

3 Mentions of the confluence of the White and Blue Niles in texts attributed to the Kushite period are not surprising because of the temple at Defeia, a site about 20 km from Soba, known for the sphinx of Aspelta found there (Vercoutter 1961). László Török associated this site with mentions of the festival in honor of Osiris and Isis in the *Annals of Harsiyotef* from Year 35, dated from the first half of the 4th century BC (Eide et al. 1996: 456, No. 78, line 149). This text refers to the temple as *M-r3-ti-t*, which is transliterated as Maratae, but it is not clear how Maratae relates to the place name Aloa/Are.

of the goddess Hathor and others being parts of a sphinx (Welsby and Daniels 1991: 296–298). Architetural traces of pre-Christian Soba were also found, the most important of these coming from Mound Z. Remnants of a square structure found by Welsby in this area (so-called Building G) were interpreted as a tentative Kushite pyramid, extended in phase 2 and used as a Meroitic temple (Welsby 1998: 275–278). However, the radiocarbon dates, as well as the relative chronology of Mound Z, indicate a later (6th-century) origin of Building G, suggesting that the structure existed around the time that Christianity was officially adopted (AD 580).

The presence of artifacts predating the medieval period in Soba is undeniable. However, the evidence for an extensive Meroitic settlement in this area is insufficient. Some of the artifacts originally considered as Meroitic could have been of Christian date (Sakamoto 2016: 125), others could have been brought from outside Soba (Welsby 1998: 20, 272; 1999; Rondot 2006: 40–41). There is for now more evidence to show that, unlike Faras (Mierzejewska 2014: 8, 10), Soba could have been established *in cruda radice*, that is, on a previously undeveloped site.

Despite the absence of strong indications for a pre-medieval settlement in Soba, examination of the pottery assemblage gives insight into the transition period between the early medieval period (6th–8th century) and the later urban development (around the 9th century). As early as the 1950s, Shinnie noted high-quality ceramics of a style unparalleled among finds from sites in the other Christian Nubian kingdoms, that is, Nobadia and Makuria (Shinnie 1955: 77–78). Combined with the absence of early Christian ceramics typical of northern Nubia in the early layers, the black pottery of excellent workmanship, with ornamentation akin to Christian motifs (so-called Soba Ware), is considered one of the determinants of early settlement in the main power center of the Kingdom of Alwa (Danys and Zielińska 2017). Excavations carried out by Welsby in Area MN, pits M (14) 40 and MN (11) 8, unearthed mixed ceramic assemblages featuring post-Meroitic ceramics and Soba Ware. It was hypothesised on these grounds that Soba Ware could have appeared in the transitional period during conversion to Christianity (6th century). This particular kind of ceramics declined in the classical period, around the 8th century (Welsby 1998: 89). Potential areas of early settlement were outlined by the results of a ground survey, which included ceramic sampling, carried out in the 1980s by C.M. Daniels. Soba Ware was found in Areas AN, C, CS, M, MN, N, RS, TW, P, QW, WC and WD (Welsby and Daniels 1991: 29–30). Excavations also identified this type of pottery in the lower layers of Mounds A, B and Z (Shinnie 1955: 77–78; Welsby 1998: 272), which would suggest that in the early years of its existence Soba occupied a large area [*Fig. 1*]. Archaeological excavations in Areas A, B, C, MN, and Z, where Soba Ware was found, including radiocarbon dating of samples, have provided additional information about the relative chronology and dating of early settlement phases in Soba. In the case of most of the layers

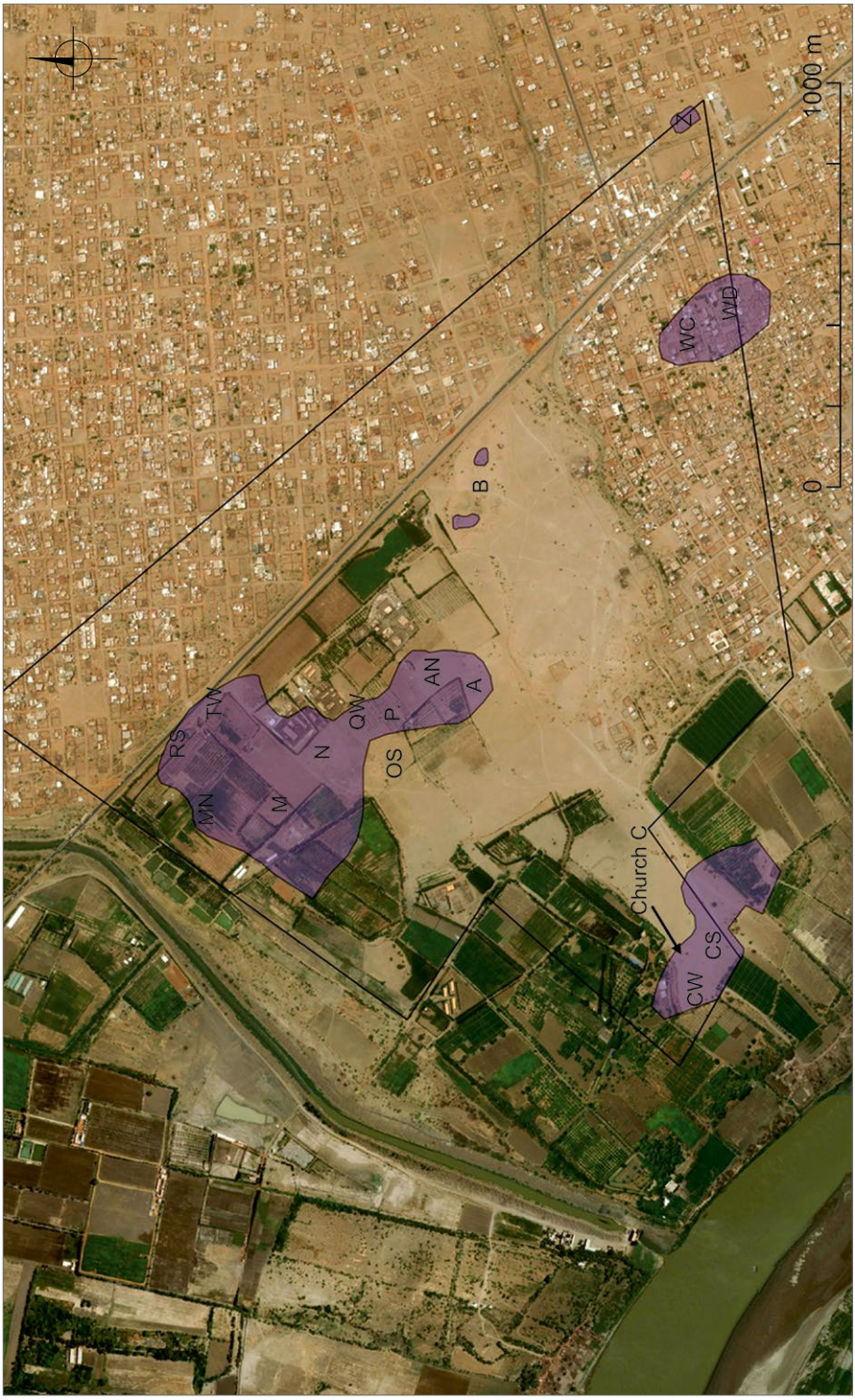

Fig. 1. Potential areas of Soba inhabited in the early stages of urban development, based on the incidence of Soba Ware in surface and excavation research by Shinnie and Daniels and Welsby (Background image Bing maps | editing M. Drzewiecki)

discovered during the excavations, the phase of brick structures was preceded by one in which less durable wooden buildings were constructed, leaving traces in the form of postholes and pits (Welsby 2004: 228). On some of the examined mounds, wooden architecture was gradually replaced by buildings made of mud bricks, fired bricks and stone. The pace of these changes varied, faster in some areas, slower in others where wooden architecture existed for a long time still. The radiocarbon dating results complement a picture of the early settlement phases compiled from stratigraphic analyses. Of the 16 radiocarbon dates obtained in the 1980s and 1990s, six point to a period associated with the formation of the city (5th–6th centuries) (Welsby and Daniels 1991: 350; Welsby 1998: 279). Three of these dates come from Building F discovered on Mound Z, two from a nearby cemetery, one from layers below room F/G of the northern church on Mound B [*Table 1*].

The two largest excavation projects carried out at Soba—Shinnie's in the 1950s and Welsby's in the 1980s—were focused on predominantly later architecture from the 9th–13th centuries, but some traces of earlier settlement were also recorded. The earliest radiocarbon date from the western part of Mound B, explored in 1981–1986, was obtained from a layer preceding the construction of the northern church (also referred to as Building A; Sample No. GU-1687). Later building activity caused extensive damage to earlier remains, but even so, postholes and pits filled with ceramics (including Soba Ware), as well as fragments of mud bricks were found below rooms A, F and E. Radiocarbon dating of the sample from the layer below

Table 1. Radiocarbon dating of samples from early settlement phases obtained in the 1980s and 1990s (Welsby and Daniels 1991: 350; Welsby 1998: 279) after recalibration using OxCal 4.4 software and the international calibration curve IntCal13 (https://c14.arch.ox.ac.uk/oxcal.html#old, accessed: 08.01.2021) (M. Drzewiecki)

Sample number	Place of extraction	Radiocarbon age BP	68.2% probability cal AD	95.4% probability cal AD
BM-2841	Building F construction phase	1470 +/- 35	566–632 (68.2%)	538–652 (95.4%)
BM-2842	Building F phase 1	1480 +/- 35	551–619 (68.2%)	436–447 (1.2%) 472–487 (1.8%) 535–650 (92.3%)
BM-2843	Predating construction of Building F	1550 +/- 50	429–497 (40.1%) 505–557 (28.1%)	405–605 (95.4%)
BM-2884	Fill of the structure over grave (Z3) 157	1500 +/- 40	475–484 (3.3%) 536–620 (64.9%)	429–494 (18.9%) 510–518 (1.4%) 528–643 (75.1%)
BM-2885	Part of the coffin in grave (Z3) 58	1580 +/- 35	426–474 (32.1%) 485–536 (36.1%)	403–554 (95.4%)
GU-1687	Building A room F/G	1450 +/- 120	429–495 (16.0%) 507–673 (52.2%)	337–779 (92.7%) 790–830 (1.6%) 837–866 (1.2%)

rooms F/G shows that the wooden architecture was built in the period cal AD 337–779 (95.4%), cal AD 507–673 (68.2%) (Welsby and Daniels 1991: 36–37). Below the central church (Building B), the early features also include single, fragmentarily preserved brick walls. A greater number of early radiocarbon dates from Welsby's 1989–1992 study is related to the features discovered on Mound Z. Here, too, the stone and brick Buildings F and G were preceded by wooden structures. Radiocarbon dating of a piece of wood from a pit below Building F shows that the wooden structures could date to cal AD 405–605 (95.4%; Sample No. BM-2843). An equally early dating was obtained for the construction stage of Building F (red brick structure on stone foundations), i.e., cal AD 538–652 (95.4%; Sample No. BM-2841) and its first phase of use, i.e., cal AD 535–650 (92.3%; Sample No. BM-2842). Dates isssuing from an examination of the ceramic material from early layers registered in Building F are consistent with the radiocarbon dating, the material originating from around AD 350–650 (Welsby 1998: 272).

Based on a relative chronology, the construction of the second building (G) discovered on Mound Z is also placed around the 6th century, but the architectural layout of the first phase is reminiscent of a pyramid and that of the second phase of a Meroitic temple. This, coupled with Meroitic-like ceramics discovered there, raises doubts about the construction date (Welsby 1998: 272).

An early dating was obtained also for the predominantly Christian cemetery east of Building G.[4] Radiocarbon dates from graves (Z3)58 (cal AD 403–554; 95.4%; Sample No. BM-2885) and (Z3)157 (cal AD 528–643; 75.1%; Sample No. BM-2884) indicate that the first burials here were as early as the 5th–6th century (Welsby 1998: 272–273).

Summing up, Area Z turned out to be a surprising combination of remains. A small Christian cemetery was situated in a manner characteristic of burial grounds of a later period, that is, outside the eastern end of a church, nearest to where the altar was located. However, the building on Mound Z, rather than being a church, appears to be associated with Meroitic beliefs. Moreover, the complex in Area Z is one of the few places in which early brick and stone architecture was noted next to the early wooden buildings.[5]

4 Pit burials without accompanying structures (so-called Type 4), discovered next to the Christian remains, varied greatly in terms of body position and pit orientation (Welsby 1998: 45–49).

5 Early timber structures identified by the presence of Soba Ware were also found in Areas MN and M. Area MN8 had only wooden architecture but in later phases in Area MN3 mud-brick buildings appeared alongside the wooden structures (three enclosures with single-brick walls), and in Area M12 wooden buildings were replaced in the next phase, in the 8th century, by a red-brick church (Building E; Welsby 1998: 21). Also the similarity between architectural elements found here and examples from churches in northern Nubia suggests that the Soba church with stone columns (Church C) could go back as far as the 7th–8th centuries, making it the medieval city's oldest known church building (Welsby and Daniels 1991: 321–322).

EARLY BUILDINGS FROM AREA CW AND FINDS FROM AREA OS

Previous studies carried out in Soba demonstrate that wooden architecture (in the form of round and rectangular structures) played an important role in the initial stages of urban development. At the same time, research on Mound Z yielded finds of early brick architecture and a cemetery. Research in 2019–2020 added an example of early mud-brick architecture in Area CW and an early medieval radiocarbon dating of a sample from the settlement layer in Area OS. The discoveries were made applying non-invasive prospection (geomagnetic and ground penetrating radar) and conducting trial excavations to examine in greater detail the architectural patterns, changes and functions of each zone in medieval Soba (for a comprehensive preliminary report on this work see Drzewiecki et al. 2020).

MOUND CW

The excavation site on Mound CW (located west of Church C) was selected based on a reading of the magnetic mapping of the area. The anomalies here indicated the presence of architectural remains. Four settlement phases were identified in Trench 1/CW (5 m by 5 m) [*Fig. 2*]. Radiocarbon-dating of the oldest phase produced a most probable date in the 6th century (cal AD 527–615; 95%; Sample No. Poz-123461).[6] Culturally sterile layers were not reached even 1.50 m below the base of the mound which was itself 0.80 m high [*Table 2*].

The oldest of the recorded settlement phases in Trench 1/CW was represented by walls made of mud bricks. Nine walls were identified. Four of these walls (Nos 33, 34, 35, 37) formed a narrow L-shaped room, 3.00 m long and 0.70 m wide in the northeastern and 1.20 m in the northwestern part. The level of foundations of these walls differed. Signs of modifications being introduced were observed also as a blockade (between walls Nos 37 and 46), walls added later (Nos 33 and 37), and reused red-brick fragments in a mud-brick structure (No. 37). Radiocarbon samples extracted from Wall 33, which is part of the L-shaped room, indicated that the wall was formed shortly after cal AD 527–615 (95%; Sample No. Poz-123461). Considering that not all the wall foundations were uncovered (e.g., Wall 34 was not excavated to the base) and that the room was visibly altered at some point, it can be assumed that the structure was built even earlier than suggested by the radio-

Table 2. Settlement phases in Trench 1/CW (Processing T. Michalik)

Phase	Description	Dating (AD)
1	Mud-brick architecture (NW–SE orientation)	6th /7th–?
2	Wooden architecture	?–9th /11th
3	Mud-brick architecture (N–S orientation)	9th /11th–?
4	Robber's pit	?

6 Samples from the 2019–2020 season were analyzed at the Poznań Radiocarbon Laboratory (https://radiocarbon.pl/en/; accessed: 08.01.2021). Calibration used OxCal 4.4 software and the international calibration curve IntCal13 (https://c14.arch.ox.ac.uk/oxcal.html#old, accessed: 08.01.2021).

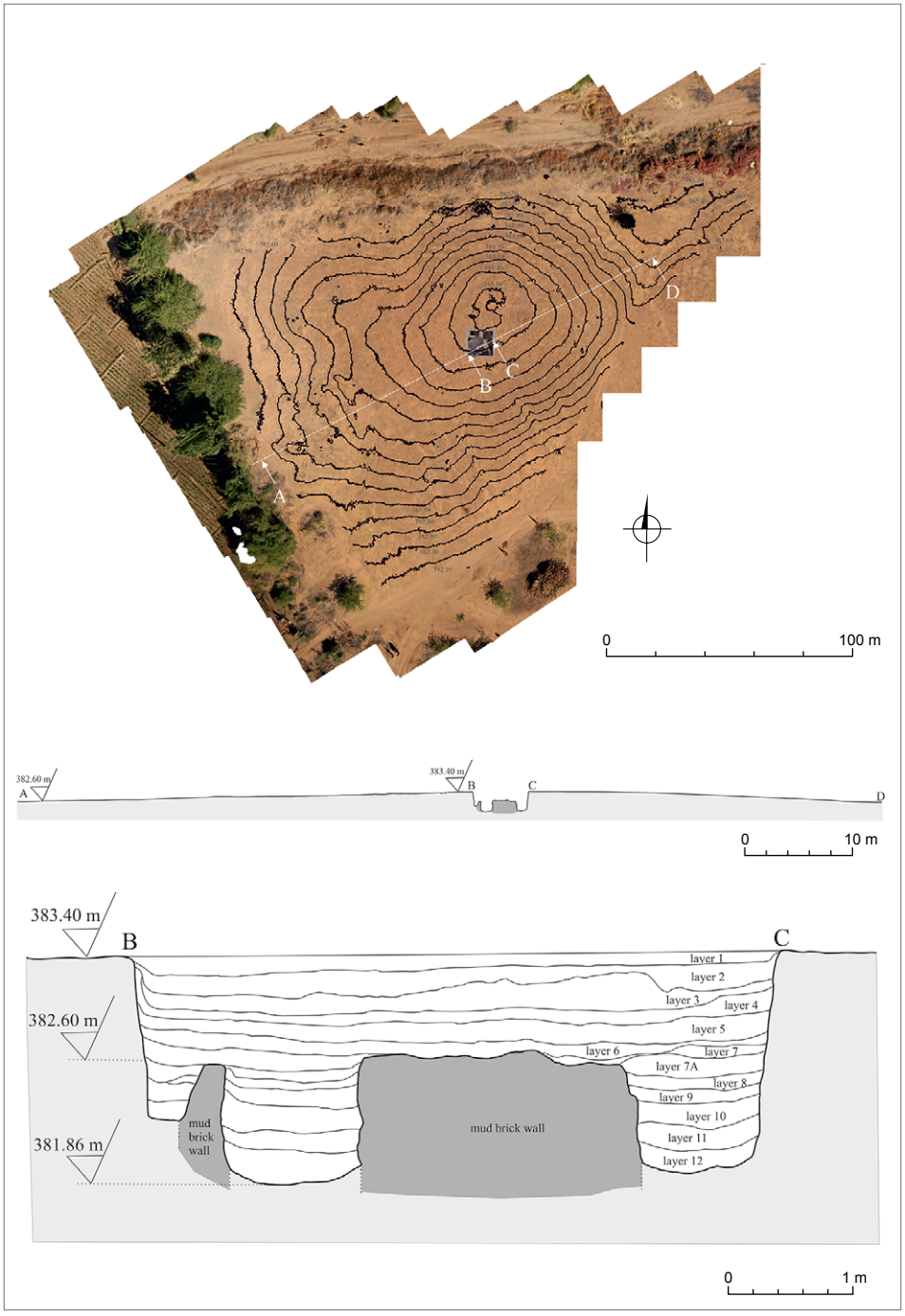

Fig. 2. Trench 1/CW: top, location in Area CW; center, cross-section A–D through the area, looking northwest; bottom, detailed section through the trench (PCMA UW | orthophoto, drawing and editing M. Drzewiecki)

carbon dating, especially as culturally sterile soil was not reached. It is the only place in Soba where such early remains of compact mud-brick buildings have been uncovered. In northern Nubia, this type of architecture, that is, irregular mud-brick architecture with frequent modifications, is characteristic of residential quarters (for example, Anderson 1996: 199–202; Welsby 2002: 123–127, 167). Such an attribution of function in the case of the remains in Trench 1/CW is speculative at this stage due to the limited size of the excavation [*Fig. 3*]. Bearing this in mind, it is nevertheless useful to look at the artifacts.

In addition to typically utilitarian pottery and faunal remains, the early medieval inhabitants of this area had access to a variety of other products, in-

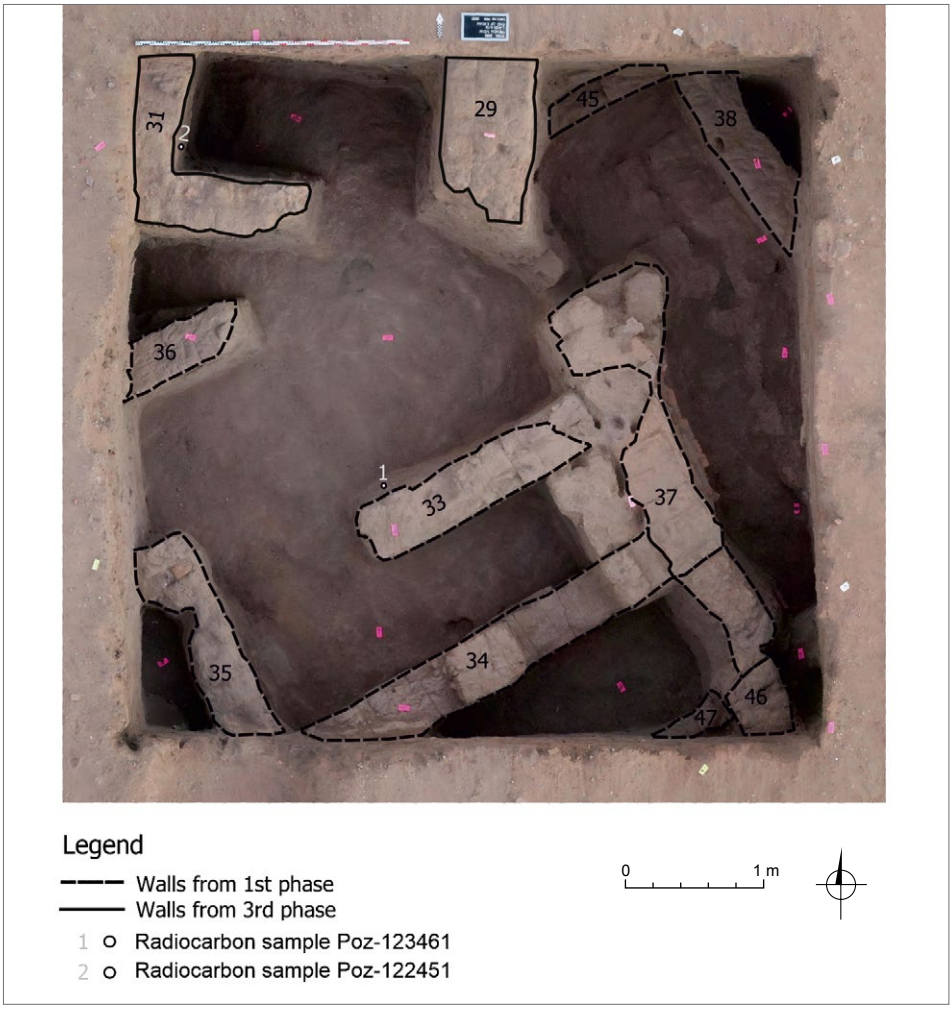

Fig. 3. Trench 1/CW: wall numbering, settlement phases and location of radiocarbon samples (PCMA UW | photo M. Drzewiecki; processing T. Michalik)

cluding high-quality items [*Fig. 4*]. The layers belonging to the first settlement phase yielded numerous examples of painted ceramics (including a few rare pieces with anthropomorphic ornamentation, as well as two fragments with inscriptions), beads, shell fragments and stone tools, also clay figurines (a camel and another unidentified animal), a fragment of a mold(?) and a ceramic disk. Fragments of a large storage vessel were found in the southwestern corner, partly covered by one of the walls (to be examined upon extension of the excavation in this area). All things considered, the users of this building could have been among the wealthier Sobans.

Wooden architecture replaced the mud-brick buildings in the second settlement phase. Numerous remains of postholes (in most cases about 10 cm in diameter) and traces of six occupation surfaces in the form of tamped earth floors were discovered. Mud-brick structures subsequently reappeared in the area (Phase 3).The dating of the charcoal sample taken from under Wall 31 showed that it had been formed after cal AD 890–1013 (95%; Sample No. Poz-122451). By contrast with the first-phase buildings, which were oriented NW–SE, the third-phase walls were erected on a N–S axis. No further construction activity was observed in the area. It should be noted, however, that the Phase-3 walls were located just below the surface and were therefore heavily eroded. The fourth stage of use was associated with

Fig. 4. Selected artifacts from the first settlement phase (clockwise from top left): bone plaque with relief decoration; inscribed potsherd; potsherd with anthropomorphic representation; terracotta camel figurine (PCMA UW | photos J. Ciesielska, A. Weźranowska)

a large pit, which partly destroyed the buildings from earlier phases. The fill of this pit contained 21 mud bungs used with storage vessels, mostly unornamented unlike earlier finds (for the latter see Welsby and Daniels 1991: 151–155; Welsby 1998: 74), in addition to potsherds and animal bones.

MOUND OS

Early radiocarbon dating was also obtained for the earliest traces of settlement in the central part of Mound OS (Trench 1/OS). A charcoal sample dated cal AD 561–651 (95.4%; sample no. Poz-123460) came from the occupation layer preceding the mud-brick architecture. This was a settlement layer, relatively thin (averaging 5 cm in thickness) and without traces of wooden architecture. It contained eight fragments of clay vessels. In the western part of the trench, a deposit of 572 clay beads was found. Judging by their positioning, the beads must have been placed in a now disintegrated organic container. The collection contained beads of three colors: brown (285 pieces), black (156) and red (131), the coloring being due to different degrees of firing [*Fig. 5*]. These were large beads, 1.5–2 cm in diameter. Clay beads had been found earlier at Soba, but not in such numbers and not so diverse in color (Welsby 1998: 74).

Early settlement on Mound OS seems not to have been extensive: Trench 2/OS just a few meters east of the first trench yielded no equally early traces of settlement, and the earliest date from 2/OS is cal AD 879–1013 (95.4%; Sample No. Poz-122454).

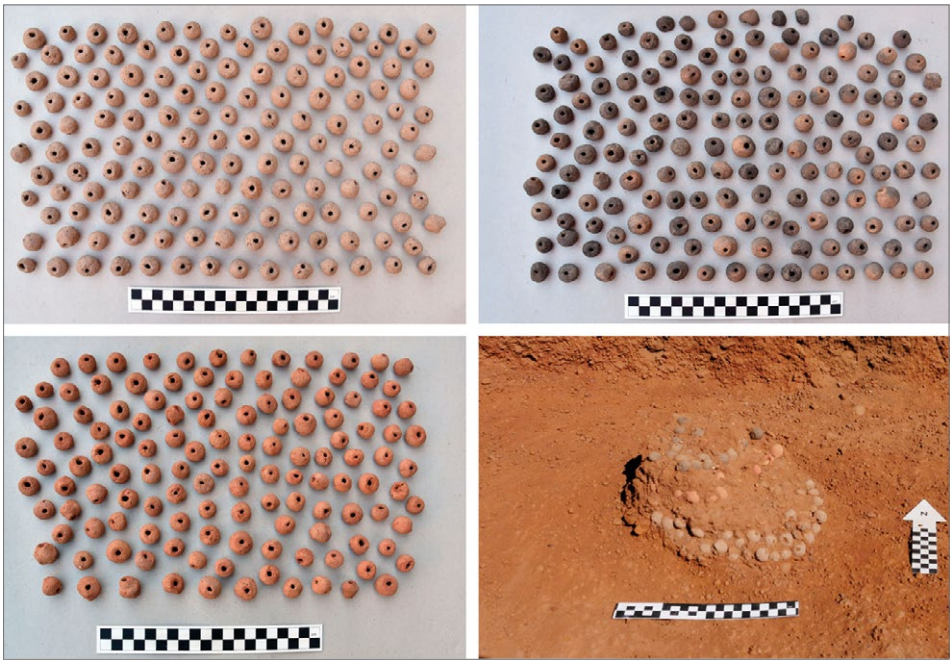

Fig. 5. Clay beads of three different colors found in the first settlement layer on Mound OS; bottom right, the collection of beads *in situ* (PCMA UW | photos J. Ciesielska and T. Michalik)

THE ROLE OF AREA CW IN THE EARLY DEVELOPMENT OF SOBA

In light of the findings to date, the beginnings of Soba can be placed in the first centuries of the medieval period (5th–6th centuries), but the architecture of the period remains little known. A mud-brick building of residential and storage character, discovered in Area CW in the 2019–2020 season, has significantly changed opinions about the city's origins.

Wooden architecture, less durable in principle, has been demonstrated by earlier research to correspond to the initial stages of Soba development. All of the identified wooden buildings were of small size (from less than 1 m to 8 m in diameter), either circular or rectangular in plan. Timber posts were also used for fencing. The largest recorded fence from this phase delimited space beside the permanent buildings on Mound Z. It was also the only area where layers attributed to the early period, as well as some architectural remains, were found. Fragmentary mud-brick walls, surrounded by remains of wooden architecture, were documented also on Mound B. More lasting and more durable architecture, which emerged slightly later, in the 7th–8th centuries, was recorded in Areas MN and M.

Areas C and CS had already yielded Soba Ware among other pottery types

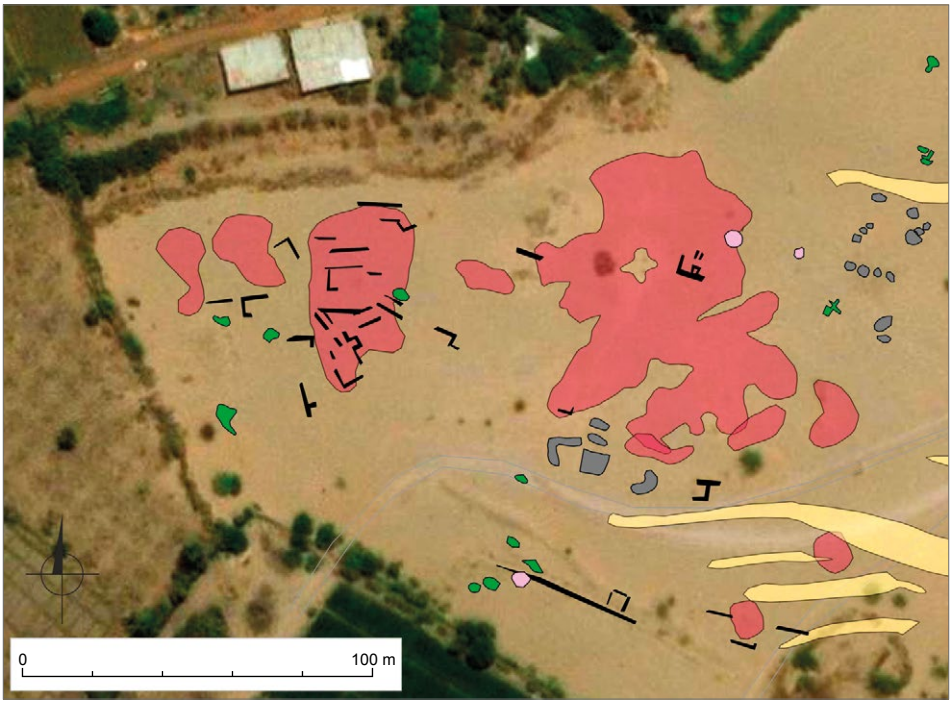

Fig. 6. Results of magnetic mapping of remains in Area CW: red – red-brick rubble; black – mud-brick walls; green – ash and burned structures; grey – other features like pits; pink – furnaces or fireplaces; yellow – geological features (PCMA UW | survey and processing R. Ryndziewicz)

(Welsby and Daniels 1991: 14–16) and the remains of a church with stone columns in this place were associated on stylistic grounds with the period following conversion to Christianity. Until the excavations in 2019–2020 there was little information on the architectural development and settlement phases of the area around Church C despite other indications of early use.

The results of the new excavations in this part of the site near the riverbank suggest that this was a focal point of early settlement at Soba. The buildings in this area preceded and then coexisted with the church. The area close to the riverbank seems to have been a natural choice. At the same time, however, sacral buildings developed on Mound Z, which is at the opposite end of the site, at a distance of approximately 2 km and well away from the Blue Nile. Consequently, Area CW was not the only place with permanent buildings at that time.

The first mud-brick buildings on Mound CW were deserted before the 10th century. Research by Daniels and Welsby in the western part of Mound B revealed the growing religious and perhaps also administrative importance of the center in this part of the site starting from the mid-9th century. The transition from mud-brick to wooden buildings at the CW site may be related to organisational changes in Soba and the relocation of the religious center to the area of Mound B. At the present stage, the hypothesis is speculative but worth further consideration, especially as the circumstances of preservation of architectural remains below ground surface on the poorly preserved mounds near Church C are promising in terms of finding proof of early settlement.

Presumed buildings in the area have been outlined based on the results of magnetic prospection [*Fig. 6*]. Recognition of settlement phases in the vicinity of Church C could be enhanced with supplementary ground penetrating radar surveying (with a better depth range). It would surely elicit more information on the role played by the area in the initial development of the city.

THE SETTLEMENT PATTERN IN EARLY MEDIEVAL SOBA

Soba at the beginning of the medieval period covered approximately 200 ha as attested by finds of a relevant date, including Soba Ware, in various parts of the city [see *Fig. 1*]. It seems that the buildings were constructed mainly of wood. Only in some areas (including Mounds CW and Z[7]) was there brick or stone architecture. It should be noted, however, that in many cases later buildings (9th/10th century) destroyed or covered traces of the early city. Hence, any inference about early Soba's spatial organisation is based on fragmentary data.

According to the chronicle of John of Ephesus, it was the Alwan ruler who initiated the conversion of the kingdom to Christianity. At that time, Soba was larger than even Meroe, a city located approximately 200 km to the north, which in its heyday (4th century BC–4th century

7 Single, thin mud-brick walls were reported also in the western part of Mound B. However, they are less substantial than the early architecture at Z and CW, and the dating of these structures is much broader (with a *terminus post quem* in the 9th century).

AD) was one of the main urban centers of the Meroitic kingdom. Meroe occupied a maximum of 1 km² (= 100 ha) (Grzymski 2004: 165). Soba was also larger than Axum in the 6th–8th centuries. The center of the Axumite kingdom at the time, located approximately 700 km east of Soba in the Tigray region, Axum achieved its greatest territorial extent in the 5th–6th centuries AD, covering about 180 ha (Fattovich 2019: 259).

The ruler's seat of early Soba has not been unequivocally identified to date, leaving open many questions concerning the city's origins. First and foremost, how was it established? Was it founded *in cruda radice* and grew unconstrained? Or was it the result of planned expansion following its founding according to a predetermined urban system? Or did it develop from an existing settlement, partly planned and partly unfettered? The relationship between the power holders and the rest of the population is not clear (e.g., enclosures, size and type of administrative buildings, community spaces like open squares). It is also difficult to trace in the architecture and urban layout any changes of social relations that could be attributed to Christian influence.

Economic factors are mentioned among the motivators of city formation (Kotkin 2009). Artifacts found in Soba in the early layers include fragments of glass vessels imported mainly from Egypt, pointing to the importance of Soba in the context of trade (Welsby 1998: 87). At the same time, the emphasis on urbanisation and urban history in the Middle Eastern and European centers in recent years may not necessarily be a good reference for settlement in Africa (Fourchard 2005; Adekola 2009). However, despite the many questions and methodological difficulties, some interesting observations about the initial stages of development of the urban center in Soba can be made on the basis of the new data and the latest literature on urban development in Africa.

The city on the Blue Nile developed in a different way than the other capitals of the Nubian kingdoms. Faras and Old Dongola—some 740 km north and 350 km northwest, respectively—were smaller and partly or fully surrounded by high walls from the first centuries of their existence, as well as taking advantage of the local topography for defensive purposes. In both cases, the most important parts of the city were fortified and can be considered as the city center. No fortifications were ever uncovered in Soba.[8] Moreover, the city did not occupy a naturally defensive site. It was established on flat ground, cut only by meandering seasonal streams. A vast unbounded space was what the founders and inhabitants of Soba considered as the most appropriate environment for settlement. Practical reasons for such a location of the city could be linked to beliefs and magical thinking, but such ideas do not lend themselves easily to discussion.

Current research points to at least two permanently built-up zones within the early city. The first is Area Z, which was probably a religious center (before and after coversion to Christianity) and Area CW with residential and storage func-

8 A stone gateway and fortification belonging to a defensive system were reported by E.A. Wallis Budge (1907/I: 325), but later research did not confirm the presence of such structures in Soba.

tions, where the earliest (known) Soban church was built. Perhaps further research will supply more data on the character of these areas and identify other similar zones within the city boundaries.

Perhaps Soba should be seen as a polycentric city? The urban development seems dispersed, with no single, clearly accentuated center. There are, however, several localities with permanent settlement (McIntosh 1991). The best known example of this type of city from the 1st millennium AD in Africa is Jenne-jeno located in the Inland Niger Delta and while it cannot be considered as a direct analogy or source of inspiration for the people of Alwa because of the considerable distance from Soba (more than 4000 km to the west), it illustrates the nature and characteristics of a polycentric city. Jenne-jeno was founded around 250 BC. About AD 800, the so-called Jenne-jeno Urban Complex flourished, comprising at the time 40 locations (now vast mounds) spread in a radius of about 4 km. This type of urban complex is sometimes called a "clustered city". According to Roderick McIntosh and Susan McIntosh (2003: 115) "excavation at sites such as Jenne-jeno reveals no obvious signs of social stratification, as opposed to abundant evidence of (horizontal) social complexity". In their opinion, the absence of one clearly defined center was supposed to prove that "authority is shared among many corporate groups rather than being the monopoly of a charismatic individual or of one bureaucratic lineage". As an explanation for such spatial organisation, they referred to local magical reasoning and a mystical landscape in Mande's approach, in which the reason for choosing a place for settlement may be contact with the spirits and supernatural forces existing in the area (McIntosh and McIntosh 2003: 116–117).

Another interesting case in point for the nuclear nature of African cities is Great Zimbabwe. This 2nd millennium AD city is also approximately 4000 km away from Soba (to the south), so in no event can it be a direct analogy to the capital of Alwa. It is cited here as an example of a polycentered character derived from local philosophical traditions. According to Shadreck Chirikure, such an urban layout can be explained by the concept of *hunhu/botho/ubuntu* derived from the Bantu community (Samkange and Samkange 1980). The concept has been refined for at least two centuries by, among others, the Shona people, descendants of the Great Zimbabweans, and focuses on the social aspects of the life of the individual. One of the three basic tenets of this philosophy is: *munhu, munhu nekuda kwe vanhu* (Shona language: 'An individual is a person only because of others'). This led Bantu thinkers to conclude that society is a group of people whose primary task is to support each individual. There should be no multigenerational accumulated wealth in societies of this kind, while the leader, in keeping with the proverb *panodya mambo varanda vanogutawo,* was to eat with his subordinates (Pongweni 1989). The temporary nature of individual authority translated into a polycentered spatial organisation of cities. With regard to Great Zimbabwe, this is described as *guta*, meaning "multi-building settlements scattered across a colonially and arbitrarily defined 720 hectare of land" (Chirikure 2020: 52).

The polycentricism of Jenne-jeno and Great Zimbabwe, as described above, could be helpful in understanding the early Soba population. Assuming that early Soba followed such a pattern, then archaeologists have so far identified two zones of permanent architecture: Mound Z and Area CW. The discovered wooden architectural remains do not suggest continuity. It seems that the structure of wooden buildings changed much more dynamically than in the case of brick and stone buildings, which after all also recorded a few occupational phases.

The polycentricity in the Jenne-jeno and the Great Zimbabwe cases was interpreted as reflecting a community where power was not in the hands of an authoritarian leader or lineage, but was exercised by a larger group of individuals/families from among whom the leader could be chosen. If we assume that the exercise of power in Soba was similar in nature, then people in power in early Alwa may have been strongly associated with religious beliefs from the very beginning, because both areas are associated with buildings of a religious nature. The search for other potential centers in the early Soba layers may provide further information and verify this hypothesis.

Studies of the city's history in the following centuries can provide a base for considering changes to its organisation and the approach to governance. As it is, it appears that the city may have undergone a significant transformation, resulting in the establishment of a new religious and administrative center on Mound B around the 9th century, which from that time on would have dominated the urban landscape of Soba.

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How to cite this article: Drzewiecki, M. and Michalik, T. (2021). The beginnings of the Alwan capital of Soba in light of new archaeological evidence. *Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean,* 30/2, 419–438. https://doi.org/10.31338/uw.2083-537X.pam30.2.09

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