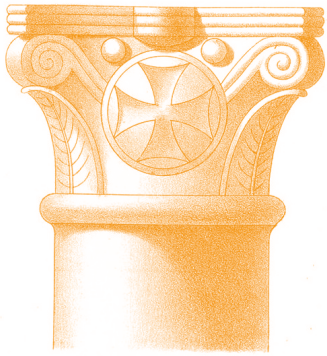
# Some notes on the Christian medieval heritage of the Gezira (central Sudan)



**Abstract**: The kingdom of Alwa, located in what is now Sudan, was a Nubian state on the southern outskirts of medieval Christendom. Despite its existence for almost a millennium, virtually nothing is known about its history, culture and administration. Focusing on the Gezira between the White and Blue Nile and the eastern shores of the latter, this article considers archaeology, medieval geographers and especially accounts from the 18th through the early 20th centuries to discuss towns and churches, Christianity and the impact of Alwa's legendary capital Soba on the memory of the Sudanese people. The author hopes to provide a useful introduction, inspiring further research on this enigmatic kingdom.

**Keywords**: Alwa, Soba, Nubia, Christianity, Nubian studies, Coptic studies, Middle Ages

Between the 6th and 15th centuries much of riverine Sudan was ruled by various Christian-Nubian kingdoms, most prominently Makuria and Alwa. The kingdom of Makuria, which bordered the Muslim state of Egypt, features most prominently in modern historiography due to the numerous written accounts of medieval Muslim geographers and the considerable amount of archaeological research conducted, especially in its far north (for an introduction to Christian Nubia see Welsby 2002; Werner 2013).

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Far more obscure is the southern Nubian kingdom of Alwa with its capital Soba, located on the lower Blue Nile near modern Khartoum. The most important sources of information about this kingdom are the three medieval accounts of al-Yaqubi (9th century), al-Aswani (10th century) and al-Makarim (12th century), which are especially helpful in regard of Alwa's geography and population. A contemporary account of the conversion of Alwa to Christianity in the 6th century, written by John of Ephesus, also exists (compiled and discussed in Zarroug 1991: 12–23). Despite the fact that the medieval sources described Alwa as a large and prospering kingdom, it has received very little attention from modern historians and archaeologists alike. The most relevant publications are Mohi Zarroug's *The Kingdom of Alwa*, an important but rather dated monograph from the early 1990s, as well as various works by the archaeologist Derek Welsby, who dug in Alwa's capital Soba in the 1980s and 1990s (Welsby and Daniels 1991; Zarroug 1991; Welsby 1998; 2014). Also noteworthy is the publication of Peter Shinnie's brief excavations at Soba as well as Balfour Paul's remark about Alwan remains on the Blue Nile (Balfour Paul 1952: 210–214; Shinnie 1961).

With such a pitiful amount of material available it is hardly a surprise that much of Alwa's history and culture is shrouded in mystery. These are the few facts that can be established about this kingdom:

- It was founded after the fall of the kingdom of Kush in the 4th century, but before the year 580, when it was recorded to have converted to Christianity (Welsby 2002: 32–33; Werner 2013: 45, 60–62).
- As a Sahelian kingdom it ruled over vast savannahs suited for agriculture and pastoralism, which in turn had a positive effect on its wealth and the size of the army it could field (Welsby 2014: 183).
- It developed its own script for a still poorly understood language dubbed "Alwan Nubian" (Breyer 2014: 188–190).
- It maintained close relations with Makuria, dynastic marriages seem to have occurred and there is evidence for an exchange of cultural influences. Some modern authors even propose a unification of the two states into a single political entity (for dynastic marriage, Welsby 2002: 89; Makurian influence on Alwan architecture and pottery, Danys and Zielińska 2017; unification hypothesis, Ruffini 2020: 764).
- Archaeological evidence from Soba confirms a decline of the urban centre starting from the 12th and 13th centuries. At the same time, Alwa disappeared from the works of contemporary geographers and historians. New, apparently independent political entities, like el-Abwab, emerged. Both Shinnie (1961: 76) and Welsby and Daniels (1991: 9) thought that the peak of Soba ended in the 12th century. The latter also mentioned a virtual absence of material dating after the 13th century. This observation was verified by the recent Polish excavations in Soba (M. Drzewiecki, personal communication). Various, apparently independent, chiefdoms

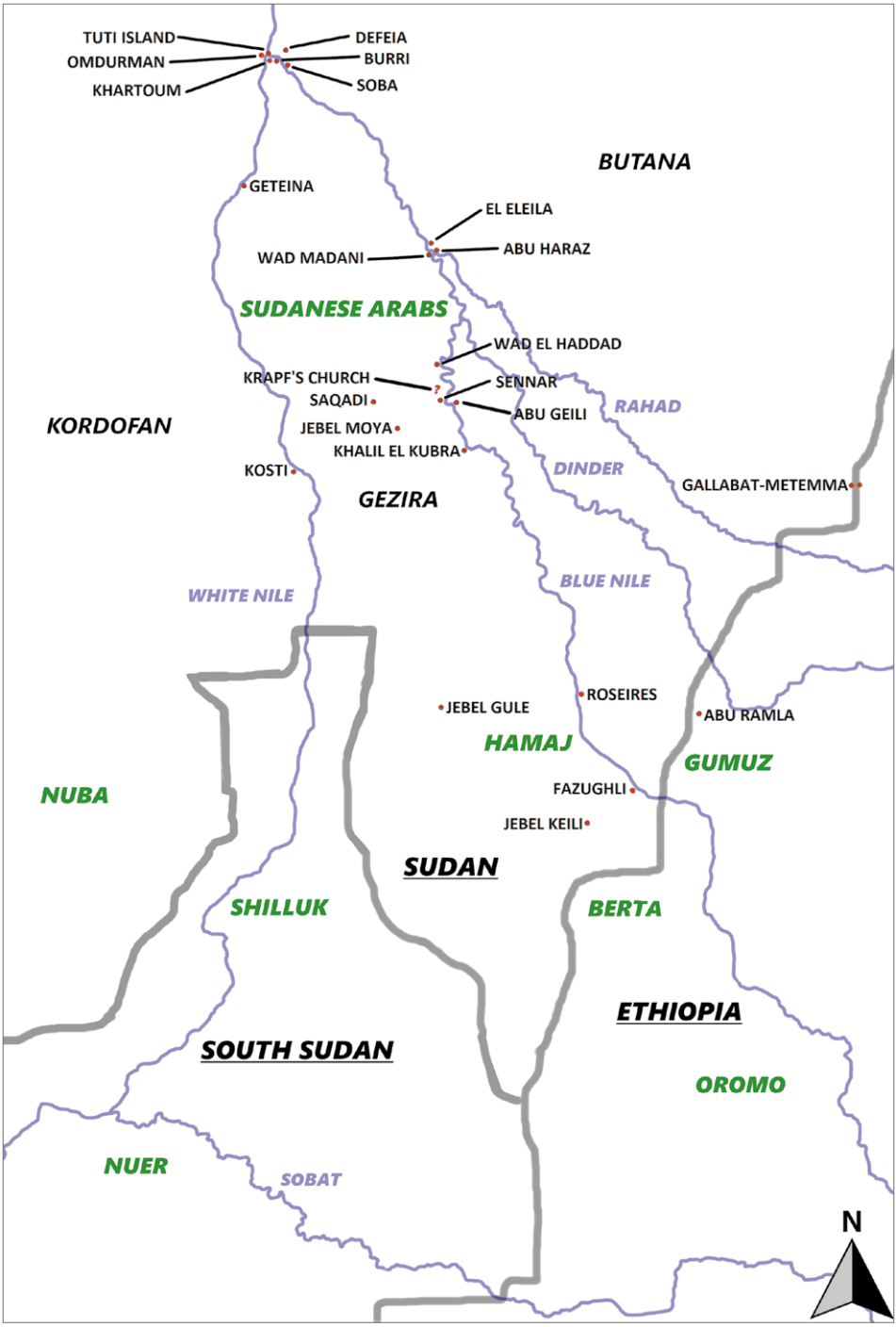


Fig. 1. The Gezira and its surroundings, showing the place names and peoples mentioned in the text (Editing G. Gerhards)

in central Sudan existing in the late 13th century were mentioned by Ibn Abd al-Zahir (see Vantini 1975: 426). For el-Abwab, once the northernmost province of Alwa and by the 13th century probably independent, see Welsby 2002: 254–255; Werner 2013: 127, 158–159.

- In the early 16th century, much of riverine Sudan was united under the rule of the Funj Sultanate, which introduced Islam as the official religion. The traveller David Reubeni passed through Soba in 1523 and confirmed that it was in ruins, even though it was still inhabited by people living in wooden huts. He also claimed that there existed a "kingdom of Soba", perhaps an Alwan successor or a rump state (O'Fahey and Spaulding 1974: 25–33; Spaulding 1974: 14; Vantini 1975: 751).

Alwa's influence is known to have been big, but its extent is hard to define, even the location of its border with Makuria is still unclear, although it was probably near the confluence of the Nile and the Atbara (Welsby 2014: 183–188). Its heartland, however, seemed to have been the Gezira, a more or less triangular "island" between the Blue and White Niles, as well as the Sobat river in the south (Zarroug 1991: 41). Well-suited for agriculture and pastoralism, parts of it were known to the medieval geographers as Kersa, whose inhabitants were obliged to provide food tributes to the royal crown in Soba. Except for this interesting clue, virtually nothing is known about the Alwan administration/influence in the Gezira, or any of the Alwan provinces for that matter (Zarroug 1991: 100).

Neither is the southern extent of the Alwan dominion clear, as expected, but the border is claimed to have lain in the land of a certain Tubli people (Welsby 2014: 183). The 10th-century diplomat al-Aswani, who visited Nubia in person, was told that some Alwan kings conducted lengthy, but ultimately unsuccessful expeditions to discover the southern end of the Gezira (Vantini 1975: 611–612). Archaeological evidence, as limited as it may be, seems to point to the hinterland of Sennar (the former Funj capital on the Blue Nile, almost 300 km upstream of Khartoum) as the southern end of Alwan influence: the southernmost known church is that of Saqadi, midway between the Blue and White Niles, while the southernmost location which yielded Alwan artifacts is Khalil el-Kubra, 40 km upstream of Sennar (Welsby 2002: 86). Recent surveys in Roseires on the upper Blue Nile confirmed that this region was once settled by Christians, although their culture, in particular their pottery, did not seem to have been affiliated with Alwa (Welsby 2014: 183). Pottery and spindle whorls inspired by Alwan material culture could be found as far southeast as the upper Dinder river in what is now western Ethiopia (A. González-Ruibal, personal communication).

Having briefly discussed the state of the sources and what little is known of Alwa's history and geography, it is time to address the purpose of this paper. Interested in the history and culture of medieval Nubia (in particular Alwa), as well as its legacy, I spent quite a lot of time researching this topic online, primarily via Google Books (https://books.google.com), Gallica (https://gallica.bnf.

fr/accueil/en/content/accueil-en) and the digital archives of the University of Heidelberg (https://www.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/Englisch/helios/digi/digilit.html). In the process I found literature from the 19th and early 20th centuries containing useful information about the former core of the kingdom of Alwa, the Gezira, that has, to my knowledge, not been discussed in modern works dealing with Christian Nubia. Were one to devote more time to research, one would surely find further resources. These accounts, primarily travelogues, will be presented here, together with a variety of publications that are already known to modern scholarship, some more extensively than others, but which are deemed important to recapitulate nonetheless. Thereby, the Alwan impact on the Gezira will be shown to be bigger than previously thought.

The paper has been organized in three parts. The first deals with accounts of Alwan towns and churches, briefly outlining what is known about Soba. The second part explores the impact of Christianity on the people of the Gezira, where Christian communities, and Christian and Christianity-inspired rituals, outlived the collapse of the medieval church by centuries. The third and final part discusses Soba and its place in Sudanese traditions, as well as its intriguing connection with the so-called Hamaj people of the southern Gezira.

## ALWAN TOWNS AND CHURCHES

It would be surprising were Soba to be the only town of the Alwan kingdom, despite the fact that medieval geographers failed to mention other urban centers in their accounts. The 10th-century geographer Ibn Hawqal spoke of an "uninterrupted chain of villages and a continuous strip of cultivated lands, so that a traveller may in one day pass through many villages, one joining the next…", which, on the one hand, implies prosperity, but on the other, a low degree of urbanization (Vantini 1975: 162–163). There are numerous mounds of red bricks along the Blue Nile, speculatively marking the remains of churches and other medieval buildings. Some sites have yielded a handful of Christian burials and artifacts (Monneret de Villard 1935: 269–274; Zarroug 1991: 64–68; Welsby 2014: 184–185). A few potentially medieval sites were discovered along the White Nile, but information is very limited. Christian pottery could apparently be found as far upstream as Kawa, 200 km south of Khartoum, while several inscribed bricks and a "perfect small bowl of fine ware with a stamped medallion of a gazelle in the middle" were discovered in Geteina, 80 km south of Khartoum (Crawford 1953: 26; Tsakos 2009: 206; Welsby 2014: 193).

There is no doubt that Soba, the seat of the royal house, located in a strategic spot near the confluence of the two Niles, must have been the most important settlement in the kingdom. Al-Aswani noted that the town had "fine buildings and large monasteries, churches rich with gold and gardens; there is also a great suburb where many Moslems live" (Vantini 1975: 614). Soba was surveyed in the 19th century and enjoys the privilege of being

the only Alwan site to be systematically excavated, although even here, over 90% of this threatened site still remains unexplored. The results of these excavations confirm its wealth and prosperity, and give many insights into the life of the ancient city (Shinnie 1961; Welsby and Daniels 1991; Welsby 1998; Drzewiecki et al. 2020).

To keep it brief, Soba was founded after the fall of the Kushite kingdom in the 4th century. By the 6th century, it had developed into a large urban center, measuring between 2 km² and 2.75 km², consisting of a multitude of structures made of brick, stone and timber. It probably had no city walls. Toward the town center was a large palatial structure, possibly the residence of the king or the bishop of the town. Nearby was a complex of three churches, two of which were basilicas of considerable size and easily comparable to the largest Makurian churches. Besides, there were several smaller churches (perhaps as many as 17), most interestingly the "mound C" church with its stone columns and fine capitals. Also remarkable are an early, pre-Christian temple(?) and another large building of presumably official character (Welsby 2002: 120, 153–154; 2014: 191–192, 197). Recent excavations uncovered several brick buildings, one of which contained a lime production zone (Drzewiecki et al. 2020: 236–242). All in all, as many as 30,000 people may have lived in Soba, which is a considerable population for a medieval town (Chandler and Fox 1974: 44). After the town declined and Islam was introduced, bricks from deserted buildings were taken for the construction of nearby graves of Muslim *fakirs* and, according to Robert Hartmann, the construction of the palace at Sennar (Werne 1848: 51–52; Hartmann 1884: 81). By the early 19th century, all of Soba's buildings had deteriorated to their present practically nonexistent state (Welsby and Daniels 1991: 9–10). The foundation of Khartoum also caused an almost industrial rush for Soba's bricks, which, according to the traveller Karl Lepsius (1852: 161), were arranged in heaps, ready to be transported to "Khartoum and beyond".

Moving downstream we reach the confluence of the two Niles in the far north of the Gezira. Now dominated by Khartoum, in the Alwan period it was a regional center. A now lost Christian site has been located at Burri in what is now eastern Khartoum. It was superficially investigated by Addison in 1929, who concluded that the site was once a small Christian town, but in his time it was being used as a quarry (Addison 1930). The site was already described as early as the 1840s, when Ferdinand Werne found the brick remains of Burri to be "insignificant, but widespread". He learned that the locals called the site *kenissa*, an Arabic term typically used to denote ruins associated with the Christian period (Werne 1852: 8). A German encyclopaedia from 1863 even noted the existence of a small church with an apse (Wagener 1863: 470). Another Christian site at the confluence of the two Niles was to be found on Tuti island, just north of Khartoum. During the Turkish conquest of Sudan in 1821, Frédéric Cailliaud was told about a "Christian ruin" there, which, however, he did not see himself (Cailliaud 1826/I: 198). Ten years later it was visited by Eduard von Callot,

who referred to the ruined building as a "Coptic church" (von Callot 1854: 112) To the east, at Defeia, Jean Vercoutter excavated a site devastated by brick robbers, where he found the ruins of two "great Christian edifices". Although this was in 1958, the discovery remains ill-known (Vercoutter 1961: 102).

Moving upstream on the right side of the Blue Nile, near its confluence with the Rahad, lies Abu Haraz. In 1851, Bayard Taylor claimed that remains of "an ancient Christian town" could be found nearby. In his time, the bricks from this site were being removed for the construction of Khartoum, bringing to light Christian artifacts: crosses, a rosary and a piece of incense (Taylor 1862: 302). It may have been the site where Linant de Bellefonds found in 1826 some ruins "of considerable extent", albeit noting that he did not find "any proof that they were ancient" (Linant de Bellefonds 1832: 188). Theodor von Heuglin passed by Abu Haraz in 1862, and wrote of several antiquities "from Meroitic and Christian times", which he considered "not uninteresting", although also remarking that "they seem to have been barely, or not at all, investigated by travellers". The first site could be found near Rufaa, roughly 40 km downstream from Abu Haraz, the second at a village called Mehemed Abu Asra, one hour walk from Abu Haraz, and finally Kordiqeli, two hours walk south of Abu Haraz, so apparently south of the confluence of the Nile and the Rahad. About the latter site, which was located on the eastern bank of the Blue Nile, von Heuglin wrote that there were "foundations made of large burnt bricks, crosses made of iron and silver and inscriptions carved into the bricks; the letters seem to be neither Coptic nor Demotic" (von Heuglin 1868: 449). One of these inscribed bricks, published by Alexandros Tsakos, is currently in the National Museum of Khartoum. It is the southernmost known Christian Nubian inscription (Tsakos 2009: 211–212). On the opposite side of the Blue Nile there is Wad Madani. In 1852, Pierre Trémaux claimed to have discovered "crypts and subterranean churches" in the proximity of the town. In Wad Madani itself "Christianity had also left traces that seem very ancient" (Trémaux 1863: 84). Nearby, at el-Eleila, there are remains of a large settlement of unclear date (Welsby 2014: 184–185).

Noteworthy in this context is the fact that in 1844, according to Lepsius, the name of Alwa was still associated with the eastern shore of the Blue Nile between Soba and Abu Haraz (Lepsius 1844: 389). It would be reasonable to suppose that the confluence of the two Niles and the confluence of the Blue Nile and the Rahad constituted once the core of the Alwan kingdom. It also appears likely that the vicinity of the mouth of the Rahad river was an important regional center for this southern Nubian kingdom.

Even further up the Blue Nile is the town of Sennar. Roughly 30 km downstream from Sennar, at Wad el Haddad, excavations in the early 20th century revealed several graves, yielding a "great quantity" of fine pottery, nearly all of them inscribed with Christian motifs (Artin 1911: 66–67). Archaeological research at the site of Abu Geili, east of Sennar, identified remains of a settlement, although the site itself seems to

have had its golden age in the Kushite period, drastically declining in significance afterwards. While some medieval artifacts, like imported Chinese celadon, have been found, there is actually no evidence of a Christian population (Zarroug 1991: 64–66; Welsby 2014: 192). At least two churches are known west of Sennar. The first is that of Saqadi, which is, as stated earlier, the most southerly of the Nubian churches known so far. Located at the foot of the eponymous Jebel Saqadi, it is a small, badly preserved red-brick building that was excavated in the early 20th century. It is of a rather unusual shape, as it was inserted into another pre-Christian building, but its layout, some of its bricks marked with crosses and its local association with Christianity leave little doubt that it once functioned as a church (Lejean 1865: 118; Crawford and Addison 1951: 111–142; Welsby and Daniels 1991: 322). The second church was reportedly to be found on a hill immediately southwest of Sennar, assuming that Johannes Krapf's claim of having passed the hill, but without actually seeing the ruins, upon leaving Sennar in 1855, is to be believed. He learned of the existence of this church beforehand from a Coptic official residing in Sennar. The fact that he placed it near the "white river" is obviously an error on Krapf's part (Krapf 1858: 381). Together with the church of Saqadi, the church identified by Krapf is the southernmost Nubian church that we are aware of.

So, why are there so few known Alwan towns and churches, especially in comparison to Makuria in the north? The pitiful state of research aside, the environment and population pressure must have played a significant role. Buildings made of sun-dried mud brick would be exposed to rain and flooding, while red bricks were a sought-for building material for reuse. Some Alwan towns may have outlived the fall of Soba and continued to be inhabited, resulting in an overbuilding of medieval layers. Meanwhile, most medieval Nubian churches were not converted into mosques, but were left to decay (Adams 1977: 543–544). Mosques were only of secondary relevance in Sudanese Islam. More important was the worship of Islamic saints, while prayers were often conducted in simple enclosures of mud and straw (Adams 1977: 569, 576). The Copt al-Makarim wrote in the 12th century that there were 400 churches in the Alwan realm, but locating even half of them would be a small wonder (Welsby 2002: 153). After enduring more than 500 years of exposure to rain, floods and brick-robbing, the vast majority of the Alwan churches in the Gezira would be either overbuilt or reduced to their ground floors, if not their negatives. Should there be any chance for the discovery of well-preserved Alwan churches, possibly even with fine wall paintings, like those from the Makurian churches of Faras, Dongola and Banganarti, it would probably lie in the more arid and less densely populated region of Butana in the north. If various accounts from the 19th century are to be believed, the Nile Valley between Dangeil and Shendi, *ergo* the far north of the former Alwan kingdom, may be especially rich in architectural remains from the Christian period (Cailliaud 1822: 678; Lejean 1865: 107; Carcereri 1876: 69).

## ALWAN CHRISTIANITY AND ITS LEGACY

The Alwan kingdom was converted to Christianity on the initiative of an unnamed king, who approached the king of Nobatia (which was soon after absorbed by Makuria). The latter sent Bishop Longinus who arrived in the Alwan capital around 580 and converted the king and the local population to Christianity. The established branch of Christianity was Monophysitism, competing at this time with the more widespread Chalcedonian branch that was also the one that the Byzantine Empire officially adhered to. The Alwan church, like the Nobatian and later Makurian, was subordinate to the Coptic Patriarch of Alexandria (Werner 2013: 60–62). A number of Coptic documents from the 12th–15th centuries lists names of Alwan bishoprics, although the actual names and numbers (at least two, at most six) of the bishops are different between the documents. Possible locations of bishoprics include Soba and Amkoul (identified by Robin Seignobos with central Kordofan west of the White Nile), but there are also some like Martin or Gougara, the locations of which have not been identified (Seignobos 2015). It would be reasonable to assume that an archbishopric existed in Soba, although evidence is lacking (Łajtar and Ochała 2017: 259). According to al-Aswani, Alwa's bishops were consecrated by the Patriarchate of Alexandria (Vantini 1975: 614).

Differently than in Nobatia, in Alwa only a couple of pagan temples from the Kushite period (while there are dozens known from the western Butana) appear to have been converted into churches and even these two are not clearly identified (Werner 2013: 54–56, 62). This implies that the Alwan kings did not pursue as extensive a Christianization campaign as their Nobatian counterparts. Most likely, the process of Christianization was slower than in northern Nubia, taking place over the course of several centuries. The sparse archaeological evidence of pottery and burials suggests that some of the Alwan communities were Christian in name only, while others remained pagan altogether (Edwards 2001: 92–94, 95; Werner 2013: 164). Alleged pagan burials are known even from the late phase of Soba, although it is unclear if the deceased were locals or foreigners, possibly even raiders from the south, who briefly occupied the town (Werner 2013: 115; Welsby 2014: 195). It seems, therefore, that Christianity may have become the official religion, but traditional religions continued to exist and were probably tolerated (Werner 2013: 160).

Could it be that Christianity was adopted in only a perfunctory manner by the people of central Sudan? Perhaps the Nubians never understood their new faith for linguistic reasons, in particular because of an overreliance on Greek or Coptic? Could it be that it was restricted to the urban dwellers? All these assumptions were once applied to the Makurian Nubians to explain why they eventually abandoned Christianity for Islam, but the huge progress made in recent decades in evaluating the ever-increasing archaeological material, as well as Makurian documents and graffiti, has confirmed the great impact of Christianity on every class of Makurian society. Churches and

priests populated even remote villages, and al-Makarim's claim about 400 Alwan churches being in existence suggests that such was the case of Alwa as well (Werner 2013: 171–174). It is also important to point out that, according to al-Aswani, the Alwans wrote in both Greek and their native language (Vantini 1975: 614). This likely meant that, like in Makuria, religious literature was translated into Nubian and used for saying Mass, making it accessible to the non-Greek speaking population (Werner 2013: 197–198).

Important clues concerning the impact Christianity had on the medieval Nubians are also provided by ethnographic research on the modern descendants of the Makurians and Alwans. Many modern apotropaic rituals linked with childbirth, marriage or sickness were most likely of Christian origin and were still practiced in 20th-century Sudan, especially in the Nubian-speaking north, but also to a lesser degree in the Arabized Gezira (Vantini 1982; Werner 2013: 177–184). The sign of the cross is especially prevalent in these rituals. In the Christian period, the cross was a popular display of faith and a symbol of power that kept evil and sickness away (for a discussion of the cross in medieval Nubian culture see Werner 2013: 355–366) [*Fig. 2*]. After the Nubians had converted to Islam, it was somewhat reinterpreted: while still being used in prophylactic manner, it became a symbol of faithlessness, so unholy that it kept even the supernatural forces of the "evil eye" away. The "evil eye" is normally associated with the look of ugly and old people, as well as non-Muslims, causing harm to Muslims. Thus, the cross started to be used as an unholy symbol to keep the unholy forces at bay (Gerster 1964: 180; Al Safi 2007: 90–92, 136–138). In northern Nubia, the fear of the infidels' glance was so great that Christian wall paintings regularly had the eyes of figural representations cut out, something that could have also happened to images in the churches of the Gezira

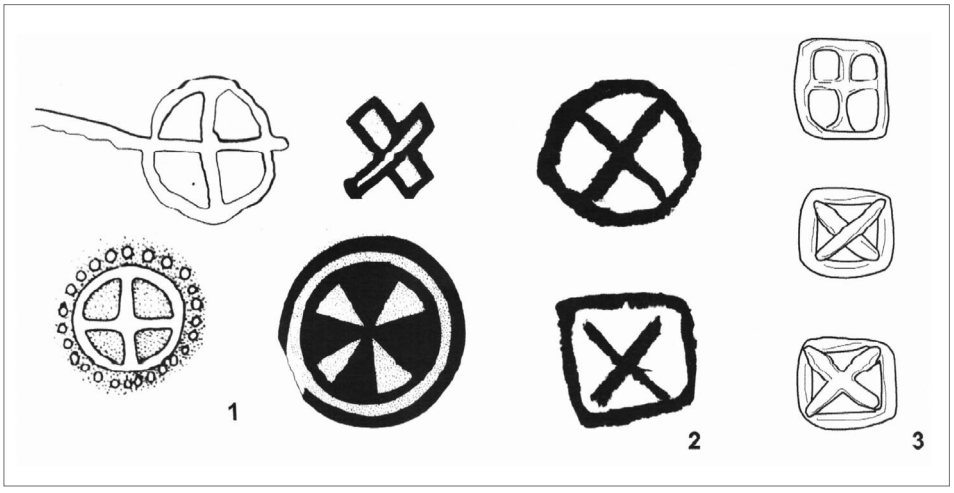


Fig. 2. The sign of the cross: 1 – on pottery from Soba; 2 – scarifications of the Gumuz people; 3 – on granaries from Abu Ramla, western Ethiopia (Drawing A. González-Ruibal)

(Adams 1977: 544). In any case, while the meaning of the cross changed after the fall of Christianity, the rituals probably remained the same, as may be attested by their 20th century descriptions. The first comes from John Crowfoot who, in 1918, described rituals from the area around Khartoum, that is, also the Soba environs:

> "... there are two or three superstitious practices still prevalent here which can hardly be explained except as survivals from the Christian period. For example, when a child is born it is the custom on the first day to mark a small cross, they call it *salib*, upon the child's forehead and lines upon the eyebrows: the marks are made with black grease or with kohl which is also put on the eyelids as a charm against the evil eye."

Together with a knife and a Quran the cross was meant to "frighten away the Jinn". On the seventh day after giving birth to a child, a sheep would be sacrificed and its blood used to "mark the cross". The cross would be redrawn with either "blood or grease or kohl for the first forty days" (Crowfoot 1918: 55–56). These practices belonged to a larger ceremony, called the "fortieth day after birth": 40 days after delivery, the mother and child, who until that point had both lived in seclusion, were finally allowed to leave the house and travel to the Nile, accompanied by friends and family singing and waving palm branches. Once at the Nile, a ritual washing would follow—again echoing the Christian ritual of baptism. Occasionally, Christian saints like Mary or John the Baptist were invoked. Much as this ceremony was popular as far north as lower Nubia, no records of this ritual south of Khartoum have been attested (Vantini 1982: 27–30).

The sign of the cross was also used to combat pain and to restore physical well-being. Crawfoot watched a ceremony where a Sheikh would chalk a "large white cross of the Greek pattern" on the boy's abdomen, justifying the practice by saying it was "a common charm for pain in that region". Furthermore, the Christian symbol was thought to protect food from spoiling by repelling the Jinn from it. Crowfoot wrote that "in Omdurman and elsewhere it is the custom to lay two pieces of straw in the shape of a cross. Similarly on sweets which are made in the morning for a banquet of wedding feast." On the sweets almonds were placed in the shape of a cross. Crowfoot concluded that these customs were not restricted to the hinterland of Khartoum, but were "common, though not of course universal, in Omdurman, the Gezira and Kordofan" (Crowfoot 1918: 56).

Nine years later he remarked that

> "the only certain relic of Christianity which I can detect in the life of the people today is the use of the sign of the Cross as an apotropaic talisman: I have seen it on the great earthen vessels used for storing grain in Dongola and on gourds in the White Nile province, and in many parts it is painted on the foreheads of newborn infants and on the bodies of children when they are ailing" (Crowfoot 1927: 149).

The account of J. Chataway, written in 1930, is also important. He starts off with a claim that there "is evidence of the link of a common religion up the Blue Nile at the time of the Christian kingdom of Soba, and that the country was subject to Soba" (Chataway 1930: 247). Focusing primarily on the Roseires district of the upper Blue Nile, he recorded, like Crowfoot, a "christening ceremony" of a child where it would have "a cross marked on its forehead with charcoal". Youths having trouble breathing would mark their chest with a cross using earth. Sick people would wear around their wrists or neck "a coin which has a head and a cross on it … as a prophylactic". A Sudanese informant also told Chataway that all these customs "occur in the Gezira, particularly among women" (Chataway 1930: 256).

The oath-taking ceremony was yet another custom including crosses known from the banks of the Blue Nile. A man would draw a cross on his forehead and across the chest with a paste made of flour, salt and ash before picking up a stick, breaking it and pronouncing the oath formula (Vantini 1982: 38–39).

The sign of cross continues to be used as a prophylactic even further south. In 1821, Cailliaud noted that some Berta worshippers of the moon (soon to be converted to Islam anyway) still incised Christian crosses on their pottery (Cailliaud 1826/II: 21). The Berta claim to have come from the north (Roseires?) a few hundred years before, possibly in the 17th century (Triulzi 1981: 21–25). The Nuer, in what is now South Sudan, also once worshippers of the moon, used to draw crosses on their foreheads, which they called a "god's sign" (Al Safi 2007: 63). To the east, around Abu Ramla in what is now western Ethiopia, the Gumuz-speaking natives apply a cross inside a square on their granaries and incise the same symbol on their bodies and faces (A. González-Ruibal, personal communication). Ethnic groups, like the ones described above, may have actually never converted to the Christian faith in the first place, which, nonetheless, did not prevent them from picking up and adopting certain rituals from their northern neighbors.

Thus, it seems to quote Krapf that "without a doubt, Christianity was spread over the peninsular between the white and blue river" (Krapf 1858: 381–382). Christianization in the south may have not been as rapid and thorough as in northern Nubia, still it infilrated into the culture of large parts of the population deep enough to keep its practices alive even after the collapse of the Church between the 13th and 16th centuries and the subsequent conversion to Islam.

The question of how long communities identifying themselves as Christian persisted in the Gezira is an intriguing one. It seems certain that despite a gradual decline in numbers, they continued to exist for several centuries, throughout much of the lifespan of the Funj Sultanate. If the traveller Evliya Çelebi is to be believed, some pious Christian individuals could still be found in or near ("Eylafūn u-Dunqula"; see below) Soba as late as 1672. He did not explicitly call them "Christians", but *rayah*, which he used on other occasions to refer to Christian subjects of the Ottomans (Habraszewski 2006–2007: 206–207). Exactly 70 years later, a Franciscan missionary residing in

Upper Egypt described a community of Christian Nubians living near Dongola (then a part of the Funj Sultanate) and another community assumedly near Sennar, "but till now we could have no correct information about this" (Vantini 1970: 141–143). The Catholic missionary Charles Poncet, who visited the town of Sennar at the end of the 17th century, noted that its Muslim inhabitants would, upon meeting a Christian, recite the *shahada*. He does not clarify, however, if these Christians were natives or foreigners like himself (Poncet 1709: 26).

A note by James Bruce, who travelled in Ethiopia and the Sudan between 1768 and 1773, is more concrete. He records having been told about a principality called Shaira in the Fazughli region, south of Roseires. Its ruler, apparently subject to the ruler of Fazughli, bore the typical Sudanese title *mak*, proving that he was not affiliated with the Ethiopian Emperor, but rather with the Funj. Unlike the neighboring chiefs, he was neither Muslim nor pagan, but ruled over a "Christian state" (Murray 1808: 422). Sadly, nothing else is known about this petty kingdom and the form of Christianity it practiced, but it was probably mostly nominal and without a functioning church. In any case, it is remarkable that a Christian chief was allowed to rule on behalf of the Muslim Funj, especially considering that the Christian community mentioned in 1742 near Dongola was reportedly suffering from sectarian violence (Vantini 1970: 141). Also noteworthy is the sheer distance between Fazughli and the former heart of Alwan Christianity on the lower Blue Nile.

Were there still Christians in the upper Blue Nile region in the 19th century? Krapf speculated that "Christian left-overs" could have still inhabited this region, not unlike the Oromo domains in southern Ethiopia, "where in some places, Christians had retreated to steep mountains and lived isolated from the entire Christendom", surrounded by pagans and Muslims (Krapf 1858: 381–382). While this might be possible, there does not seem to be any specific evidence for this assumption. As an exception one may consider a letter of an Italian missionary published in the *Les Missions Catholiques* newspaper, the 1876 issue, where one can read that there lived a community of Christian Nubians in Gallabat-Metemma. While the mention of Christian Nubians at this late date is highly intriguing and deserves to be discussed elsewhere, it seems reasonable to assume that these Christians could have been recent migrants from northern Sudan (Carcereri 1876: 69). In general, it must be noted that by the 19th century, the population south of Sennar was described either as nominal Muslim or pagan. Perhaps some of the latter had once been nominal Christians, as suggested by an anonymous traveller who thought that "some of the wild tribes to the north and northwest of that kingdom [Abyssinia] had once been Christian, and had only ceased so to be by slow degrees". One of these tribes supposedly called itself "the followers of the Prophet of the Palm Branch" (G.H.F. 1850: 64). By that time, all inhabitants at the confluence of the two Niles seem to have converted to Islam. Still, there is evidence that at least until the beginning of the 20th century, some people of Soba were still aware of their Christian heritage: a local, aged sheikh told the British missionary

Llewellyn Gwynne that "his grandfathers (ancestors) were all Christian, but were forced to accept Islam by the conquerors" (Ward 1905: 143).

## MEMORIES OF SOBA

The impact of Alwa and Soba on the memory of the Sudanese people is ambivalent. People are largely unaware of Alwan history and, being largely Arabized and therefore tracing their origins to the Arabian Peninsula, they do not even consider the Alwans as their ancestors. Yet there are some individuals, in particular members of the well-established Moghraba tribe, which is recorded to have lived around Soba at least from the early 19th century, who display a certain sense of pride in Soba. A local school even bears the name "The Kingdom of Soba" (Drzewiecki et al. 2020: 242–243; on the Moghraba see MacMichael 1922: 316–318).

While on average, the Sudanese know virtually nothing about Alwan history, there is one event that features very prominently in folklore, and that is the destruction of Soba. This event must have been a dramatic one, for it has left a great impact on the Sudanese people, who processed this event in various oral traditions. In 1951, Crawford thought that "[t]he fall of Soba must have been a catastrophe of the first order of magnitude, for its repercussions have lasted in tradition and even today Soba is quoted as an example of complete annihilation. Its memory is tinged with regret…" (Crawford 1951: 28). Some traditions described the destruction of Soba as one "which one will never see the like", resulting in a total depopulation of the town, so that "only owls perched there howling within the walls"(Vantini 2006: 489). The "regret" mentioned by Crawford could certainly be felt in 1672, when Çelebi visited a site near the confluence of the two Niles that he called "Eylafūn u-Dunqula", probably same with the village of al-Aylafun just south of Soba (his "u-Dunqula" could be a reference to town inhabitants with roots in Dongola in northern Nubia). Seemingly conflating al-Aylafun and Soba, he wrote:

> "When [the] Funj conquered its fortress/castle [they] totally demolished [it], [so that] still today the people of Dunqula of Berberistan [Nubia] say with a deep sigh: 'Oh Eylafūn! If only we could have back the paradise of Eylafūn, we would not want the paradise in the next world!" (Habraszewski 2006–2007: 200).

According to many Sudanese traditions the town was destroyed around 1500, although they do not agree on who was the attacker: the Funj from the south or the Arab Abdallab federation from the north (Welsby 2002: 255). Probably neither of these tales are historically accurate, since, as seen above, the town was already largely ruined by the 14th century. It is possible, of course, that these traditions simply have the date wrong. In any case, another popular and rather misogynistic Sudanese folktale ascribes Soba's destruction to a beautiful but highly deceitful and greedy woman called Ajoba,

a native to the town. She caused great devastation by manipulating nearby kings who sought to marry her daughter. The tale of Ajoba is a personification of several Sudanese tropes associated with the pre-Islamic period, in particular chaos, barbarism and matrilineality, a state of affairs believed to have ended with the arrival of the Muslim Abdallab and Funj. The phrase "Ajoba destroyed Soba" is still used to describe destructive women (Drzewiecki et al. 2020: 243–244). This phrase is a variation of the proverb "to be destroyed like Soba", which indicates utter annihilation (Crawford 1951: 152). Much as the traditions and proverbs may differ, they all attribute Soba's fall to dramatic and violent man-instigated events.

In the recent past, Soba's memory was not just associated with destruction and decline. In 1974, a respected researcher of early modern Sudan, Jay Spaulding, analysed several 19th-century traditions from the upper Blue Nile and concluded that after the fall of Soba, some Alwan Christians gradually retreated upstream, to the hilly country of Fazughli and its surroundings, where they established a new Christian kingdom that lasted until its conquest by the Funj in the 17th century. The Alwans subsequently became known as Hamaj or Anaj. From the mid-18th century the Hamaj took control of the Funj state and practically ruled it until the Egyptian conquest in 1821 (Spaulding 1974: 21–25).

The most important sources for this hypothesis are the accounts of Pierre Trémaux and Alfred Peney, who visited the upper Blue Nile in the mid-19th century. Here, a local *makdom* of Fazughli existed subject to the Turkish colonial regime. Trémaux and Peney collected various traditions that ascribed Fazughli's ruling house a glorious history with roots in Soba. According to Peney (1885: 45), "[T]he ancestors of this *mek* [...] were from the island of Sennar, where they had their fixed capital in the ancient Soba". From Soba their "rule extended over a large part of the island of Sennar". When the Funj arrived in the northern Gezira in the early 16th century, they "were forced to give way before the newcomers and retreat to their mountains, where they maintained themselves by paying an annual tribute to the [Funj] *mak* of Sennar" (Peney 1882: 398). Therefore, it was the Funj conquest of Soba that caused the "empire of Fazughli" to emerge "from the debris of the kingdom of Soba" (Peney 1885: 45).

Meanwhile, Trémaux failed to even differentiate between the kingdoms of Fazughli and Alwa (Trémaux 1863: 195). His remark that the kingdom of Alwa/Fazughli managed to maintain its rule over the eastern shore of the Blue Nile is very interesting because it implies that the lower Blue Nile was only gradually abandoned to the Funj (Trémaux 1863: 194). Was this receding Alwa the "kingdom of Soba" mentioned by David Reubeni in 1523? Trémaux wrote that "... it was during the rule of *mak* Unsa II [1681–1692] when Sennar conquered the state of Alwa, where another dynasty seems to have reigned. The inhabitants, [once] forced to take refuge in the mountains of Fazughli, were pursued there; conquered again, they became tributaries of Sennar" (Trémaux 1863: 195). Spaulding (1974: 21) thinks that the conquest of Fazughli occurred around 1685.

Finally, there is a brief passage from the so-called "Funj Chronicle", a Sudanese Arabic historiography from the 19th century: "After the victory of the Funj over the Nuba [of Soba], the latter scattered and fled to Fazughli and Kordofan" (Vantini 1975: 788). This account confirms that it was traditional lore among the Arabized population north of Sennar that people had migrated from Soba to Fazughli.

Peney thought that the ruling elite of the Fazughli kingdom was made up of a people known as the Hamaj, who, according to him, settled from Fazughli to as far downstream as Sennar, although their language was also spoken on most of the hills west of the Blue Nile (Peney 1885: 47–48). According to traditions collected in the Anglo-Egyptian period, this "rapidly disappearing race" once inhabited much of the southern Gezira as far north as Jebel Moya near Saqadi. "Hamaj" does not refer to a specific ethnic group or tribe, but is a negatively connotated Arabic exonym applied to a variety of heterogenous people in this region, while the Hamaj themselves had no understanding of a common identity. Instead, they often simply referred to themselves by the names of the respective hills that they inhabited. The term probably also contained a political component, describing their vassal relationship with the Funj aristocracy they were ruled by, at least in the 19th and early 20th centuries (Seligman and Seligman 1932: 415–416; for a discussion of the identity of the Hamaj and their relationship with the Funj Sultanate see Triulzi 1981: 57–85). Even if their names are very similar, the Hamaj should probably not be equated with the Anaj: while the first term is used to describe a variety of living people, the latter refers to an extinct, mythical and white-skinned people of Sudanese folklore, often said to be responsible for building the many ancient and medieval monuments of the Nubian Nile Valley and Kordofan (MacMichael 1912: 86–91). To come back to the identity of the Hamaj: Peney considered them to be distinct from other local ethnic groups like the Berta or Gumuz. They had only recently converted to Islam and preserved so many pagan customs that Peney, in typical 19th century fashion, thought of them as uncivilized savages (Peney 1885: 46–48). Especially the claims regarding their perceived savagery and the strong presence of paganism appear striking and conflict with the idea of a people deriving from an ancient Christian kingdom that built big churches and had their own script. They also did not speak a Nubian language, but had one of their own: according to de Pruyssenaere, this language was essentially identical to Ingessana/Gaam (a so-called Eastern Jebel language) and was spoken from Jebel Gule to as far southeast as Jebel Keili near the Ethiopian border (de Pruyssenaere 1877: 7). Linguistic material collected in the region confirms the presence of a variety of languages, including the extinct Gule language, Ingessana, Gumuz and Berta (Bryan 1945: 189–191).

One may ask: were the claims of an Alwan origin ideologically motivated to justify the reign of the *mak* of Fazughli, perhaps stemming from pre-Islamic times when the *mak* did not adopt an Arabic genealogy as was fashionable in the Muslim north, but instead boasted of an ancestry from Soba, the legendary

metropolis on the lower Blue Nile? This cannot be ruled out. After all, claiming to be the rightful heir of the kingdom of Soba was also an important aspect of legitimization for the post-medieval rulers in the north: the "Funj Chronicle" puts an emphasis on the prosperity of Soba (by borrowing a description of the town by al-Aswani) before the Funj conquered it and supposedly made it their capital. The Abdallab tribe meanwhile, who ruled northern Sudan on behalf of the Funj, insist that it was their eponymous tribal ancestor Abdallah who destroyed the kingdom of Soba and inherited its "bejewelled crown" (Adams 1977: 538–539, 599). All that can be said with reasonable certainty is that as of the early 17th century, a kingdom of Fazughli did exist: a Portuguese source from 1607 noted that it had access to fine horses and gold, which it traded with the Ethiopian empire. Which religion it adhered to is not mentioned, which might imply that it was pagan, not Christian (Triulzi 1981: 58).

It must be pointed out that the memory of Soba was certainly not restricted to the ruling elite of Fazughli. The Alwan town was, for example, the subject of this unbreakable Hamaj oath: "I swear by Soba, the home of my grandfathers and grandmothers, which make the stone float and the cotton ball sink" (Chataway 1930: 256). It was also a popular place name in the region for both inhabited and ruined towns (Vantini 1982: 38). The Hamaj of Jebel Gule associated Soba with a great queen, whom they considered their ancestress. Women would pray to her at sacred stones and rocks bearing the same name, usually asking *haboba soba* ("grandmother Soba") for safe travel, relief from illnesses, rich harvests, healthy marriages and many children [*Fig. 3*]. Men did not take part

Fig. 3. Two Hamaj women leaning against a Soba rock, Jebel Gule (1910) (Photo C.G.Seligman: https://web.prm.ox.ac.uk/southernsudan/details/1967.26.189/index.html)

in the Soba cult, although they may have done so in the past (Seligman and Seligman 1932: 428–429; Delmet 1981: 33–43). The worship of such sacred stones was common throughout the southern Gezira and even among the Shilluk along the western banks of the White Nile, even if they were not always called "Soba". It is unlikely, however, that the people of the southern Gezira of the 19th century still understood the original Soba as a concrete physical place. Many centuries after the destruction of the town, all that remained of the memory of Soba were stones, divine queens and rituals (González-Ruibal 2014: 176–177).

## ADDENDUM

It seems that as late as the 19th century crosses were not just painted on the forehead, but even worn as jewellery. When Lord Prudhoe visited a village in the central Gezira in 1829 he noticed that among the locals, "[a] cross of gold is not unusually worn, the remains of now-forgotten Christianity; it is called shegar (the true)" (Prudhoe 1835: 54).

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