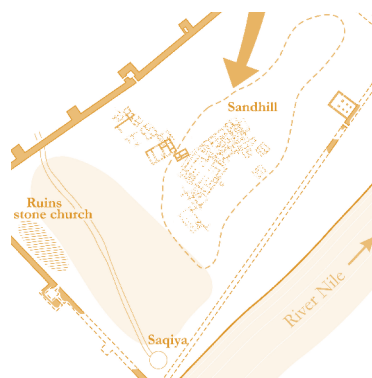


Pachoras: a brief history of the town from the 5th to the 7th centuries



Abstract: Pachoras was an important town in mid-5th century AD Nobadia, but its steady urban development was broken by a flood of catastrophic proportions occurring sometime in the beginning of the second half of the 5th century AD. The devastated settlement and so-called Enclosure remained deserted until the close of the 6th century. A sand dune rising 5 m in height accumulated in the meantime inside the enclosure, and it is on this hill that the Cathedral of Aetios, the first of the medieval stone cathedrals of Pachoras, was constructed before the end of the 6th century.

Keywords: Makuria, Nobadia, Pachoras, destruction of the enclosure

The large “valley of Pachoras” was inhabited from the Neolithic period (A-Group) through Ottoman times and, to be true, even through the mid-20th century, until a time when the Nubian Lake put a definite end to any research, fragmentary at best in any case, in this region. Archaeological excavations have helped to outline the history of settlement in the late Meroitic period and the broadly understood Christian period, chiefly within the frame of the Kingdom of Makuria. The times of the see of Pachoras and its cathedrals are indeed the brightest period in the history of this agglomeration (Jakobielski 1972; Kubińska 1974; Godlewski 2006; Jakobielski et al. 2017).

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There is no doubt today about the millennial continuity of occupation in this part of the Nile valley, which was at its widest here in the section between the First and Second Cataracts. The topographic conditions were advantageous to human settlement, but at the same time they posed a threat. The low flat riverbank where Pachoras was located, stretching roughly 2 km inland to the rock cliff in the west, was easily inundated by the Nile flood, which occasionally took on catastrophic proportions. One of the greatest disasters of this kind occurred in Pachoras in the 6th century AD, in all likelihood between 530 and 550.

The date of this cataclysm has been confirmed so far only by archaeological evidence from Pachoras on the one hand (Adams 1986: 19) and Dongola on the other (Godlewski 2019), but the part of the Nile Valley that sustained damage in the outcome of this event must have been much more extensive, perhaps even including Egypt. The issue of this climatic anomaly obviously merits a broader and detailed examination.¹ Suffice it to say that there

are two archaeologically recorded events significant for reconstructing local history from the 5th to the 7th centuries:

1) destruction and abandonment of the citadel at Pachoras (dubbed the Enclosure by early researchers) and the settlement architecture further north of the hill, and

2) emergence of a new political center at Ikhmindi, which a surviving inscription suggests was founded by the Nubian King Tokiltoeton from the second half of the 6th century (Donadoni 1959; Deichmann and Grossmann 1988: 81–88). The phrase that “the fortification was built for the safety of men and animals”, which reflects societal response to a situation of threat, could be a reference to a natural cataclysm(s) like a deluge, perhaps repeated, of unseen proportions.

In the late Meroitic period, between the 2nd century BC and the 4th century AD, Pachoras was one of the more populous settlements between the First and Second Cataracts. The population was also socially differentiated, judging by the diversity of tomb superstructures

1 The link between global climatic changes and variations of the Nile discharge has already been reported, the Nile flood maxima and minima being a direct factor of the intensity of the rainy monsoon season in the Ethiopian highlands feeding the sources of the Nile (Hassan 1981; data from AD 640 to the present). Recently, the possibilities of modeling clusters of volcanic eruptions, ultimately in order to analyze the societal response to a climatic or environmental shock, as in the case of droughts caused by Nile failure, is being explored by the “Yale Nile Initiative” headed by Joseph Manning; this collaborative project to be concluded in 2023 is focused on Ptolemaic Egypt (305–30 BC) (Manning et al. 2017). A discussion of climate modeling and societal resilience in the Eastern Mediterranean in the past millennium, with references to methodological issues and further reading, can be found in Xoplaki et al. 2018. It should be kept in mind, however, that recent extensive research into ice-core records of volcanic eruptions, which is offering a new tool for dating episodes of environmental stress, concerns drought rather than excess floods, hence the evidence offered is still circumstantial, e.g., Michael McCormick speaking of a series of volcanic eruptions that caused climatic changes from Britain to China (and Ethiopia in the south), ushering in a cooling that recent studies have shown to be at the root of drought, crop failure, a breakdown in food supply chains, and famine (see Gibbons 2018).

discovered by Francis Llewellyn Griffith at an extensive Meroitic cemetery (Griffith 1924; 1925). The settlement connected with this burial ground was located most probably in the northeastern part of the wide valley, near the river, but there is nothing in the archaeological record to substantiate its existence. The fortifications of the Enclosure (Citadel), which could be seen on the surface, were explored in part by Griffith (1926: 25–29, Pls XXI–XXX) and then documented

by Leonard Wooley in 1912 [Fig. 1]. The early dating of these defenses to the late Meroitic period proved unjustified in the light of later research. Ugo Monneret de Villard (1941) moved the construction of the citadel to the 4th/5th century AD, and this view has never been challenged.

Being a complex second in size only to Dongola in all of the kingdom, the Pachoras Citadel was probably made into the seat of the rulers of Nobadia following the transfer of the royal necropolis from

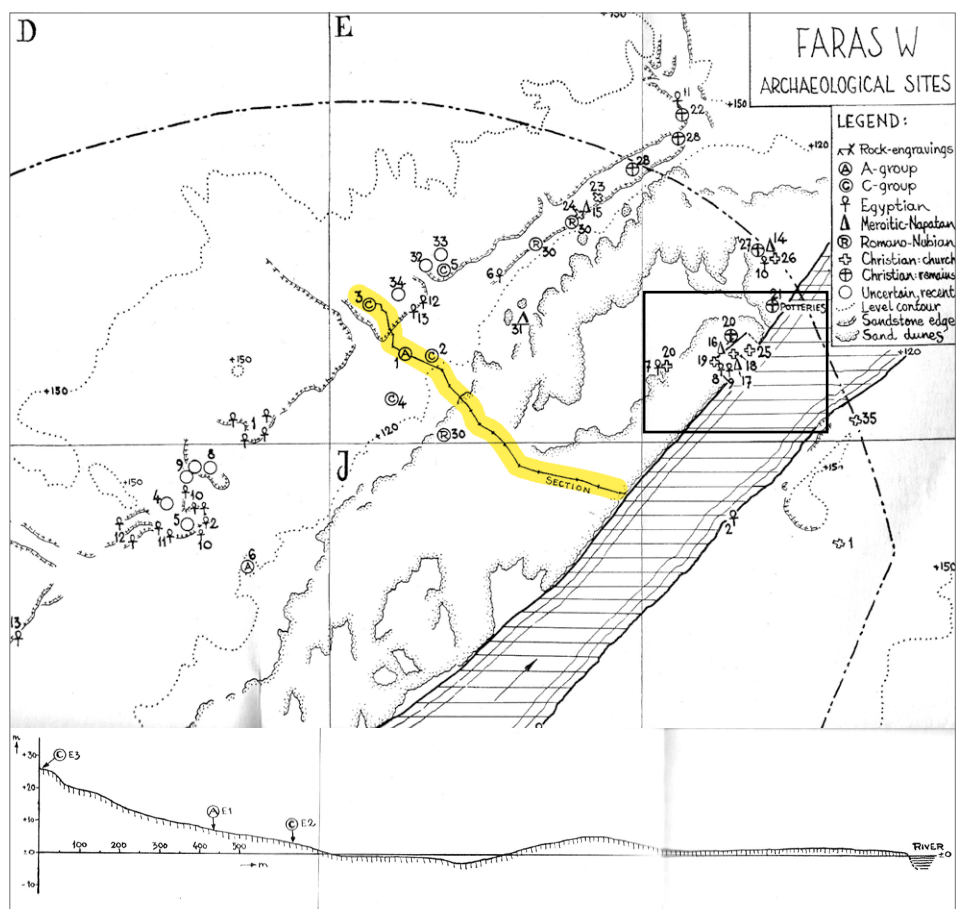


Fig. 1. Archaeological sites in Faras West; box, the site of the citadel and the pottery workshops on the riverbank; bottom, section looking north (downriver) (Map H.-A. Nordstrom; reproduced after Adams 1961a: Fig. 1)

Qustul to Ballaña, an event which has been dated hypothetically to the mid 5th century AD. Therefore, the citadel would have taken on importance as an administrative center of the kingdom, its location justified from an economic point of view as well as meeting security needs. Standing on the western Nile bank, far from the mouth of Wadi al-Allaqi, it would have afforded protection to a sizable population in danger, probably quite real, of being attacked by marauding desert tribes.

The Enclosure was filled with official

and private architecture, of which nothing remained except the stone-built Rivergate Building, which was transformed into a church in the late period (Griffith 1926: 66–86, Pls XLVI–LIX). The catastrophe caused by a high Nile and perhaps also intensive rainfall was sudden and tremendously destructive. The flood breached the eastern curtain of the fortifications and annihilated the largely mud-brick architecture of the town leaving behind only the stone elements, mainly doorways and foundations [Fig. 2]. Villages in Sudan

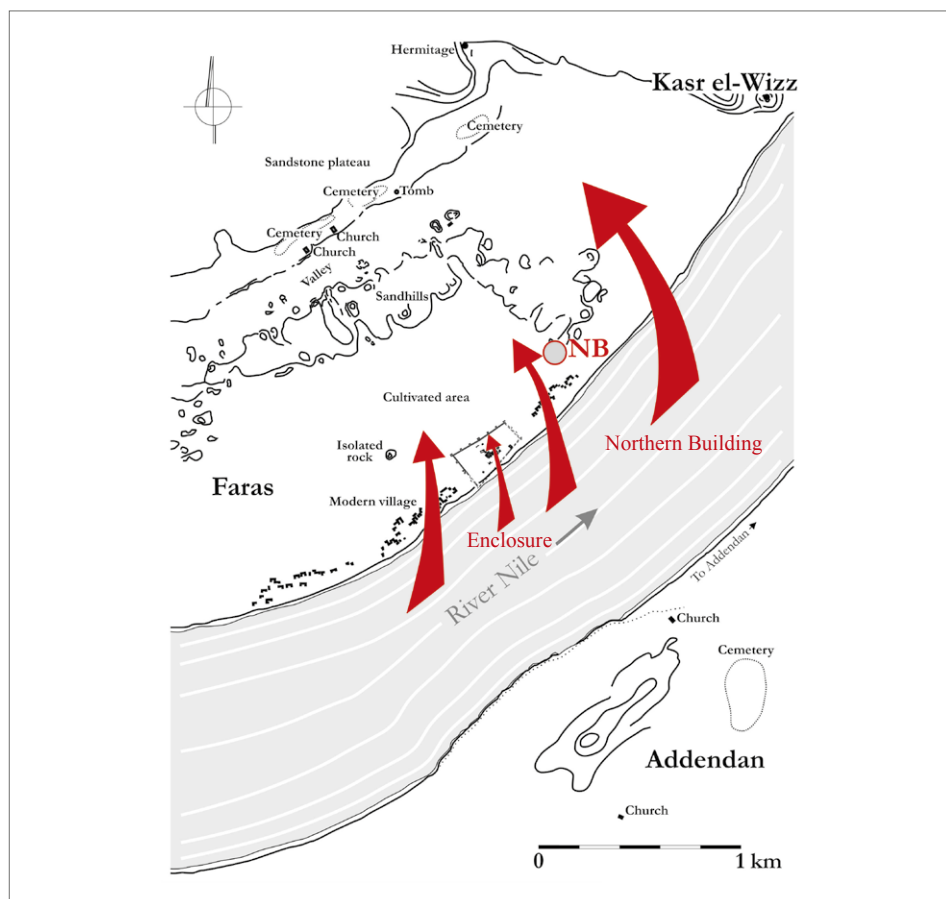


Fig. 2. Penetration by the high Nile into the Pachoras agglomeration in the mid-6th century AD: note the location of the Enclosure and the Northern Building, later the pottery workshops (NB) (Drawing S. Mašlak)

which survived the cataclysm of 1986 presented a similarly tragic view: fragments of doorjambs were the only elements of the washed out houses still sticking out from the flat ground. A rather general description of the village architecture once inside the Pachoras Enclosure is possible based on an examination of these remains (Godlewski, in preparation).

The extent of the disaster would have forced the residents of the town to leave. The city administration was moved to Ihmindi, while the residents of Pachoras found a new place for their

houses on the western cliff, high above the river and the devastated valley. The date of this event is not known, but it must have taken place most probably in the 530s or 540s. The first churches in Pachoras, the South Church and the North Church, were built on the top of the cliff (Mileham 1910), and the earliest tombs of the fresh converts to Christianity were situated further to the north (Griffith 1927: 67–78, Pls LII–LVIII; Monneret de Villard 1957: Pl. CXXXVI). The dwellings from this period must have been located around the churches, but there were not discovered.

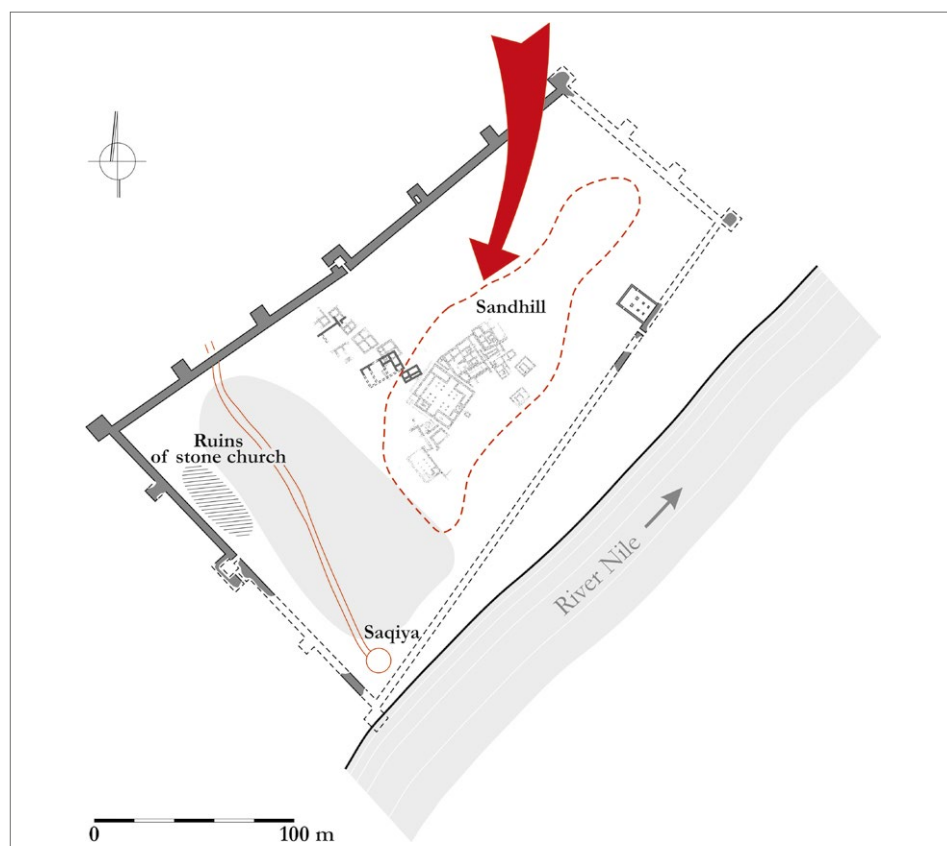


Fig. 3. The Enclosure in Pachoras with the sand dune in the center and the oldest architectural remains observed on the site; arrow indicates the direction of the wind bringing sand in; area with extensive evidence of digging for *sebakh* in modern times in the southern part (Drawing S. Maślak)

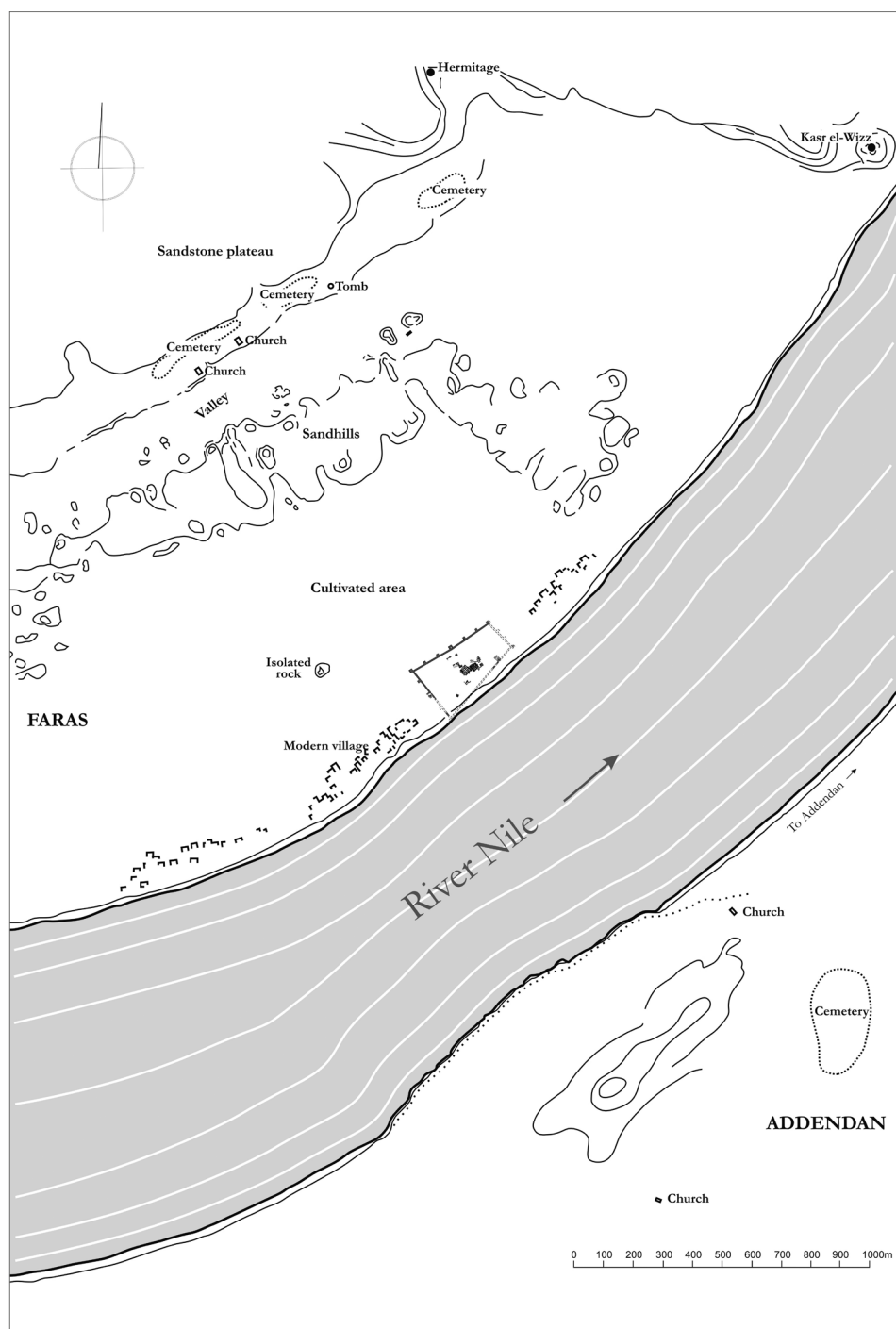


Fig. 4. The valley of Pachoras (original documentation of Leonard Wooley from 1909, updated W. Godlewski, digitizing S. Maślak, 2006)

The deserted Enclosure gradually filled up with sand blown in by the northern winds. The dune grew to be more than 5 m high in the middle of the citadel [Fig. 3]. It was the lowest by the western curtain wall where the wind blew the sand away from the ruined wall. The northern curtain wall was presumably the chief reason why the dune formed in the northern and central part of the Enclosure.

The revival came after AD 580, in a completely different political and social situation that developed in the Nile Valley after the fall of Nobadia and the rise of Great Makuria (Godlewski 2020). The territorial administration of the Church of Makuria under formation, guided by the Byzantine church administration from Alexandria, recognized the importance of the ruined city of Pachoras. In effect, at the turn of the 6th century AD, Bishop Aetios founded an episcopal complex on top of the sand dune inside

the citadel, including the first cathedral and the adjoining buildings, 100 and 200, west of it. The building that preceded the Cathedral, the Mud Church, appears to have been constructed on the sand dune a mere few years earlier (Godlewski 2006: 31–41) [Fig. 5]. The town continued to occupy a site on the western cliff.

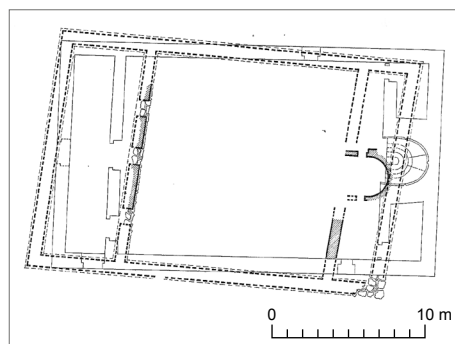


Fig. 5. Outline of the layout of the Mud Church (dashed line) under the pavement of the Cathedral of Aetios in Pachoras (solid line outline) (After Michałowski 1967: 48)

THE TOPOGRAPHY OF THE PACHORAS AGGLOMERATION

The wider valley of Pachoras was mapped in 1909 by Geoffrey S. Mileham. The present discussion is based on a map drawn up by the American expedition (Griffith 1926: 25, Note 1) [see Fig. 1]. A few years later, Griffith's mission uncovered a Meroitic cemetery with Christian graves, churches in a field of mastabas and a church by the Rock of Hathor, as well as precincts inside the Citadel. In 1960–1964, a Polish mission concentrated on uncovering the central part of the citadel where the Cathedral of Paulos and Petros was located. The pottery workshops north of the citadel mound were reinvestigated at this time by William Y. Adams (1961b; 1986/I: 16–22).

The parts of the Pachoras agglomeration to be considered in the time between the mid 5th century AD and the year AD 707 (which is the date recorded in the foundation inscription of the Cathedral of Paulos), can be described as follows, taking into consideration the excavation results [Fig. 4]:

1. Citadel (Enclosure) and the early architecture inside the fortifications, from a time preceding the cataclysmic floods that destroyed the structures inside the walls and led to the deserting of the settlement on the river bank (Godlewski 1986; forthcoming);

2. Western part of the town, on top of the cliff above the old Nile riverbed, including the North and South Churches (Mileham 1910);

3. Northern cemetery, on the cliff edge (Griffith 1927: 67–81).

When life returned to the citadel, most probably in the second half through the end of the 6th century AD, there was already a huge sand dune inside the walls. It is not to be excluded that the mound held religious significance for the local inhabitants already in the period before the flood. If the king and the missionaries converting Nubia to Christianity had founded a church here, it would have prompted the decision to locate on the already hallowed site first the Mud Church and then, after the incorporation of Nobadia into Greater Makuria, the Cathedral

of Aetios along with the adjoining Buildings 100 and 200 [Fig. 9]. The monastery on the northern cliff (Qasr el Wizz) may have preceded the construction project inside the citadel area by a few years [see Fig. 4].

It is unfortunate that the investigations did not cover all of the wide valley of Pachoras, which was after all an episcopal see from the close of the 6th century AD, seat of the bishops of Pachoras and periodically also the metropolitan bishop (from the second half of the 8th through the end of the 10th century). Pachoras also served as the quarters of the *domestikos* of Pachoras, at least from the end of the 8th century. This specific administrative situation would have surely affected the development of the agglomeration after AD 707.

THE CATASTROPHE: ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

The archaeological evidence for the cataclysm that washed away the town of Pachoras in the mid-5th century AD was uncovered already by Adams during the exploration of the architecture on the site of the later pottery workshops (NB in Fig. 2). Griffith (1926: 63–65, Pls XLI–XLV) had interpreted the second and third phases of this building as a monastery, but this interpretation does not seem likely today. In the end of Phase 3, the walls in the eastern part of the structure were destroyed, surviving as stubs approximately 1 m high, submerged in a layer of mud about one-meter thick, which only heavy rainfall or a major Nile inundation could have deposited (Adams 1986: 16–19) [Fig. 6 left]. The destroyed chambers were not restored and were

gradually filled with windblown sand. Adams proposed to date the revival of the workshops with a changed architectural plan and mass ceramic production to about AD 850.

A similar deposition of a meter-thick layer of mud, representing most probably a major flood event, was observed by the author in Buildings BY and BX under the first cathedral of Dongola (EC.I); it was dated there to about AD 540–550 based on contextual archaeological material including pottery of the first half of the 6th century (Godlewski, in preparation). The top of the mud layer recognized on the outside of the east and west walls of the fragmentarily investigated Building BY was at 11.46 m above the benchmark, which was assumed as the winter level of

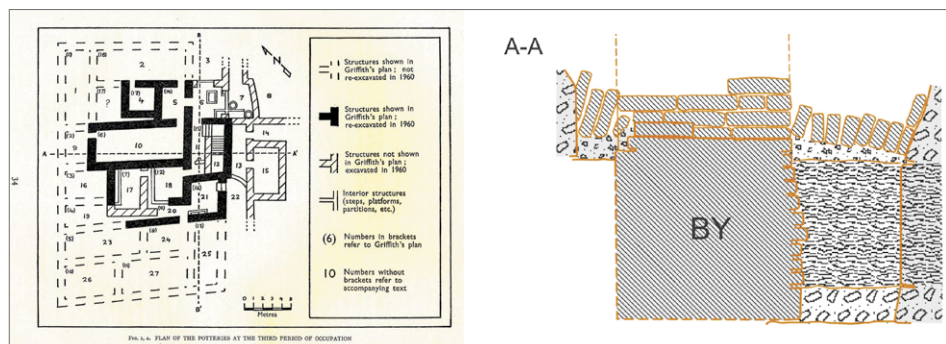


Fig. 6. Archaeological evidence of a cataclysmic deluge: left, Northern Building in Faras with superposed plans of the pottery workshops; right, Building BY excavated at Site CC in Old Dongola, section (Left, After Adams 1986 modifying Griffith 1926: Pl. XLII; right, PCMA UW Old Dongola Project | drawing W. Godlewski and D. Zielińska)



Fig. 7. The Enclosure in Pachoras: Trench 1, stone wall and above it a thick mud(?) deposit under the sand dune (Courtesy PCMA UW Pachoras documentation archive)

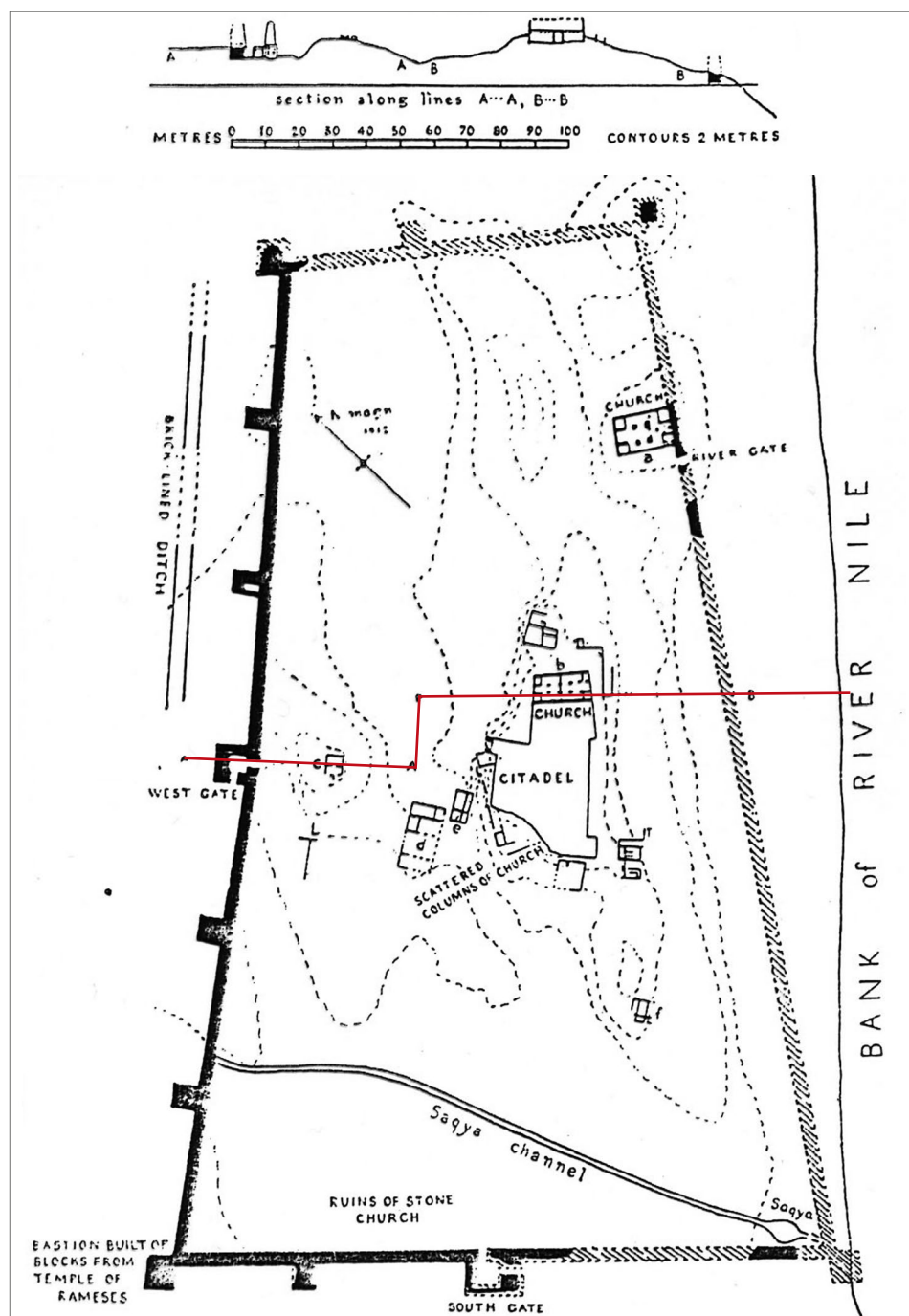


Fig. 8. The Enclosure in Pachoras following Griffith's excavations; top, section through the fill and late architecture inside the Enclosure in relation to the eastern and western outer fortification walls (After Griffith 1913)

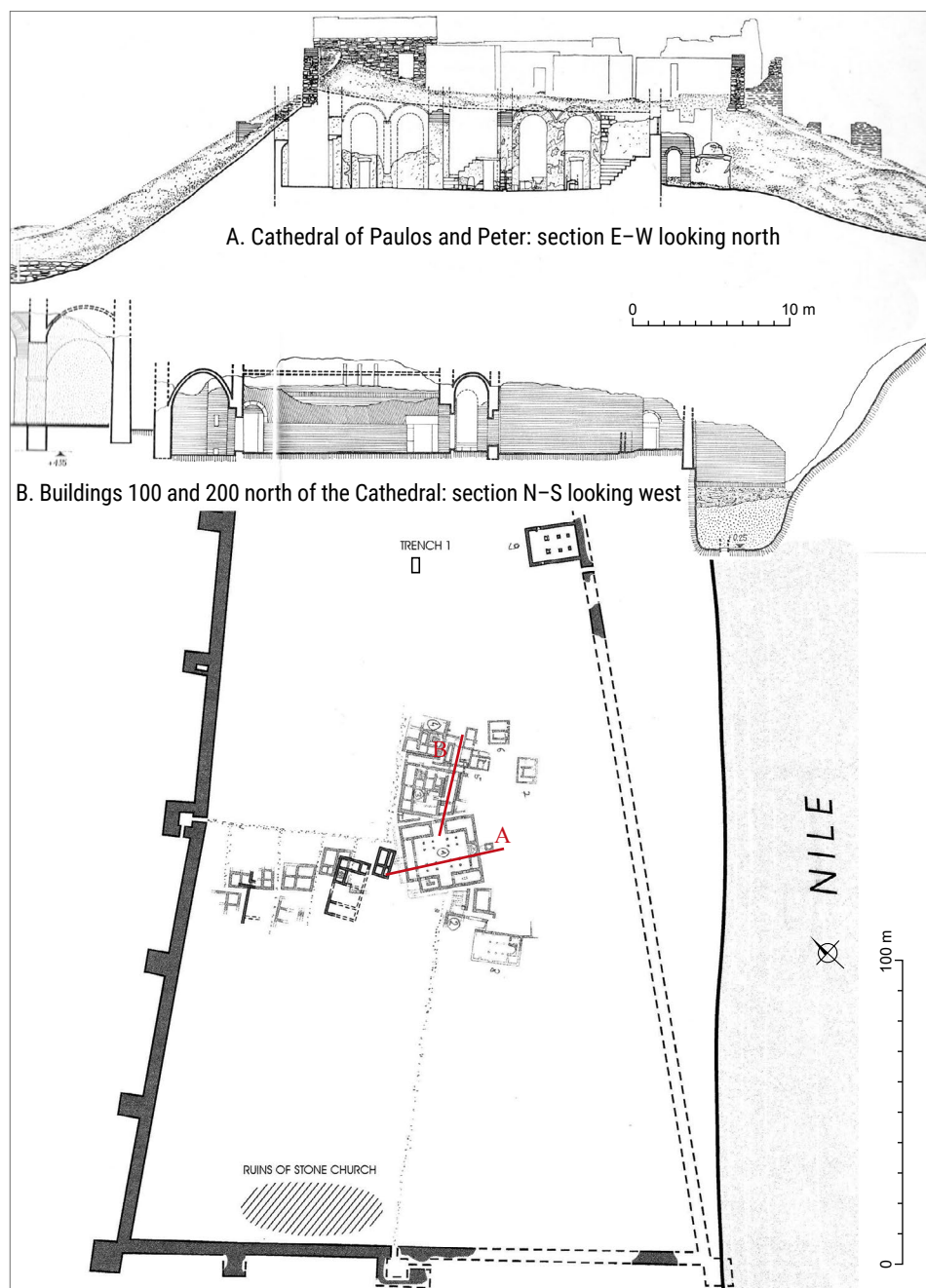


Fig. 9. The Enclosure in Pachoras following the Polish excavations in 1963–1964; top, sections showing differences in the ground levels of the early 5th-century AD architecture, including the Cathedrals of Aetios, Paulos and Petros (A) and the town architecture north of the Cathedral (Buildings B100 and B200) (B) before about AD 550 and in AD 590 respectively (After Griffith 1926: Plan 9a and sections 8 and 10; Michałowski 1965: Plan I)

the Nile in 1964 [Fig. 6 right]. The layer was observed to be approximately 1 m thick (trenches 1 [86.4] and 6 [85.4] in Dongola), and it was not present inside the building, even though on the western side the layer is practically level with the entrance. The mud may have been stopped from pouring inside by a stone threshold block in this entrance, perhaps scavenged as building material after the structure was deserted.

The threat posed by a high water level on the Nile could not have loomed too big in the consciousness of Dongola inhabitants, because the next structure on the site, Building BX, was located barely 27 cm higher than the threshold of the western entrance to Building BY. One is tempted into thinking that the flooding which had left the meter-high deposition of mud was believed to be a one-time event that would not be repeated. It was repeated, however, as indicated by another deposition of Nile mud of similar thickness present on the floor of the western part of Building BX. The elevation of the top of this second mud deposition was 12.11–12.18 m, that is, approximately 0.70 m higher in context with the walls of Building Y. The building must have been desacralized at this point and the level of the pavement in the successive structure, Building EC.I, was raised by 1.10 m (Godlewski forthcoming).

The mud deposits in Dongola are like the layers that in Pachoras Adams had attributed a big Nile flood (heavy rainfall) and the dating of these deposits at the two sites coincide as well. The event in Pachoras, which Adams dated to the early Christian period, caused substantive damage in the town extending on the relatively low ground next to the river.

The effects of the cataclysm would have been felt with particular severity in the northern and western districts, and it surely destroyed the east curtain wall facing the river and penetrated into the citadel [see Fig. 2]. However, the only proof of this event inside the citadel is its evident abandonment for a few dozen years at the very least, which left the huge sand dune in the middle [see Fig. 3]. One would expect that a flood of this magnitude would have caused much wider destruction throughout the lands of Nobadia, but no documented archaeological evidence is forthcoming for now (see Kyle Harper 2017; Polish edition 2021: 297–302).

The absence of documented archaeological evidence of the destruction caused by the flood inside the Citadel (as well as at the site of the Northern Building) is unfortunate, but it may be explained by the fact that the entire southern part of the mud deposition within the Citadel was removed in modern times by local farmers digging for fertile soil (called *sebakh*) for their fields (Griffith 1926: 28), whereas these levels were not reached anywhere in the central and northern part with the exception of the inside of the Rivergate Church (initially, Rivergate Building). Neither was the Nile mud deposition observed in the test trenches dug in 1964, but the Polish team was already pressed for time by the filling up of the Nubian Lake. Photographic images of the section in Trench 1 reveal an interesting sequence of layers above the destroyed wall of stone slabs [Fig. 7]. The compact layer above the wall (which may be a wall foundation) could represent a mud deposition layer (there is no descriptive documentation of this trench in the records). All in all, the farmers' activities in the southern

part of the citadel, as observed by Griffith, should be construed as indirect evidence for the presence of a thick deposition of Nile mud left by an exceptionally high flood. Interestingly, this part of the Enclosure does not seem to have been occupied by any kind of architecture during the period of the stone Cathedrals on the hill inside the Citadel [Fig. 8]. According to Wooley, Griffith located a *saqiya* inside the Enclosure and a canal that supplied water to the cultivated fields west of the fortifications.

In turn, the sand dune in the center of the Enclosure should be perceived as indirect evidence for a period of several years when the ruins of the Citadel stood abandoned and open to drifting sand, blown in freely from the north and east, where the collapsed walls offered no obstacle. The formation of a dune approximately 5 m high would have taken some time, most likely in the years between AD 540–550 (the date of the destruction) and about AD 590 (construction of the Mud Church).

RECAPITULATION

In recapitulation, one is entitled to suggest, based on a review of available evidence, that about the 540s–550s the entire area of the Pachoras agglomeration, reaching all the way to the western and northern cliffs, was inundated by an exceptionally high Nile flood. The alluvial mud that the river left behind became the base of a developed agricultural economy in the 8th through 14th centuries, determining the position and importance of the region in the ages to come. The proceeds from the local economy stood behind the office or status of the *domestikos* of Pachoras, who was either the owner of the land or merely its administrator. The area under cultivation and economic development was presumably more extensive than marked by Griffith on his map from the early 20th century, in all likelihood reaching the eastern and northern cliffs. The flood destroyed the Citadel and any architecture to its northwest. The unparalleled magnitude of this event is corroborated by evidence from Dongola, 500 kilometers upriver from Pachoras,

where similarly thick depositions of alluvial mud were documented outside the walls of Buildings BY and BX.

Following the flood, the civil and religious architecture of Pachoras moved to the top of the high cliff west of the old river branch. It is there that the first churches were built and the oldest cemeteries situated (Mileham 1910; Griffith 1927: 67–78, Pls LII–LVIII). Presumably the dwellings of the inhabitants of Pachoras were also located in this western district for the rest of the 6th century AD.

A revival came at the close of the 6th century AD. Life returned to the Citadel where a huge sand dune had formed in the center. The first structure to be constructed on the hill was the Mud Church, quickly superseded by the first stone cathedral, that of Aetios. This building development should be dated to the close of the 6th and the early 7th century. The floor of the first stone cathedral was already 5 m above the architecture inside the Enclosure dated to middle of the 5th century from before the Great Flood [Fig. 9].

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