

Piety, Power and Representation. A new type of church architecture in a fortification context in Medieval North Africa (renewal application)

This grant supported the investigation of a unique architectural complex in the fortress MOG0089 on the island of Kurta off Mograt island in present-day Sudan. Mograt, the largest island in the Nile, is situated at the upstream end of the Great Nile Bend where long-distance trade routes from the north return to the river. Its strategic importance is mirrored by the density of surveillance, or defensive, structures: Mograt features seven fortresses dating from the Late Antique to the Funj period, some of which were also reused later (www.mogratarchaeology.com).

Exploration of MOG0089 started in 2019. Its size and position as well as finds from earlier illicit digging indicated the existence of a church within the fortress. It was eventually identified in a most unexpected location: **On top** of an enlarged section of the fortification wall, 4 m above the surrounding terrain.

Three field seasons allowed us to completely excavate the church and explore adjacent structures. These included a room completely sunk into the fortification wall south of the church with its only access being through a hatch from above as well as a complex of four rooms abutting the fortification wall at ground level in the fortress interior, next to the stairs which led up to the church on top of the wall. The main room of the latter complex preserved the remains of a wall painting – the feet and lower parts of the garments of three individuals, likely Christ, a saint and a local dignitary or member of the clergy – in situ.

The current grant was for obtaining 14C dates from samples associated with the construction and the use of the church and the adjacent structures. Based on find material, the working hypothesis was that the church,

and the fortress itself, had been built in the later part of the Classic Christian Period or the earlier part of the Late Christian Period, i.e. between 1000 and 1200 AD.

Unexpectedly, the dates turned out to be much earlier. One of them was obtained from the remains of a wooden door leaf which was found still upright in the doorway to the room with the wall painting. It was dated to 656–703 calAD (53.5%) or 741–774 calAD (41.9%). The other dates conform with this one, indicating that both, the fortress and the church, were built in the later 7th or the 8th century AD.

These dates are mirrored by similarly early dates which we have since obtained from a Medieval cemetery site on Mograt (MOG001). Taken together, they reshape our understanding of Early Medieval communities in this region of the Middle Nile valley and how they were integrated in the wider political and cultural landscape of their time. Rather than being marginal and lagging behind in adopting new cultural forms and expressions, they were either able to invest considerable resources at the intersection of religious life and military power themselves, or else were an integral part of a polity whose central powers provided and managed these resources. Against the background of this emerging picture, the later use of both fortress and church shall be scrutinized in the next, and final, step of the analysis. A better understanding of the duration and the continuance of the occupation will help us answer the question of how MOG089 was embedded in regional and superregional dynamics.



Fig. 1 The fortress MOG089 on the island of Kurta in the central part of the image; on the left the island of Mograt, on the far right the main riverbank (image: Mograt Island Archaeological Mission)



Fig. 2 MOG089 with its trapezoid fortification wall and the excavation areas on top of and alongside the inner face of the eastern section of the fortification wall (image: Mograt Island Archaeological Mission)

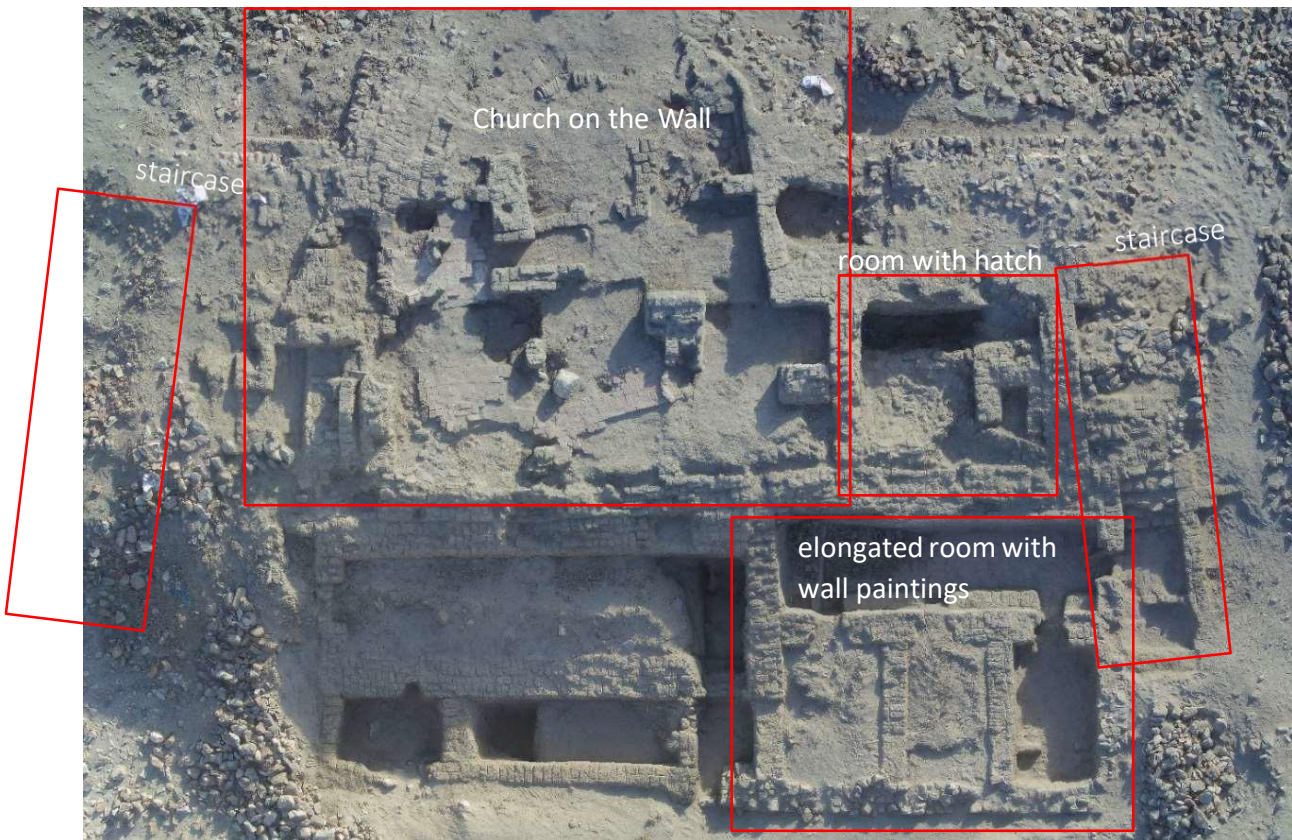


Fig. 3 The features excavated between 2019 and 2023 (image: Mograt Island Archaeological Mission)



Fig. 4 The elongated room at the bottom of the southern staircase (visible in the lower right corner) leading up to the church; the room has a redbrick floor, mudbrick benches and the remains of a wall painting on the eastern (right hand side) wall; a sample from the wooden door leaf *in situ* in the entrance to this room (see foreground of this image) was dated to 656–703 calAD (53.5%) or 741–774 calAD (41.9%) (image: Mograth Island Archaeological Mission)