A Mamluk Coin from Kulubnarti, Sudan

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During the late 13th and 14th Centuries AD, the Mamluk Sultanate in Egypt interfered in Nubian political affairs and made numerous military incursions into Sudan. These activities contributed to the collapse of the medieval Nubian kingdom of Makuria. Kulubnarti, a seasonal island situated in northern Sudan, was inhabited throughout this period and its population was, doubtless, witness to the turmoil of the age. Located in the very heart of the rugged and remote Batn el-Hajar (‘Belly of Rocks’), Kulubnarti is upstream of the Second Cataract of the Nile, about 640km north-northwest of Khartoum (figs. 1, 2). Excavations were carried out on the island and on part of the west bank by the University of Kentucky, under the direction of Professor W.Y. Adams in 1969 and 1979. Many artefacts from the site now form part of the British Museum collections in the Department of Ancient Egypt and Sudan. The main focus of the excavation was the investigation of three largely late medieval settlements, designated 21-S-2, 21-S-9 and 21-S-10, although a number of smaller sites and two large medieval cemeteries were also examined. Kulubnarti was continuously occupied from c. AD1100 and remains inhabited today. Overall, approximately 1,300 artefacts were registered by the mission and substantial numbers of unregistered leather, basketry, ceramic sherds and textiles were collected. Despite the large quantity of material excavated, there are very few coins in the assemblage.

A total of eight coins were recovered from site 21-S-2 and an additional one from site 21-S-10. Both were settlement sites and all coins were recovered from post-medieval surface contexts. The coins from 21-S-2 were identified as small denomination Egyptian issues of the 19th century and included three small copper coins of 5 paras, a large copper coin of 40 paras, a silver coin of 20 paras and two silver coins of one piaster. It is the ninth coin, now in the British Museum (EA 78210), from settlement 21-S-10 that forms the basis for this discussion. The artefact was tentatively identified as a coin by the excavator who records ‘the final coin, if such it is, is a small, thick disc of copper, 15mm in diameter, which is so worn that no trace of design has survived’.

Conservation and cleaning enabled the identification of EA 78210 as a small thick, somewhat irregularly-shaped, poorly-struck, bronze coin of the Mamluk sultans, minted

1 Cf. Adams, Kulubnarti I.
2 Adams and Adams, Kulubnarti II.
3 Adams and Adams, Kulubnarti II, 81, pl. 10 [B, C].
4 The coin’s excavation object catalogue number was 85.7.56 and field excavation number was 21-S-10/16, Adams and Adams, Kulubnarti II, 81, 127.
5 Adams and Adams, Kulubnarti II, 81.
6 Cleaning and conservation was performed by Simon Dove of the Department of Conservation, Documentation and Science of the British Museum.
sometime during the 14th Century AD, probably mint of Damascus (figs. 3–4). The coin surface is worn and pitting is visible near the edge of the obverse face. These factors unfortunately hindered exact dating of the object. Fragments of impressed text are barely visible near the edges on both sides. The coin’s dimensions are as follows: length: 19mm; width: 17mm; maximum thickness: 2.5mm.

In and of itself, coin EA 78210 is not an object worthy of much attention; however, its discovery at Kulubnarti is of historical interest due to both its date and origin. Virtually all evidence for the Mamluk incursions of the 13th and 14th Centuries AD into Nubia is derived from literary sources such as an-Nurwayri, al-Mufaddal, Ibn Khaldun and Maqrizi. There is scant archaeological evidence in Nubia for a Mamluk presence despite numerous written reports of incursions by large armies, beginning with a raid on Dongola in 1265.

From the beginning to the mid-14th Century AD, the Mamluks made at least four sorties into Nubia, three of which reach Dongola, a site far upstream of Kulubnarti. In 1304, the Nubian king Ammy requested assistance from the sultanate in Cairo and returned to Dongola with a large troop of soldiers. These soldiers remained in Nubia for at least nine months before returning to Egypt. Ammy’s successor, Kerenbes provoked Mamluk wrath by refusing to pay tribute and was attacked by their army in 1315. His fortune turns, and he is later reinstated on the Makurian throne in Dongola by the Mamluks in 1323. The last Mamluk foray into Nubia occurred in 1365. An army of 3000 horsemen was dispatched from Cairo at the request of the Nubian king to assist him in regaining the Makurian throne from a pretender. The mission was not successful. Although the Mamluks relieved a siege at al-Daw and then lay siege to the island of Mikhail (Meinarti) just north of the Second Cataract, they did not proceed on to Dongola and the Nubian king remained in al-Daw. It also does not appear that they advanced as far south as Kulubnarti at this time.

The question arises as to how this coin arrived at Kulubnarti. There is nothing from the disposition of the artefact to suggest that it was used in any fashion other than as currency of some sort. The widespread use of coinage upstream of the Second Cataract in northern Sudan did not occur until the 19th century after the conquest of Sudan by Mohamed Ali in 1820. At this time Egyptian and Ottoman coins were officially brought into circulation. Sudan began to mint its own coinage during the Mahdiya period between 1885-1898. As a consequence, it is not entirely surprising that, despite the lengthy period of occupation at Kulubnarti, few coins were recovered during excavation.

Trade in Nubia was tightly regulated by the medieval rulers up until c. 1300. As described by the 10th Century AD Arab geographer Ibn Selim al-Aswani, trade between Christian Nubians and Arab MoSlems occurred freely in Lower Nubia, the region between the First

7 Identification of the coin was made by Vesta Curtis and Joe Cribb of the Department of Coins and Metals of the British Museum. Cf. Balog, *Coinage of the Mamluk Sultans*.


9 Dongola is now referred to as Old Dongola.

10 Sometimes also written Ayay.

11 Al-Daw is believed to be Jebel Adda.


13 Job, *Sudan Notes and Records* 3, 163.
and Second Cataracts of the Nile, and coinage was in circulation. However, upstream of the Second Cataract, the region in which Kulubnarti is located, trade was conducted by barter. ‘Neither the dinar, nor the dirham are of any use because they do not use money in their transactions, except with the Muslims beyond the cataract they do not buy or sell with money, but carry out their transactions by the exchange of slaves (raqiq), cattle, camels, iron tools and grains’. Further, customs posts were placed at both ends of the Batn el-Hajar (Takoaa and Upper Maqs) to ensure that traders complied with the regulations. Transgressors could be punished by death.

Following the decline and collapse of the Nubian medieval kingdoms in the late 14th Century AD (post 1365), exchange along the Middle Nile remained based upon barter as the use of coinage was slow to penetrate the region upstream of the Second Nile Cataract. Archaeological evidence of this period from Kulubnarti indicates that the Batn el-Hajar region economically declined, trade along the Nile decreased, and the inhabitants gradually became more and more impoverished; a situation that did not begin to improve until the beginning of Turco-Egyptian rule in 1821. Much further to the south, the Funj Sultanate based in Sennar (1504/5-1820), did not mint coins and the markets did not normally use coinage as a form of exchange. Foreign coins themselves were commodities and frequently kept for jewellery. Units of items such as gold, grain, iron, cloth and salt had specific values and were used for trade, particularly on a national level.

Several commercial contracts dating to the 16th Century AD, illustrate the trade relations between travelling Arab merchants and the Sudan in the period that followed. Trade was still largely conducted by barter in the mercantile and civilian spheres. For example, a contract between Yusuf b. Gamal al-Din Mansur al-Tahtawi (Cairo retailer) and Muhammad b. Mari b. Sulayman al-'Arini al-Murshadi (travelling merchant), stipulates that Muhammad receive various sorts of cloth, tin, chains, scents and files in order to travel to Sudan and trade these goods in exchange for slaves, camels and gold dust.

In another contract, between Ibrahim b. Musa b. Gamal al-Din al-Tahtawi (merchant) and Gibril b. Ayyub b. Mahluf al-Misurati (travelling merchant), Gibril is permitted to choose goods in Cairo in order to purchase in Sudan ‘with cash or by barter’ slaves, camels, feathers and other goods.

As trade in the region of the Batn el-Hajar primarily was conducted by barter until the mid-19th Century, the presence of a Mamluk coin of the 14th century, or of any coin for that matter, is of note particularly as coinage is largely absent from the archaeological record of the area as a whole. However, apart from the terminus post quem provided by the coin’s date, there is no way of knowing when or how the coin arrived at Kulubnarti and unfortunately, the archaeological context in which it was discovered, offers little clue. It would be nice to be able to suggest that EA 78210 may provide some archaeological corroboration for

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14 Vantini, Oriental Sources, 604.
15 Ibid., 602-4.
17 Walz, Annales Islamologiques 15, 227.
18 Ibid., 232.
Mamluk presence in the region during the 14th Century AD as they comprised the largest group of individuals having access to and using coinage in the remote Batn el-Hajar at that time; however, such great weight of import can not be given to the discovery of a single coin. It is entirely possible that the coin was carried to the site by someone a century or two after its minting, thus it remains impossible to narrow down the exact date of the coin’s arrival at Kulubnarti or to attach further significance to it other than to make some general observations concerning trade in the Batn el-Hajar.

Bibliography


Figure 1: Map of northern Sudan.

Figure 2: The island of Kulubnarti (copyright D.A. Welsby).
Figure 3: Coin, British Museum EA 78210.

Figure 4: Coin, British Museum EA 78210.