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Urban planning of Khartoum. History and modernity Part I. History

Urbanistyka Chartumu. Historia oraz współczesność Część I. Historia

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INTRODUCTION

This article is the first part of considerations on the urban development of Khartoum. It concerns the origins of the city and its flourishing in the 1st part of the 20th century. The second part will address the issues relating to the contemporary urban planning of Khartoum against the cultural background of the city.

Khartoum is the capital of Sudan, and the main political, commercial and cultural centre of the country. Sudan is located in the north-east part of Africa, on the Red Sea. The country boasts an eventful and interesting history and valuable cultural heritage comprising monuments associated with the cultures of e.g. the Kingdom of Kush; Jebel Barkal; complexes of the Napata region; and archaeological sites on the former Meroe Island have been inscribed into the UNESCO World Heritage List¹. Polish scientists, mainly archaeologists have also become involved in the work on the history and protection of the cultural heritage of Sudan, and Khartoum, by carrying rescue ethno-archaeological research. One should mention here teams from e.g. from the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan and

the Warsaw University, which have discovered many valuable finds in the last decades e.g. in al-Ghazala; Old Dongola; Kadero; Faras; and Banganarti².

This article addressed the issue of the history of spatial development of Khartoum, located at the confluence of the White and Blue Nile, as a particularly interesting structure consisting of three independently functioning centres, each of which has a separate history and genesis.

Chernozemic lands of Gezira, neighbouring with Khartoum municipality from the South, came to existence as an effect of a long-term sedimentation process taking place in the prehistoric era when, according to theories, a major part of these areas was covered by a gigantic water reservoir. Later, due to geological processes reshaping the topographic landscape of North Africa, waters of the Nile ran towards the Mediterranean Sea down the newly made cataracted riverbed. Gezira, with over 100 m sedimented fertile soil surrounded by the White and Blue Nile rivers, to this day has remained one of the richest agricultural regions in Africa.

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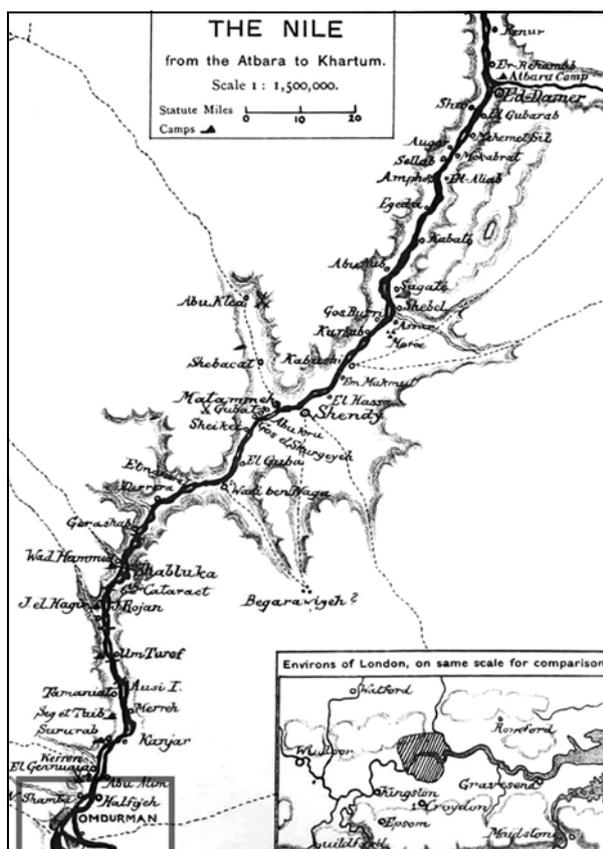


Fig. 1. Plan of settlement along the Nile at the end of the 19th century. Location of Khartoum marked on the map. Map [in:] Ernest N. Bennett, *The downfall of the Dervishes*, Methuen & Co. New York, New Amsterdam Book Company, 1899, p. 104

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Traces of the first settlement or more precisely the village of Al Mugran from which modern Khartoum grew, come from the 16th century. It was the main settlement in the area where the Blue and the White Nile merged. Such hydrological landform features naturally created three separate regions in which three different centres were established: Khartoum, Umm-Durman and Khartoum North. The history of those three settlements goes back to the 16th century; however, their heyday came in the 19th century when the region was under the Turco-Egyptian occupation³. In the year 1821 the Turks chose Khartoum as the capital of the country. But they encountered several obstacles e.g. in the form of harsh desert conditions and epidemics repeatedly breaking out in that areas. In spite of that, during the following decades they significantly developed the city infrastructure, trying e.g. to drain the marshy banks of the Nile⁴. In the mid-19th century Khartoum resembled a typical Ottoman city surrounded by defensive walls with gates through which caravans entered. Buildings in Khartoum, including those more formal ones, developed e.g. due to involving political prisoners in the building and designing process – including architects from Europe. It ought to be mentioned, that Turks were experts on the technology of firing bricks used for the construction of the majority of buildings at the

time; while the British, who took over control of the country, continued to develop infrastructure basing on a similar urban layout and materials⁵.

The history of destruction and later rebuilding of the city by the British is connected with the person of Muhammad Ahmad bin Abd Allah – Al-Mahdi, who was a leader of the national-insurgent movement and rebelled against the Egyptian control of Sudan. In 1885 Al-Mahdi's troops seized Khartoum. Since Egypt was under the protectorate of Great Britain at the time, a war broke out between Mahdists and the British forces aided by the Egyptian army. They were led by e.g. General Charles George Gordon, the former governor-general of Sudan, who returned to Khartoum with his troops to evacuate foreigners residing there. He was killed in a bloody battle and his heroism was commemorated by erection of the Gordon College which was later renamed the Khartoum University.

After Khartoum had been captured by Al-Mahdi's supporters, it ceased to be the main city of Sudan, and fragments of its precious edifices served as material for building a new capital transferred then to Umm-Durman. The Mahdist era lasted until the year 1898, when the Anglo-Egyptian army led by Lord Horatio Herbert Kitchener defeated the Mahdist troops. It

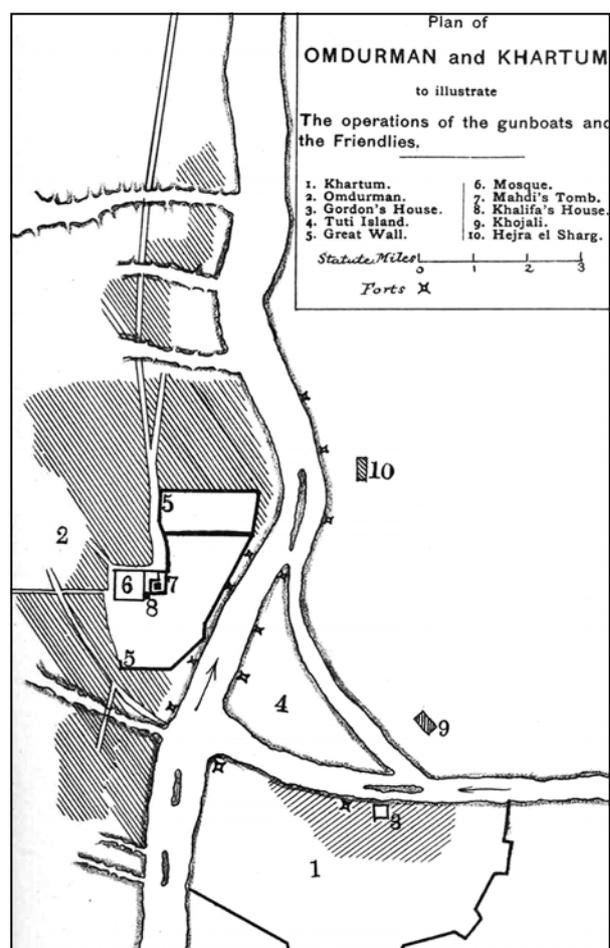


Fig. 2. Plan of Khartoum and Umm-Durman at the end of the 19th century. Map [in:] Ernest N. Bennett, *The downfall of the Dervishes*, Methuen & Co. New York, New Amsterdam Book Company, 1899, p. 214

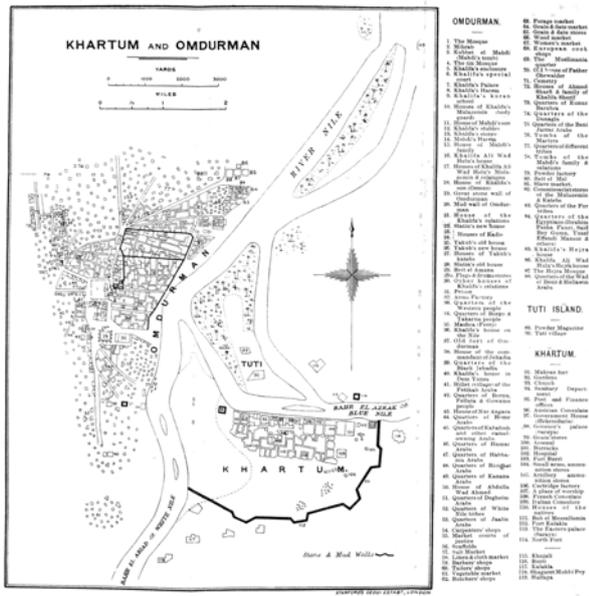


Fig. 3. Plan of Khartoum and Umm-Durman at the end of the 19th century. Map [in:] Rudolf C. Slatin, *Fire and Sword in the Sudan. A Personal Narrative of Fighting and Serving the Dervishes 1879–1895*, London – New York, 1896, p. 630

was then that the period of the Anglo-Egyptian condominium began in Khartoum. After a relatively brief period of the Mahdist rule, the city was ruined and abandoned; nevertheless it was re-established as the

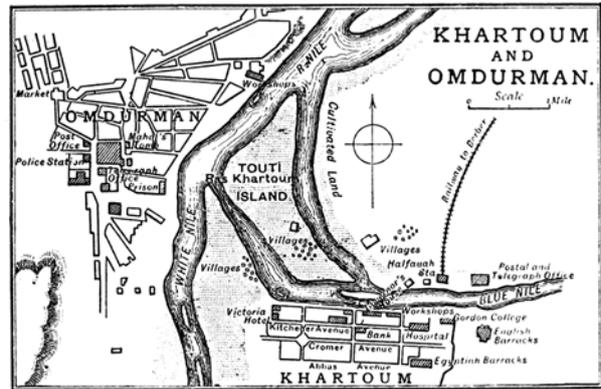


Fig. 4. Map of Khartoum from the beginning of the 20th century, drawn by T. Cook [in:] Ernest Alfred Wallis Budge, *Cook's handbook for Egypt and the Egyptian Sūdān*, London 1906

capital. Khartoum acquired political independence only in the mid-20th century⁶.

As has been mentioned, present-day Khartoum as an urban structure is made up of three cities, so it is not a homogeneous arrangement. The area of the former city of Khartoum (located to the south of the confluence of two rivers) is nowadays an administrative centre; the area of the old Umm-Durman (located to the west) can boast official buildings, while Khartoum North is mostly associated with the industry and services⁷.

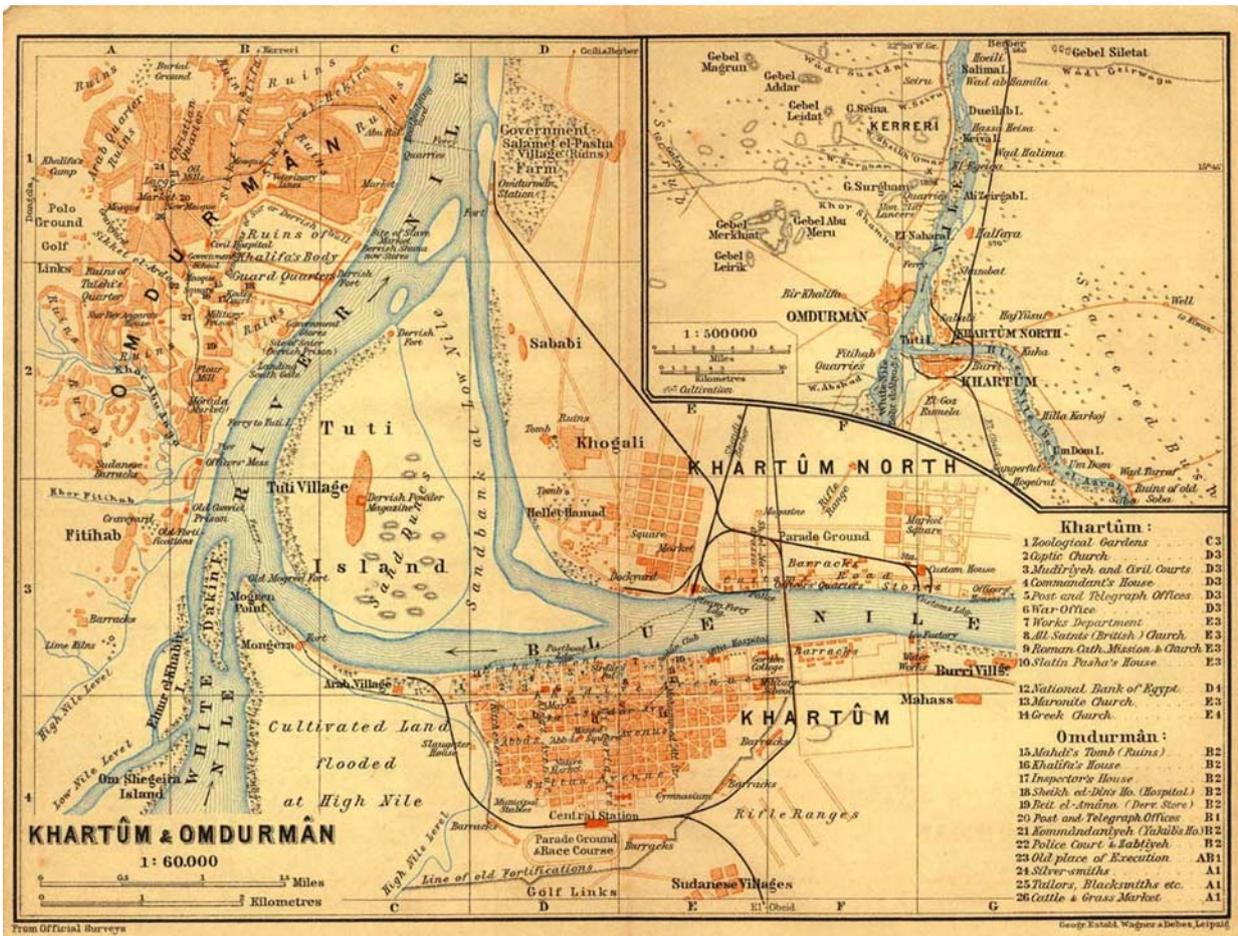


Fig. 5. Map of the urban complex in Khartoum with Umm-Durman, Khartoum and Khartoum North from 1914. Copy of map [in:] Authors' Archive

Population of Khartoum is about 7 million. Residents inhabit the area covering around 22 km²⁸. A particularly crucial moment when the number of Khartoum inhabitants increased twelvefold occurred within the 1st half of the 20th century⁹.

UMM-DURMAN, KHARTOUM AND KHARTOUM NORTH – HISTORY OF SPATIAL DEVELOPMENT

When beginning this subsection it ought to be mentioned that Umm-Durman developed as a centre with strong Arabic-Islamic traditions, while Khartoum – with British, which resulted in their respective specificity and different urban-planning character. In turn Khartoum North began to crystallise slightly later as a centre with poorer and more simplified urban structure though defined, like in Khartoum.

Umm-Durman, located on the west bank of the Nile, began to evolve towards an Arabic-Islamic city already at the beginning of the 19th century, but the process was interrupted by the aforementioned Anglo-Egyptian invasion. It should also be mentioned, that before Al-Mahdi w 1885 moved the capital here from Khartoum in 1885, Umm-Durman was a relatively small and poor town.

The undefined, chaotic urban morphology of Umm-Durman came as an effect of quick and sketchy land designation made for Al-Mahdis' battalion which settled in the town before a battle. According to sources, land division was made by throwing the stones defining the lines between the compounds, each accommodating one large military family. Communication system came later as a result of gradual subdivisions of the compounds between the family members, when small alleys emerged along subdivided properties. One might say that, in contrast to the Khartoum City, Umm-Durman route system came from spontaneous proliferation of housing compounds, without a priori well-planned street network.

After the death of Al-Mahdi, when he was succeeded by Abdullah Ibn-Mohammed Al-Khalifa¹⁰, Umm-Durman was gradually converted into a vast military camp. The city was surrounded with a wall, the mosque was built (see fig. 8) in the main town square serving as a market, the military headquarters, the treasury and the ammunition depot were erected in it. The remaining area was earmarked for residential building. Traffic through the city was conducted by means of several wide main streets and secondary local roads¹¹. The most important objects in the city, with symbolic significance, were the tomb of Al-Mahdi (see fig. 9) and the house of Al-Khalifa (see fig. 10).

The organic urban structure was gradually tidied up, but one can hardly call it a defined layout that was implemented from the beginning in Khartoum. However, it should be stressed that despite attempts at regulation, residential districts developed in a traditional, uncontrolled way¹². Their urban layout (both



Fig. 6. View of buildings in Umm-Durman around the mid-20th century, on an archive postcard. Copy of postcard [in:] Authors' Archive



Fig. 7. View of buildings in Umm-Durman around the mid-20th century, on an archive postcard. Copy of postcard [in:] Authors' Archive



Fig. 8. View of the mosque in Umm-Durman in the 1st half of the 20th century, on an archive postcard. Copy of postcard [in:] Authors' Archive



Fig. 9. View of the tomb of Al Mahdi in Umm-Durman in the 1st half of the 20th century, on an archive postcard. Copy of postcard [in:] Authors' Archive

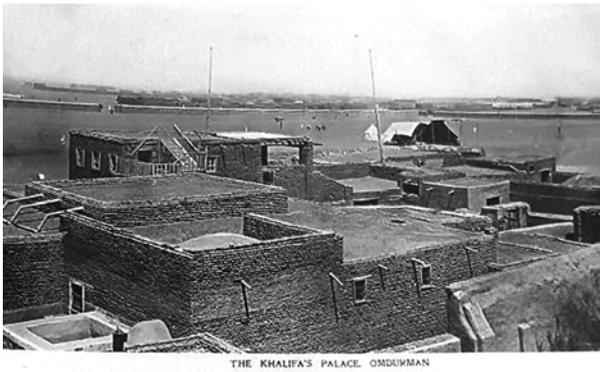


Fig. 10. View of the Al-Khalifa House in Umm-Durman in the 1st half of the 20th century, on an archive postcard. Copy of postcard [in:] Authors' Archive

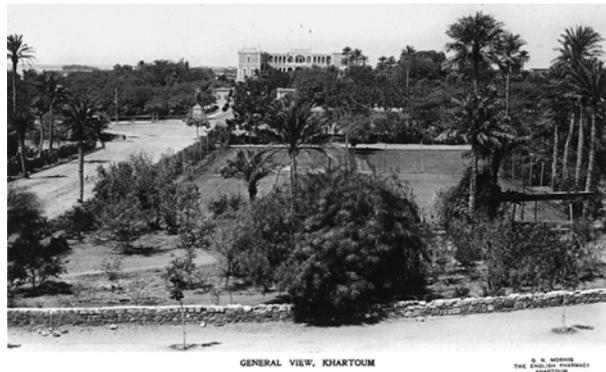


Fig. 14. View of Khartoum at the beginning of the 20th century, on an archive postcard. Copy of postcard [in:] Authors' Archive

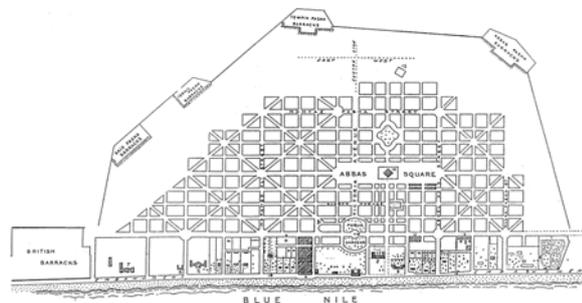


Fig. 11. Plan of Khartoum designed by Lord Kitchener, copy [in:] Authors' Archive



Fig. 15. View of Khartoum at the beginning of the 20th century from the south-west, on an archive postcard. Copy of postcard [in:] Authors' Archive



Fig. 12. View of Khartoum at the beginning of the 20th century, on an archive postcard. Copy of postcard [in:] Authors' Archive

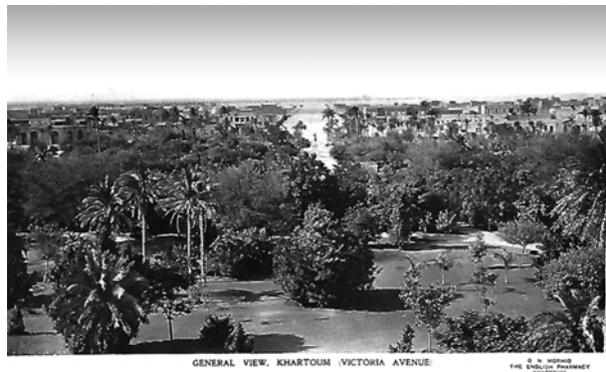


Fig. 16. View of Victoria Avenue in Khartoum at the beginning of the 20th century, on an archive postcard. Copy of postcard [in:] Authors' Archive



Fig. 13. View of Khartoum at the beginning of the 20th century, on an archive postcard. Copy of postcard [in:] Authors' Archive



Fig. 17. Gordon Avenue in Khartoum at the beginning of the 20th century, on an archive postcard. Copy of postcard [in:] Authors' Archive



Fig. 18. Former British military barracks in Khartoum at the beginning of the 20th century, on an archive postcard. Copy of postcard [in:] Authors' Archive



Fig. 22. View of the Gordon Hotel in Khartoum at the beginning of the 20th century, on an archive postcard. Copy of postcard [in:] Authors' Archive



Fig. 19. Governor's Palace in Khartoum at the beginning of the 20th century, on an archive postcard. Copy of postcard [in:] Authors' Archive



Fig. 23. View of the post office building in Khartoum at the beginning of the 20th century on an archive postcard. Copy of postcard [in:] Authors' Archive

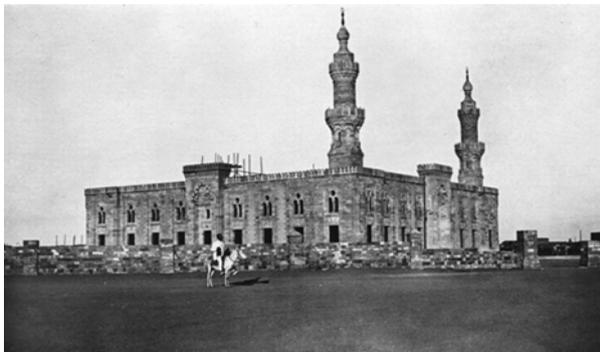


Fig. 20. Mosque in Khartoum at the beginning of the 20th century, on an archive postcard. Copy of postcard [in:] Authors' Archive



Fig. 24. View of an English pharmacy in Khartoum at the beginning of the 20th century, on an archive postcard. Copy of postcard [in:] Authors' Archive

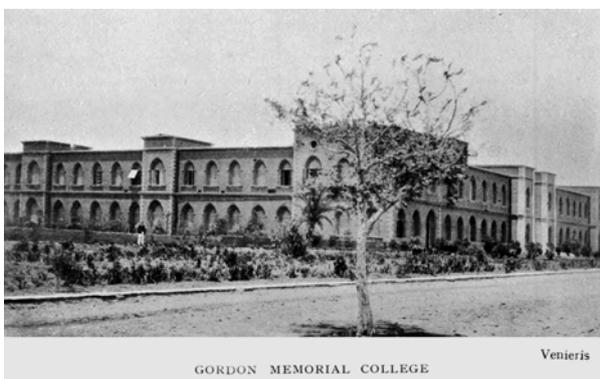


Fig. 21. View of Gordon College in Khartoum at the beginning of the 20th century, on an archive postcard. Copy of postcard [in:] Authors' Archive

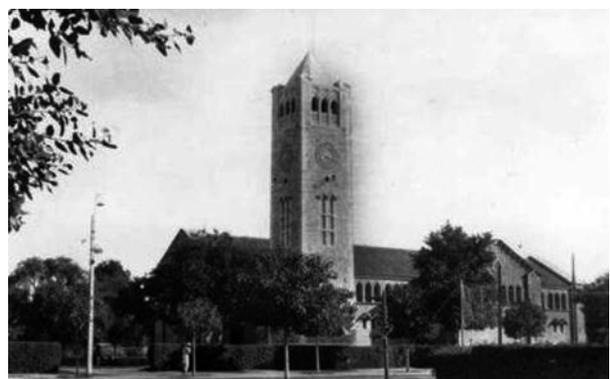


Fig. 25. View of the Anglican church of All Saints in Khartoum, at the beginning of the 20th century, on an archive postcard. Copy of postcard [in:] Authors' Archive

concerning dwellings and traffic) can be characterised as chaotic, with small open spaces and architecturally homogeneous buildings. Umm-Durman lacks greenery, and the little there exists is rather sparse. It is related to the fact that the town is located on barren and rocky soil. This is yet another feature that distinguishes it from verdant Khartoum.

Much information about the urban structure, and primarily about the functional–spatial programme of the city, can be gleaned from the town plan from the end of the 19th century, enclosed in the book by Rudolph C. Slatin, entitled *Fire and Sword in the Sudan. A Personal Narrative...* from 1896 (see fig. 3). In it the irregular layout of the city core is predominantly (from the west, north and east side) surrounded by the outline of the defensive walls. Outside the walls, organic building quarters were marked, which might have served as suburbs or districts inhabited by particular families of tribal communities.

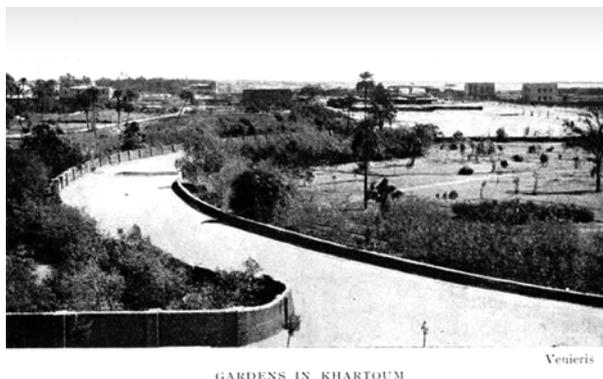


Fig. 26. View of gardens in Khartoum, at the beginning of the 20th century, on an archive postcard. Copy of postcard [in:] Authors' Archive



Fig. 27. View of the railway station Khartoum North in the 1st half of the 20th century, on an archive postcard. Copy of postcard [in:] Authors' Archive

In the year 1898, when Khartoum again became the capital of Sudan, the development of Umm-Durman was suddenly stopped. The town buildings sprawled uncontrollably, turning away from the river.

The city of **Khartoum** whose structure, before it was “re-designed anew”, resembled organic Umm-Durman (see fig. 3) is an entirely different layout. Plan The urban plan of the city was created under the

influence of Lord Kitchener in 1898, in cooperation with Milo Talbot, G.F. Goring and John Maxwell¹³. There are also hypotheses that the team working on the urban-planning concept of Khartoum included the well-known urban designer W.H. McLean, remaining under the influence of Ebenezer Howard's ideas, which considerably contributed to the project¹⁴.

The plan of Khartoum can be characterised as defined, orthogonal, on which a multi-axes layout was superimposed (see fig. 11). One can also perceive some similarities between that plan and the plan of Washington drawn by Pierre Charles L'Enfant. Though it must have been a coincidence since the British modelled the urban planning and architecture of the town more on colonial cities, among which Khartoum was to be “the jewel in the crown” of black Africa¹⁵.

In the use of a combination of an orthogonal layout with a multi-axes one the authors of the plan of Khartoum perceived e.g. the opportunity of better control and faster reaction in the case of a possible uprising or an attack of enemy troops. According to the described plan, the city occupied a sector of a circle measuring approximately 2 × 1 mile. A regular plan with criss-crossing streets enabled some districts to develop into garden cities (see fig. 12, 26) following the idea of the English urban planner, Ebenezer Howard, which must have been McLean's idea. Building blocks singled out thanks to the orthogonal layout were mainly intended for dwellings for native inhabitants. They were relatively easy to build up, and their communications layout allowed for safe and fast transfer since initially roads were wider than plots. The buildings of the British and Egyptian military barracks, connected to the then political situation of Sudan, were located on the city boundary where the railway line was later to run¹⁶. The banks of the Blue Nile were reserved for public utility buildings, some of which have survived until today. It was here that the Governor's Palace was built (see fig. 19) where General Charles Gordon was killed, which led to re-occupation of the city by the English. From the Governor's Palace southwards ran one of the most important communications arteries of the town – Victoria Avenue (see fig. 16). It ran through the city centre, and the railway station was located at its end. The city also boasted the main square called Maidan Abbas in which the main mosque was located (see fig. 20) as well as buildings serving commercial functions. Trade was also conducted on two market squares: the Arab and the European, which were situated to the west of Victoria Avenue¹⁷. Public utility buildings in the city at the beginning of the 20th century were elegant and resembled typical English colonial architecture. Among the most interesting objects in Khartoum from that period one should number the above-mentioned Governor Palace which was modernised by Kitchener; Gordon College (converted in 1952 into the Khartoum University) (see fig. 21) which was designed by a Greek architect, Fabricious Pasha, working mainly in Egypt¹⁸; Gordon Hotel (see fig. 22);

the post office (see fig. 23); an English pharmacy (see fig. 24.) and an Anglican church of All Saints designed by a Scottish architect of the Arts and Crafts movement – Robert Weir Schultz¹⁹. Building work on the cathedral and other public buildings was supervised by Kitchener himself²⁰.

Khartoum North is located in the right bank of the Blue Nile. In contrast to Umm-Durman and Khartoum, the town was not an arena of so intensive historical events that it would affect its urban layout. On the plan by T. Cook (see fig. 4), merely a small village was marked on the site of the later town, while Umm-Durman and Khartoum had already been developed, regular urban structures. In turn, on the map from 1914, (see fig. 5) Khartoum North was marked as a defined, orthogonal, regular structure. One can therefore surmise, that the city developed during the 1920s when Khartoum located on the other bank of the river also intensively developed architecturally. The structure of Khartoum North marked on the aforementioned plan is made up of two individual orthogonal layouts, each with a separate main square. It should be noticed, that those structures even considered as a whole are much smaller than Umm-Durman and Khartoum. Military buildings located on the river, resembling those from Khartoum situated

on the other side on the river, were also marked in the tissue of Khartoum North on the above mentioned plan. From the beginning of the 20th century that city, in contrast to Umm-Durman and Khartoum, was predisposed to be an industrial centre, a handling port and a transport node.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion to the first part of considerations concerning the spatial development of Khartoum, one has to state that all three described cities: Umm-Durman, Khartoum and Khartoum North, despite currently constituting one urban complex, have totally different urban characters, different origins, and different historic town-forming factors. Umm-Durman and Khartoum are fascinating centres, both from the perspective of urban layout and specific architecture that was the work of renowned architects from the beginning of the 20th century, such as e.g. W.H. McLean, Fabricious Pasha or Robert Weir Schultz. Hence the intention of the Polish – Sudanese team to prepare a prolegomenon to the research on the history of development of that agglomeration and its contemporary urban-planning problems, which will be the subject addressed in the second part of the article.

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Abstract

This article is the first part of a study concerning the spatial development of Khartoum and addresses the issue of the city's origins and history. Khartoum is the capital of Sudan and the main political, commercial and cultural centre of the country. The city, founded in the 19th century, at the confluence of the White and the Blue Nile, is an example of a fascinating urban structure consisting of three independently functioning centres: Khartoum, Umm-Durman and Khartoum North.

Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł jest pierwszą częścią opracowania dotyczącego rozwoju przestrzennego Chartumu i podejmuje problematykę genezy oraz historii powstania miasta. Chartum jest stolicą Sudanu oraz głównym ośrodkiem politycznym, handlowym i kulturalnym tego kraju. Miasto, założone w wieku XIX, w miejscu połączenia Białego i Błękitnego Nilu, jest przykładem ciekawej struktury urbanistycznej, złożonej z trzech, niezależnie funkcjonujących ośrodków: Chartumu, Omdurmanu oraz Chartumu Północnego.