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# A Description of Ain Farah and of Wara

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IN the winter of 1964, the authors had occasion to travel through Western Sudan and the Tchad, and were able to visit two archaeological sites in that region. The first was Ain Farah, a large complex of stone construction surrounding a central core of brick buildings, and the second was Wara (or Ouara), a large walled fortress and palace arrangement made out of brick.

Geographically the sites both lie on the natural east-west route across Africa. In the Sudan, this route is about 100 miles wide as it is bounded, for all practical purposes, by the Libyan desert to the North and the swamps of the Bahr el Ghazel to the South. In Darfur, this route is partially blocked by the very large and impassable volcanic mass of Jebel Marra, and travellers are necessarily confined to a relatively narrow passage. This strategic location undoubtedly increased the importance of the two sites.

Because of its geography, Darfur has acted as a funnel through which Islam has flowed across Central Africa. The region is punctuated by remains of indeterminate antiquity, and its investigation will surely eventually reveal much about the expansion of Islam across Africa.

At present, however, little is known about the archaeology of this region. This ignorance is primarily due to the rarity of interested visitors, although Arkell<sup>1</sup> has written several descriptions of the area. Particularly little is known about Wara, which lies just across the border in the Tchad, even though it is culturally and geographically linked with Darfur. The authors hope that their pictures and measurements may contribute somewhat to the understanding of the region.

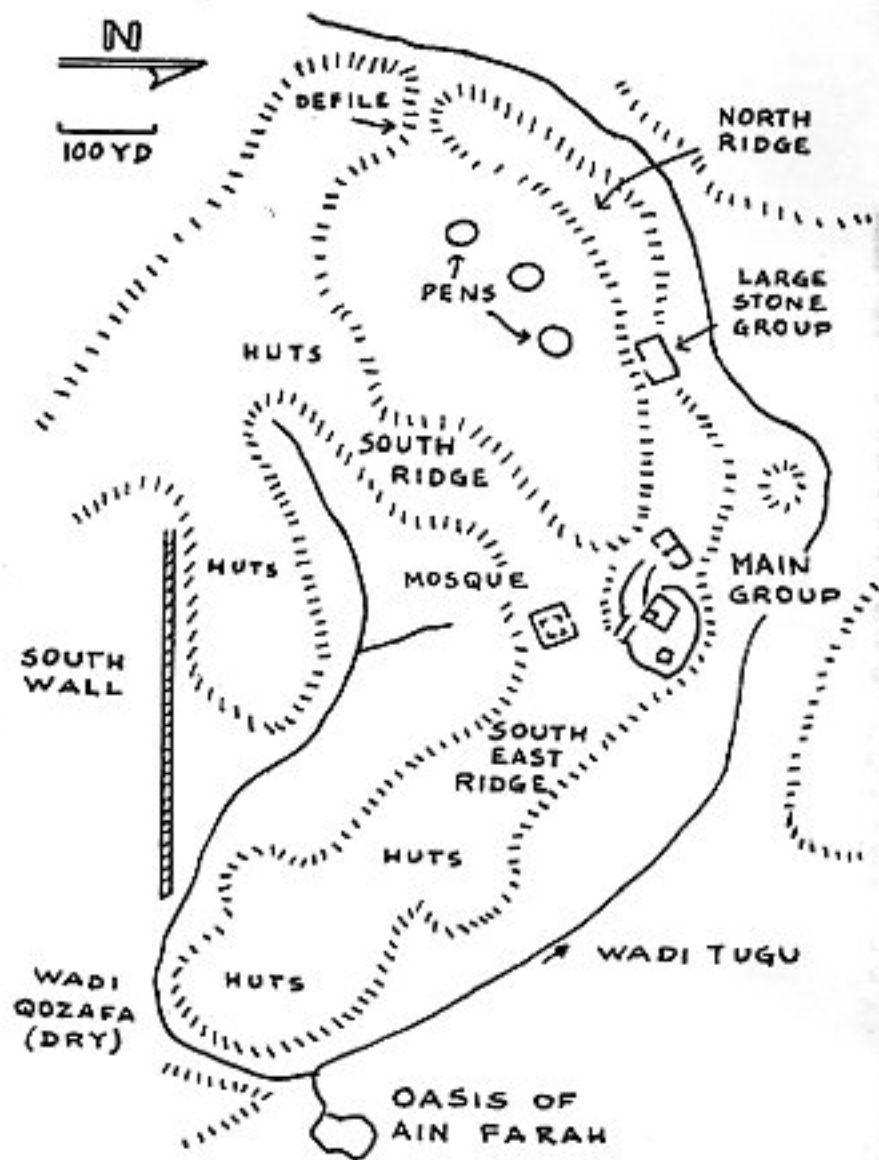
The first place they visited was Ain Farah which is approximately 80 miles north-west of El Fasher, the provincial capital of Darfur, which can now be reached by a bi-weekly airplane service from Khartoum. The site is reached by driving along the base of the Wana Hills to Kutum, the administrative centre of the Northern Region, and then progressing some 20 miles into the Furnung Hills.

The site is finally reached by crossing a large open plain and entering the gorge, walled on each side by high stony ridges, that shelters the spring of Ain Farah. Ain Farah is reputedly the only perennial spring in the Northern District, and this fact could account for the extent of the ruins, a plan of which is shown in FIG. 1. It is apparent that Ain Farah was a large town whose focal point was the several large brick structures that Arkell has written about.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> A. J. Arkell, *A History of the Sudan to 1821* (Athlone Press, 1961).

<sup>2</sup> Id., 'Darfur Antiquities, Part 1, Ain Farah', *SNR*, XIX (1936), pp. 301-11.

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## PLAN OF AIN FARAH

FIG. 1

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As can be seen from the sketch map, the location is particularly well chosen. The only easy access to the town is through the narrow defile to the west. This approach is very defensible while still affording a means to bring the livestock into the town. To enter the settlement from any other direction one has to climb very steep ridges, about 400 feet high, except to the south where the ridge is further reinforced by a strong wall.

The dwellings mostly lie on the crest of the south and south-east ridges. Apart from the large stone group, only a few huts are scattered over the very sharp north ridge. There seem to have been over 200 huts in all. Numerous circular enclosures, presumably animal pens, fill the large interior valley.

The huts are quite remarkable. They consist of circular units about 8 ft. in diameter, whose walls consist of large rocks coursed in an earth matrix, and which are 24 to 30 in. thick. The walls are now about 3 ft. high, and, since little debris is to be seen, it is supposed that this was their approximate original height, and that the roofs were made out of some palm frond or grass. As a rule a dwelling seemed to be made up of two or three of the circular units which were joined to each other as shown in *PLATE XLVI, a*. This larger unit would have only one door to the outside and this is without a lintel so that a man could walk into the hut. But the inner doors, communicating from one circular unit to the next, have very low lintels. The inner doors are about 2 ft. on a side and seem to have a paved sill as illustrated in *PLATE XLVII, a*. Another interesting feature of a dwelling is its 'cupboard', which seems to have been a storage space or, possibly, a small domestic oven. Each 'cupboard' would have an opening about 16 in. square which widens to a cavity about 2 ft. on a side. Cupboards similar to the one shown in *PLATE XLVII, b* were observed by Arkell at Jebel Uri,<sup>3</sup> another ruined town in Northern Darfur quite close to Ain Farah.

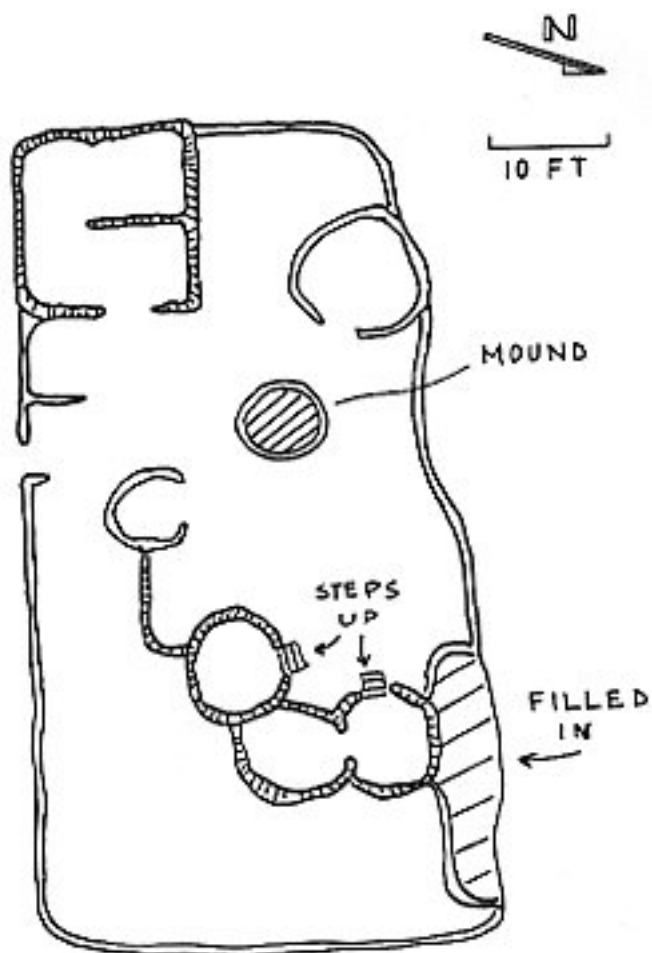
The large stone complex on the north ridge seems to consist of a series of huts enclosed by a low stone wall. The stone work is like that of the huts described before, with the exception that the walls are thinner and higher, and that the huts are not interconnected. *FIG. 2* is a plan of this stone group. A particularly curious feature of the complex is the 6 ft. diameter mound which seems to have been deliberately formed by building a 3 ft. high wall and filling this enclosure with earth.

The large brick buildings at the centre of the town have been generally described by Arkell.<sup>4</sup> Because of a recent article in which he proposes that Ain Farah may have represented a Christian settlement,<sup>5</sup> the authors took careful measurements of the square building to the east of the main brick complex, and their figures were used to draw *FIG. 3* to exact scale. This edifice has been

<sup>3</sup> A. J. Arkell, 'Darfur Antiquities, Part 3, The Ruined Town of Uri in Northern Darfur', *SNR*, xxvii (1946), pp. 185-202. <sup>4</sup> *Id.*, 'Ain Farah', *op. cit.*

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*, 'The Mediaeval History of Darfur', *SNR*, xl (1959), pp. 44-7.

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== LOW WALLS 1 TO 3 FT.

▨ HIGH WALLS OVER 6 FT.

LARGE STONE GROUP

FIG. 2

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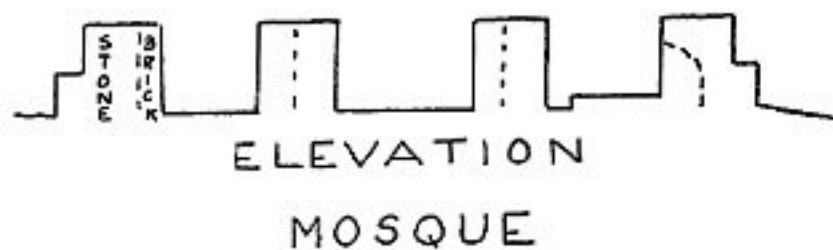
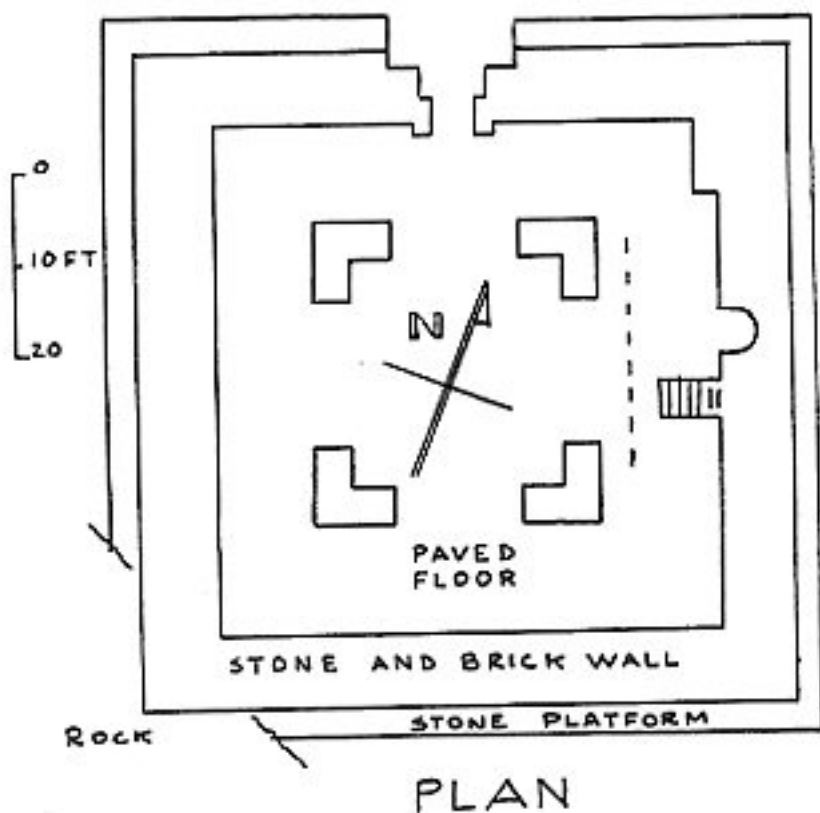


FIG. 3. PLAN AND ELEVATION OF MOSQUE AT AIN FARAH

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alternatively called the mosque or the church. The structure is quite impressive. Large walls, 8 to 9 ft. thick, are placed upon a stone platform which may be up to  $4\frac{1}{2}$  ft. high. The walls are odd in that the outer  $5\frac{1}{2}$  ft. are stone while the inner  $2\frac{1}{2}$  ft. are brick. This brick is similar in size and weight to bricks used ordinarily in the Sudan. The floors, however, are paved with very large bricks, about 4 by 10 by 20 in., which weigh only about 7 lb. The reason for their lightness was not apparent as they were in no way hollow and had the same appearance as the other, smaller, bricks.

It was not possible for the authors to resolve the controversy over the exact nature of the building. But it would appear that the edifice was last used as a mosque. As can be seen from the photographs (PLATE XLVIII) what would appear to be a *mihrab* and a *minbar* are appropriately placed in the east wall. Furthermore, the arched brick vault of the *mihrab* penetrates through the brick part of the wall into the stone part, so that it forms an integral part of the structure. It would therefore seem quite unlikely that the *mihrab* was a later addition to the original structure.

If the building is then definitely a mosque, it is difficult to understand the significance of the apparently Christian sherds found at Ain Farah. It is possible that they were trade items from the Christian settlements of the Nile valley. The authors did not find any other interesting sherds although the area is covered with fragments of coarse red pottery similar to that used today by the local inhabitants.

After having visited Ain Farah, the authors drove west into the Tchad to see Wara. This site lies about 40 miles north of Abeche, the centre of the Wadai (or Ouaddai) prefecture in the Tchad, and is reached by crossing flat country occasionally broken by river beds and marked by rocky hills which are the last outcrops of the Darfur mountains.

The site lies in an amphitheatre formed by three hill masses, to the north-east, the south, and the west, each of which rises quite abruptly out of the flat plain to a height of about 500 ft. This can be seen in PLATE XLIX, a panoramic view of Wara from the south hill. A sketch plan of the site is shown in FIG. 4. The names given to the buildings are according to an oral tradition reported by Lt. Magendie.<sup>6</sup>

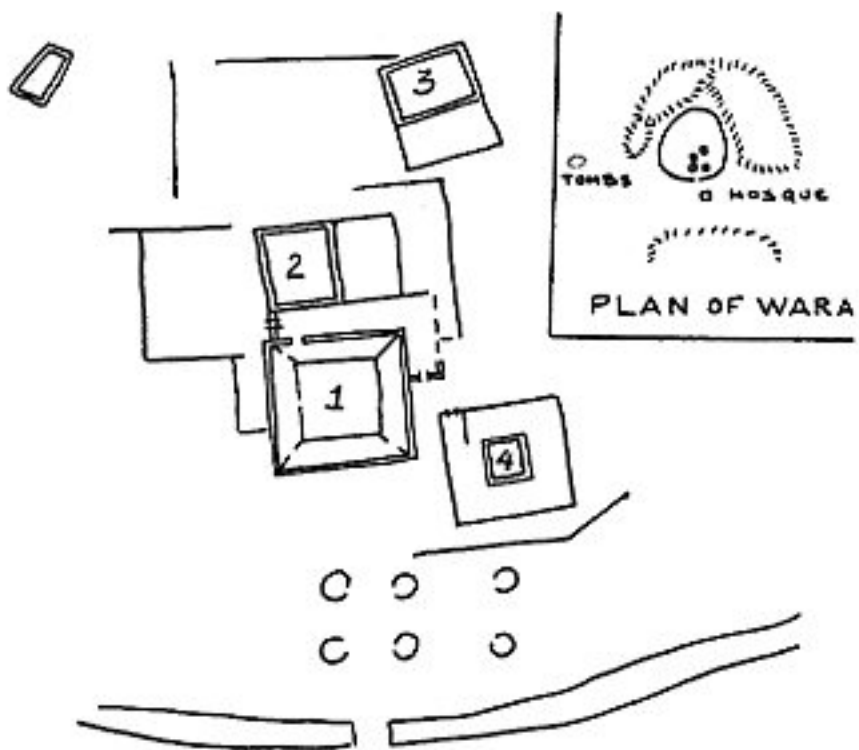
His account also attributes the founding of the town to a certain Abdel Krim (Abd el Karim), a Maba chieftain who is said to have driven out the Tunjur and conquered the region in about 1640. This man is known as the 'father of Islam' in the Wadai because he brought Islam to the inhabitants. The same story was recorded by Nachtigal when he visited Wara in 1873.<sup>7</sup> Nachtigal's

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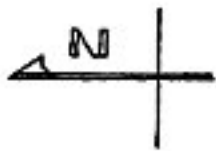
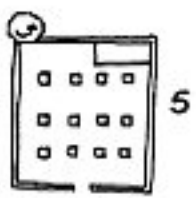
<sup>6</sup> Magendie, 'Les Ruines de Ouara', *Bulletin de la Société des Recherches Congolaises*, Brazzaville, No. 22 (1936).

<sup>7</sup> G. Nachtigal, *Sahara und Sudan*, vol. 3, pp. 273 ff.; F. A. Brockhaus (Leipzig, 1889).

A DESCRIPTION OF AIN FARAH AND OF WARA



- 1 GOUSSOUR HAMRA
- 2 } GOUSSOUR DALMA
- 3 }
- 4 GOUSSOUR BEÏDA  
(OR ABEIT)
- 5 MOSQUE



DETAIL OF BUILDINGS  
AT WARA

FIG. 4



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account is very interesting because he gives a detailed chronology of the kings of Wara and of their wars. These wars seem mostly to have been with Darfur during the 18th century, when the rulers of Wara successfully freed themselves from paying tribute to Darfur. Nachtigal is also able to say that Wara was abandoned in 1850 but that it still supported a population of several hundred people when he got there. He also states that Wara was abandoned, not because of a lack of water as supposed by Lt. Magendie, but because the sultan Mohammed Sherif, who acceded to power in 1850, feared the proximity of the Abu Sunun (or Kodoi) which were the strongest of the original tribes of Wadai and to which he was not related.<sup>9</sup>

The remarkable feature of Wara is the monumentality of the palace and its fortifications. The defensive outer walls enclose an area about 800 ft. in diameter or about 10 acres. The walls are made of brick and at their largest, over the main gate, they are fully 20 ft. high and 8 ft. wide. The labour required to make the bricks and to lay them is enormous, and is a token of the power of the rulers of Wara.

All the buildings, except the mosque which is outside the walls, lie in a compact group facing the main entrance. Between these buildings and the gate are six circular brick walls, 5 ft. high, a foot thick, and 8 ft. in diameter, each with an entrance. It may be supposed that these were guardhouses, an assumption that is certainly in keeping with the forbidding aspect of the town which suggests that the rulers of Wara were prepared to resist powerful enemies.

The main building is the Red Tower (Goussour Hamra) which seems to form a unit with the two Dark Towers (Goussour Dalma), as can be seen from the sketch plan. The entrance to these buildings seems to have been through a covered passageway along the south side of the Red Tower, and this is shown in PLATE XLVI, b. In this picture one may note the square holes about 12 ft. off the ground which presumably held the rafters. This height is also the level of the second storey of the Dark Towers, part of which can be seen to the right in the picture. About 18 ft. high there is a dark horizontal line formed by wooden beams. The purpose of this layer is unclear since the roof of the building, remains of which are quite evident, was actually about 28 ft. off the ground. The Red Tower is entered from the west through a small door just next to a graceful archway that leads from the covered passage to a courtyard. The floor plan of this building is quite unusual: a central room about 20 ft. square is flanked by four trapezoidal rooms about 10 ft. wide.

The entrance to the first Dark Tower, Number 3 in FIG. 4, is reached by passing through the archway into the courtyard and then turning right. This building is two storeys high, as is the second Dark Tower. This last is slightly set apart from the other and has its own courtyard. Both towers would appear

<sup>9</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 77 ff.

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to have been living quarters. Cooking and other domestic activities were probably done in the numerous small brick enclosures attached to the towers.

Alongside of the last three buildings, which seem to have formed the Sultan's Palace, is the Far or White Tower (Goussour Beida or Abeit). The tower is constructed on top of a 10-ft. high stone platform in which the stones were carefully selected for evenness and laid in regular courses. The tower itself is about 20 ft. on a side and seems to have consisted of two storeys for a total height of 30 ft. The purpose of this edifice is unclear, but Lt. Magendie reports that it was used by the Sultan for prayer and meditation. The tower is placed so as to receive the first rays of the rising sun as it appears through the pass between the hills to the east.

The mosque is quite large and is graced by the remains of an octagonal minaret about 7 ft. on a side. The stairs in the minaret, as elsewhere in Wara, are formed by poles imbedded into the bricks and covered with branches. The walls of the mosque are about  $2\frac{1}{2}$  ft. thick and enclose an area about 50 ft. square. Twelve columns, placed in a three by four arrangement, stand about 10 ft. high. The main entrance is to the West and a wide central aisle leads to the *mihrab*.

There are two notable features outside of the town, the tombs about half a mile to the north of the mosque, and the platform on the hill to the west. The tombs are all grouped very closely in a circle about 40 ft. in diameter and are protected by a thorn fence maintained by the inhabitants. There are about eight tombs and each consists of a brick wall about 8 in. high enclosing a  $5 \times 8$  ft. rectangular area.

The platform on top of the hill to the west, which the authors did not visit, apparently had a ceremonial character. Nachtigal calls the hill Thorega, and reports that part of the installation of each new Sultan took place around the platform.<sup>9</sup>

Beyond the physical description of the locality, it is interesting to consider the etymology of Wara. Arkell reports that in Darfur, as in Wadai, Wara was the older word for royal residence.<sup>10</sup> Nachtigal, on the other hand, reports that in the Arabic spoken in the region, Wara or War meant 'the place through which it is difficult to pass'.<sup>11</sup> In terms of usage it might be quite difficult to distinguish between these definitions, and both could equally well be applied to Ain Farah and Wara.

An historical analysis is probably most useful to supplement the cultural comparison of Wara and Ain Farah. As has already been noted, the Wadai seems to have been a traditional dependency of the Tunjur whose centre was in

<sup>9</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 77 ff.

<sup>10</sup> A. J. Arkell, 'History of Darfur, A.D. 1200-1700, Part 3', *SNR*, XXXIII (1952), p. 130.

<sup>11</sup> G. Nachtigal, *op. cit.*, p. 273.

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Darfur. In the early 17th century Islam seems to have come to the Wadai and to Darfur, and in both cases the Tunjur were evicted<sup>12</sup>. Brick construction is associated with this conquest; in Wadai, Wara is built, and in Darfur, a mosque and a palace are built at Ain Farah. Wara is constructed on a new site chosen by Abd el Krim, but at Ain Farah the Moslem buildings are superimposed upon the older, and presumably Tunjur, remains.

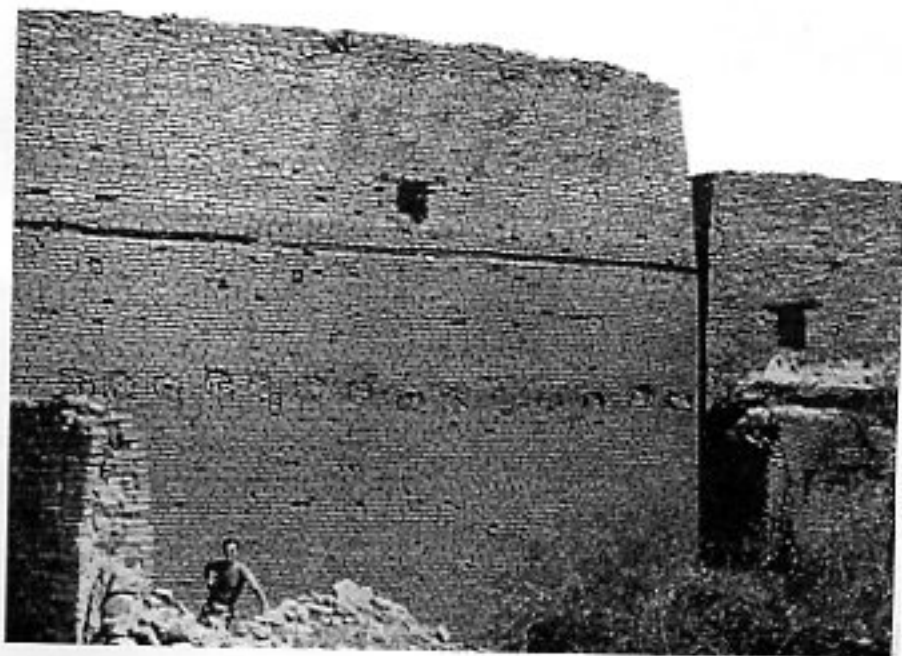
Under this hypothesis it would be further reasoned that the Tunjur, a primitive people moving only on foot, would build their towns in easily defensible mountain areas such as Darfur, but that the Arabs, who used the horse, would chose to settle in the plains. This would explain why there are few Tunjur remains in Wadai even though it was a Tunjur domain, and also why only relatively small brick buildings were built at Ain Farah, and why Ain Farah, which is stuck up in the hills, was abandoned long before Wara was.

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<sup>12</sup> G. Nachtigal, *op. cit.* pp. 273 ff.; A. J. Arkell, 'History of Darfur', *op. cit.*, p. 45.



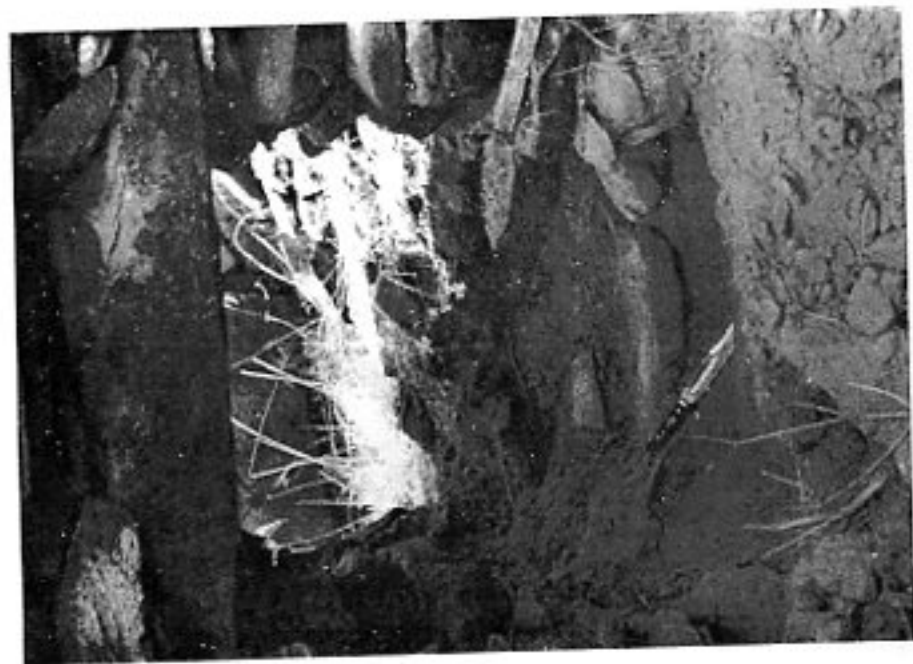
4. CIRCULAR HUTS JOINED TO FORM A DWELLING



A SOUTH WALL OF THE RED TOWER



8. OPENING TO A CUPBOARD



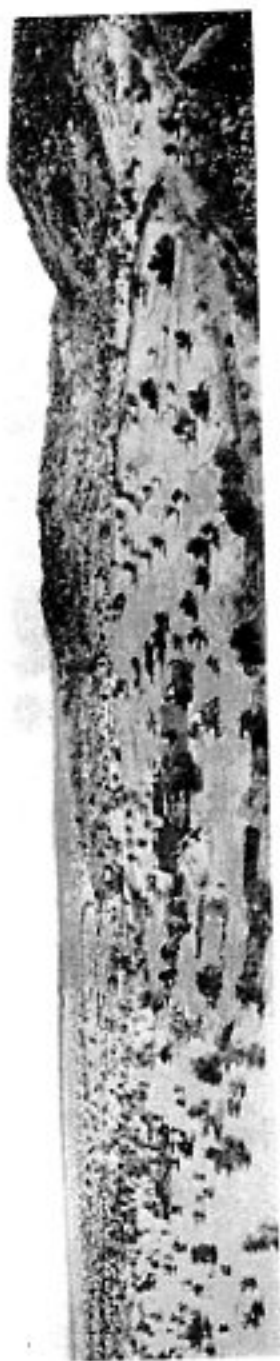
9. INNER DOOR WITH SILL



4. DETAIL OF MIHRAB IMBEDDED IN WALL OF MOSQUE



5. MIHRAB STEPS



Fossiliferous view of WARA looking north