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# ARCHAEOLOGY BY THE FOURTH NILE CATARACT

Survey and Excavations on the left bank of the river  
and on the islands between Amri and Kirbekan

Volume I

Landscape, toponyms and oral history and the people, their  
settlements, architecture and land use before the Merowe Dam

edited by

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Front cover: One of the innumerable channels of the Nile and a small cataract in the area of the SARS concession.

Back cover: The track to et-Tereif entering the reservoir in October 2008.

The Nile looking upstream across the village of Seneta.

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# Preface

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Co-ordinator of the Merowe Dam Archaeological Salvage Project

Building a dam at the Fourth Cataract of the Nile is an old project first conceived in the 1940s. It was previously known as the “Hamdab Dam” in reference to the name of the locality of the planned dam site. Finally the authorities adopted the name “Merowe Dam” after the capital of the province. At the beginning, this name caused some confusion due to the fact that the dam crossed a small island called “Mirowy”. During the 1990s the Sudan Government became more serious about implementing the project.

The successive directors of the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums (NCAM) (Usama Abdelrahman Elnour, Ahmed Al-Hakem and Hassan Hussein Idriss) respectively launched appeals to the international scientific community to rescue the archaeological remains of the endangered region of the Fourth Cataract. These appeals at the time gained very little attention from scientists. Perhaps the main reason may have been that few people believed in the execution of the dam in the near future due to the isolation of the country after the downfall of the civil democratic government (1989) and the beginning of a new era of military rule that was destined to last for 30 years. The difficult nature of the area also deterred many people from undertaking any research/rescue projects in the region.

By the end of last, and beginning of this, century it became clear that the Government has finally determined to build the hydro-electric dam as one of its top strategic projects. NCAM suddenly found itself faced with a tremendous task. From an archaeological perspective the building of this dam required surveys and rescue excavations over vast regions:

- The construction area itself at the dam site.
- The flooded area of about 170km upstream of the dam on both banks of the Nile together with tens of islands.
- Four resettlement areas distributed equally in the Northern and River Nile States.
- Thousands of kilometres of electricity transmission lines.
- Other related infrastructure projects such as new roads.

Help in raising awareness of the impending threat came from the Sudan Archaeological Research Society (SARS). With a generous invitation from SARS, NCAM was able to address an appeal to the international scientific community from the platform of the Society’s annual colloquium at the British Museum in May 2003. At that meeting was announced the birth of the “Merowe Dam Archaeological Salvage Project – MDASP”. The response to the appeal was great and 12 missions from different countries took to the field joining the Gdańsk Archaeological Museum

and SARS which had already had teams working in the area. NCAM and the French Archaeological Unit (SFDAS – *Section Française de la Direction des Antiquités du Soudan*) took the responsibility of working at the dam site, at the four resettlement areas and the related projects, while the area to be inundated upstream of the dam was divided into concessions amongst the different missions.

SARS decided to suspend its activities at the Egyptian/Kushite site of Kawa and to devote its efforts to the salvage operations on the Fourth Cataract. It benefited from its experience, in the region, of the previous survey conducted in 1999 on the left bank of the Nile, to plan the strategy of its eight seasons of interventions (2002-2008). One should admire the courage of SARS and all other missions that took the risk of such an adventure in one of the harshest regions of the Nile Valley about which our historical knowledge was, at that time, almost a blank. The “*Khawagat*” members of these missions, drawn from around the world, were certainly the first non-Sudanese to walk on the rocks of some parts of the region, at least since the end of the colonial period in Sudan. The *Khawagat* discovered a completely new environment while themselves constituting a novel experience for the local population.

The limited time available to the scientists before the flooding of the area made the task much more complicated, compounded by the strong opposition and resistance against the building of the dam from some elements of those people directly affected by it. In some parts of the Fourth Cataract, archaeologists came to be considered as a part of the Dam “building baggage” and were consequently forbidden to execute their research.

NCAM is greatly indebted to SARS for what has been achieved during its Fourth Cataract salvage activities. The enthusiasm and determination of Vivian Davies and Derek Welsby and all members of the Society was crucial in convincing many missions to join the salvage efforts. With so limited time, financial and human resources, it was difficult to rescue everything and a wise choice had to be made to get the maximum data possible in the field to provide a representative sample of the region’s archaeological heritage.

SARS’s activities have touched on all the periods of the country’s history from the early prehistoric to the late historic periods. The work in the Fourth Cataract has contributed to reveal a rural version of Sudan’s history away from the capitals and the main urban centres of the country.

As the final act, at the invitation of the founders of CeRDO (*Centro Ricerche sul Deserto Orientale*), Drs Alfredo and Angelo Castiglioni, who organized the logistics of the mission, a small team from the British Museum, CeRDO

and NCAM supervised the dismantling and transportations of a lot of rock art from the SARS concession, together with the blocks of a unique granite Kushite pyramid discovered and excavated by the mission. NCAM is indebted to the Castiglioni brothers who, through their personal contacts, were able to secure technical and financial assistance from the Italian firms IVECO and New Holland to make this work possible.

This book, the first of several projected volumes, covers very interesting topics of the mission's activities during the eight seasons spent in the area. The text, with its rich photographic/illustrative documentation, is an excellent souvenir of a beautiful landscape which has been lost forever. It gives a comprehensive account of the dam project, a description of the landscape and the geomorphological evolution of the area, its land use and the vegetation, the tribal oral histories, the toponyms of the region, along with ethnographic studies, a discussion of the local architecture and settlement organization and life in the villages.

Although these studies have been conducted on a limited area of the region, it certainly constitutes a representative sample of the Fourth Cataract. This book whets our appetite to receive the full archaeological data recovered and the resulting synthesis of the country's history in this now inundated region. It is hoped that it will be the first of many such reports from the many missions involved in the MDASP which will provide details of multiple aspects of life in the Fourth Cataract immediately before the inundation and of its rich archaeological heritage.

We hope that this work can be translated into Arabic to be available for the new generations of the dislocated population to give them a picture of their ancestral homeland which they will never have the opportunity to see.

# Summary

This volume is the first of several which will present in detail the results of the research undertaken by the Sudan Archaeological Research Society as a part of the Merowe Dam Archaeological Salvage Project. The Society was awarded a concession, by Sudan's National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums, on the left bank of the Nile between Dar el-Arab and Jebel Musa and of all the adjacent islands in 1998. The first season, initially planned for the winter of 1998-99, had to be deferred for political reasons. In October 1999 survey was begun based midway along the concession in the village of et-Tereif, the results of which were published in a monograph in 2003 (Welsby 2003a).

Over the 10-year duration of the project the Society fielded 18 teams whose core activities were to survey archaeological sites and undertake excavation of a representative sample of them. While this work was in progress individual team members also investigated the palaeoenvironment, land use, modern settlements and culture, place names and folklore. In the course of the work approximately 2,800 archaeological sites were recorded which include very large numbers of images pecked or carved into rock. Evidence for human activity was documented from the Middle Palaeolithic up to the present.

The large size of the concession, the complexity of its land forms and the limited time frame available for work, coupled with funding constraints, meant that not all the areas which were subsequently inundated could be investigate to the level of detail considered desirable. Some areas were not even visited by the SARS teams. Towards the end of the project the teams were impacted by opposition to the construction of the dam, instigated by a group from amongst the Manāṣīr, and this brought an abrupt halt to the work in the vicinity of ed-Doma midway through the winter of 2006-7.

Notwithstanding the problems faced by the survey teams an immense amount of data was recovered. It is the intention to publish this in the Society's monograph series over six volumes:

- I Introduction, palaeoenvironment, place name survey, modern architecture, settlement, land use, customs and folklore
- II Gazetteers of the sites discovered
- III The excavations
- IV The artefacts
- V Bioarchaeology
- VI The rock art and rock gongs

The first volume begins with an introduction to the area and its archaeology as well as providing details of the genesis of SARS's involvement. It is followed by a series of detailed studies by a range of authors. Pawel Wolf and his colleagues describe the palaeoenvironment; data largely collected in the field by Baldur Gabriel. It is into this environmental framework that all human occupants of

the region have interacted through the millennia. Arnaud Malterer examines the agricultural practices in the region immediately prior to its inundation. Whilst impacted by the introduction of the diesel water pump during the 20<sup>th</sup> century many of the practices employed and the crops cultivated have a long history in the area and indicate its potential for sustaining human settlement over time. Muhamed Jalal Hashim toured very extensively throughout the upstream and central part of the concession speaking to the local people and ascertaining from them a wealth of information on the names of settlements, locations and physical features in the landscape. He also recorded some folklore traditions and the Manāṣīr's perceptions of their origins, as well as, incidentally, recording in passing the archaeological remains which he came across. As some of these sites were not subsequently visited by the archaeological teams his information is all that is available. Rebecca Bradley and Nuha Abdel Aahiz Abdel Aziz working together, along with Nadejda Reshetnikova and Frances Welsh working independently, recorded the modern settlements in the central and downstream parts of the concession. They observed not only the physical structures of the dwellings and their ancillary buildings but also their methods of construction and how that construction was organised. Further, by interviewing and observing the inhabitants, they were able to offer insights into how the houses were utilised and to build up a picture of daily life for all sectors of the communities considered. Although there is some overlap between these reports it has been deemed desirable to publish their results in full as what they recorded is now lost forever within the area of inundation or will have been dramatically altered following the dispersal of the populations, most into the resettlement areas but some into those areas immediately above the high water mark of the reservoirs.

Throughout the project the teams were greatly supported by the staff of the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums in Khartoum and by their representatives, the inspectors, who accompanied each field team, assisting with logistical and administrative issues but also taking a full part in the archaeological work. The teams resided amongst the local communities renting houses in several villages and employing people to work on the excavations. At all times the level of hospitality extended to us was of the highest order. Certainly in our personal experience, even when the issues were raised about the perceived tacit support being given by the archaeologists to facilitate the construction of the dam, the people we lived and worked amongst clearly understood that the issues were entirely separate. At no point did we experience any personal animosity towards us from those amongst whom we lived

The immense richness of the archaeological heritage of the Fourth Cataract region will be amply demonstrated in subsequent volumes. Its almost total destruction is much

to be regretted while the devastation of the lifestyles and livelihoods of those who were forced to leave the area is tragic.

It is hoped that this, and the other volumes in the series, will at least serve to preserve a memory of this important region alongside those studies which will in due course be published by others missions working across the river from the SARS concession and upstream and downstream of it.