THE FOURTH CATARACT AND BEYOND

Proceedings of the 12th International Conference for Nubian Studies

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Julie R. ANDERSON and Derek A. WELSBY
CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Yusuf Fadl Hasan and Derek A. Welsby
Opening Session ........................................................................................................... 1

Salah Mohamed Ahmed
An Introduction to the Merowe Dam Archaeological Salvage Project (MDASP)......................... 5

THE FOURTH CATARACT AND BEYOND - MAIN PAPERS

PREHISTORY

Piotr Osypiński
Prehistory of the Fourth Cataract ........................................................................................................ 9

Matthieu Honegger
Recent Advances in Our Understanding of Prehistory in Northern Sudan ........................................ 19

Donatella Usai
Recent Advances in Understanding the Prehistory of Central Sudan ................................................. 31

Maria Carmela Gatto
Recent Advances in the Understanding of Nubian Prehistory in Lower Nubia, Upper Egypt and the Deserts 45

THE KERMA PERIOD

Henryk Paner
Kerma Culture in the Fourth Cataract of the Nile ............................................................................. 53

Charles Bonnet
Forty Years Research on Kerma Cultures .......................................................................................... 81
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brigitte Gratién</td>
<td>Kerma North of the Third Cataract</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominique Valbelle</td>
<td>International Relations between Kerma and Egypt</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salah Mohamed Ahmed</td>
<td>Kushites at the Fourth Cataract</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vincent Rondot</td>
<td>The Island of Meroe</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angelika Lohwasser</td>
<td>Kush and her Neighbours beyond the Nile Valley</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bogdan Żurawski</td>
<td>The Fourth Cataract in the Medieval Period</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Włodzimierz Godlewski</td>
<td>The Kingdom of Makuria</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David N. Edwards</td>
<td>Medieval Nobadia</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derek A. Welsby</td>
<td>The Kingdom of Alwa</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abdelrahman Ali Mohammed</td>
<td>The Islamic Period in the Fourth Cataract</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intisar Soghayroun Elzein</td>
<td>Islamic Archaeology in Northern Sudan</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael Mallinson</td>
<td>The Red Sea Littoral since the Arrival of Islam</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yusuf Fadl Hasan</td>
<td>The Islamic Sudan and the Outside World, c. 1317-1821</td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CONTENTS

REPORTS AND RESEARCH PAPERS

PREHISTORY

Elena A. A. Garcea
The Evolution from Large Social Units with Loose Networks into Small Social Units with Tight Networks from the Khartoum Variant to the Abkan and the Pre-Kerma at Sai Island .................................................. 235

Sandro Salvatori, Donatella Usai, Mohamed Faroug Abdelrahman, Antonietta Di Matteo, Paola Iacumin, Veerle Linselle and Mongeda Khaleb Magzoub
Archaeology at el-Khiday: New Insight on the Prehistory and History of Central Sudan .................. 243

Andrea Zerboni
The Geoarchaeological Contribution to the el-Salha Project: From Site to Landscape at el-Khiday (Central Sudan)........................................................................................................................... 259

Tina Jakob
A Bioarchaeological Appraisal of the Human Skeletal Remains from el-Khiday 2, Central Sudan........ 271

Abdelrahim M. Khabir
Typological and Technological Examinations of Neolithic Pottery from Khartoum Province, Sudan .... 279

Azhari Mustafa Sadig
Child Burials: A Funerary Practice in the Middle Nile Region. Evidence from the Late Neolithic Site of es-Sour ........................................................................................................................................ 285

Przemek Bobrowski, Agnieszka Czekaj-Zastawny and Romuald Schild
Gebel el-Muqaddas (site E-06-4). The Early Neolithic Tumuli from Nabta Playa (Western Desert, Egypt) 293

Heba-Tallah A. A. Ibrahim
Megalithic Architecture and the Nubian Desert .................................................................................... 303

KERMA AND CONTEMPORARY CULTURES

George Herbst and Stuart Tyson Smith
Pre-Kerma Transition at the Nile Fourth Cataract: First Assessments of a Multi-component, Stratified Prehistoric Settlement in the UCSB/ASU Salvage Concession ................................................................. 311

Magdalena Wlodarska
Kerma Burials in the Fourth Cataract Region – Three Seasons of Excavations at Shemkhiya............. 321

Geoff Emberling, Bruce B. Williams, Megan Ingvoldstad and Thomas R. James
Peripheral Vision: Identity at the Margins of the Early Kingdom of Kush ........................................ 329

Enrico Dirminti
Between Kerma and Avaris: The First Kingdom of Kush and Egypt during the Second Intermediate Period 337

Pernille Bangsgaard
Nubian Faunal Practices – Exploring the C-Group “Pastoral Ideal” at Nine Cemeteries ........................ 347
Petra WESCHENFELDER
Linking the Eastern Desert and the Nile Valley: Pan-Grave People from the Late Middle Kingdom to the Early New Kingdom ................................................................. 357

Florence DOYEN
Sai Island New Kingdom Town (Northern Sudan): 3rd and 4th Seasons (2009-2010) ......................... 367

Giulia D’ERCOLE, Giacomo ERAMO and Italo M. MUNTONI
Archaeometric Approaches to Ceramic Manufacture and Traditions at Sai Island, Northern Sudan .......... 377

Lauriane MIELLE
Nubian Traditions on the Ceramics Found in the Pharaonic Town on Sai Island ....................................... 387

Giacomo CAVILLIER
Soleb 2010 Project: Amenhotep III’s Fortified Complex Research ........................................................ 393

W. Vivian DAVIES
A Statue of Amenhotep III Rediscovered .................................................................................................. 399

Kate SPENCE and Pamela ROSE
Fieldwork at Sesebi 2010 ........................................................................................................................ 409

Philippe RUFIJEUX
Early 18th Dynasty Pottery Found in Kerma (Dokki Gel) ........................................................................ 417

Stuart Tyson SMITH and Michele R. BUZON
Colonial Entanglements: “Egyptianization” in Egypt’s Nubian Empire and the Nubian Dynasty ............... 431

Doris PEMLER
Looking for Nubians in Egypt. Taking a Look at the Iconographic Evidence from the 1st Intermediate Period and Middle Kingdom ........................................................................... 443

Natalie A. POMERANTSEVA
Images of the Foreigners in Egyptian Art ................................................................................................ 451

Neal SPENCER
Amara West: Considerations on Urban Life in Colonial Kush .................................................................. 457

Michaela BINDLPR
Cultural Traditions and Transitions During the New Kingdom Colonial Period and Its Aftermath – Recent Discoveries from the Cemeteries of Amara West ................................................................. 487

Daniele MICHAUX-COLOMBOT
Pitfall Concepts in the Round of ‘Nubia’: Ta-Sety, Nehesy, Medja, Maga and Punt Revisited ................. 507

Alfredo CASTIGLIONI and Angelo CASTIGLIONI
À la recherche de la terre d’Amou .............................................................................................................. 523
CONTENTS

KUSHITE

EL-SAMANI AL-NASRI MOHAMMED AHMED
The Emergence of Kush ................................................................. 531

Jean REVEZ
The Role of the Kings’ Brothers in the Transmission of Royal Power in Ancient Egypt and Kush: A Cross-Cultural Study ................................................................. 537

Friederike JESSE
On the Borders of Kushite Power – The Gala Abu Ahmed Fortress in Lower Wadi Howar, Northern Sudan 545

Michael H. ZACH
The Army and Military Dictatorship in Meroe? .................................. 557

Stanley M. BURSTEIN
The Satrap Stela and the Struggle for Lower Nubia ............................ 573

Jeremy POPE
Meroitic Diplomacy and the Festival of Entry .................................... 577

Maria Iride PASQUALI
On the Traces of Nubians: Notes on the Relations between Romans and Meroites ........................................... 583

IKHLAS ABDUL LATIEF
The K3 Symbol in Kushite Civilization ............................................ 587

Amarillis POMPEI
Delivery of Nubian Royal Insignia: The Crowns ................................ 591

Katarina ALDENHOVEN
Kushite Barque Stands ..................................................................... 601

Julie R. ANDERSON and SALAH MOHAMED AHMED
Early Kushite Royal Statues at Dangeil, Sudan .................................. 613

László TÖRÖK
Quality, Style, and Nubianness. Prolegomena to a History of Meroitic Sculpture .................................................. 621

MURTADA BUSHARA MOHAMMED
The Possible Royal Tomb of Eltameer Merowe .................................. 635

Julia BUDKA
Egyptian Impact on Pot-Breaking Ceremonies at el-Kurru? A Re-examination .................................................. 641

Brigitte BALANDA
Protecting the Mummy – A Reinterpretation of Shabtis in Napatan Funerary Customs ......................................... 655

Timothy KENDALL
Reused Relief Blocks of Piankhy from B 900: Toward a Decipherment of the Osiris Cult at Jebel Barkal 663
## CONTENTS

Svetlana Bersina†
Sabazios dans les pays de la vallée du Nil. Variétés régionales de l’image et du culte……………… 687

Emanuele M. Ciampini and Grażyna Bałkowska-Czerner
Meroitic Kingship and Water: The Case of Napata (B2200)……………………………………………… 695

Tracey Sweek, Julie R. Anderson, Salah Mohamed Ahmed and Satoko Tanimoto
Conservation of an Amun Temple in the Sudan …………………………………………………………….. 703

Karla Kroeper
Excavation of “Offering Chapel 360” in Naga ……………………………………………………………….. 711

Pawel Wolf, Ulrike Nowotnick and Catharine Hof
The Meroitic Urban Town of Hamadab in 2010……………………………………………………………….. 719

Eugenio Fantusati, Eleonora Kormysheva and Svetlana Malykh
Survey in Abu Erteila: Preliminary Results…………………………………………………………………….. 739

Richard A. Lobban
Preliminary Findings at Abu Erteila: A Meroitic and Early Christian Site in Sudan …………………… 759

Michel Baud†
Downtown Muweis – A Progress Report (2007-2011)……………………………………………………… 763

Marc Maillot
The Palace of Muweis in the Shendi Reach: A Comparative Approach ……………………………………… 783

Vincent Francigny
An Elite Meroitic Cemetery at Sai Island ……………………………………………………………………….. 797

Mahmoud Suliman Bashir
The Archaeological Material from the Meroitic Cemetery at Berber ……………………………………….. 805

Tsubasa Sakamoto
Chronology of Meroitic Graves in Northern Sudan: Agency, Power and Society …………………….. 809

Serge Feneuille, Jean-Pierre Letourneux and Marie Bouchar
Archaeological Information Extracted from a Comparative Study of Samples of Mortar Collected on Various Ancient Monuments in the Nile Valley between the Third and the Sixth Cataracts…… 827

**MEDIEVAL**

Marek Chlodnicki
The “Royal” Tumulus at Hagar el-Beida………………………………………………………………………….. 833

Brenda J. Baker
Tracking Transitions in the Fourth Cataract Region of el-Ginefab: Results of the Arizona State University Fieldwork, 2007-2009 ……………………………………………………………………………….. 841
CONTENTS

Eugen S Trouhal
Anthropology of Wadi Qitna and Kalabsha South ................................................................. 857

Artur Ołuski
Rank-Size Rule in Nubian Settlement Systems ........................................................................ 867

William Y. Adams
The Eparch at Meinarti ........................................................................................................ 875

Bogdan Żurawski
Meroitic to Medieval Occupation Upriver from Dongola. Excavations at Baganarti and Selib in 2010.... 887

Mariusz Drzewiecki
Baganarti – Fortifications ........................................................................................................ 901

Marta Osypińska
Animals in the Economy of Christian Makuria ........................................................................ 909

Małgorzata Martens-Czarnecka
Nubian Representations of Nativity Discovered in the Monastery in Old Dongola ......................... 917

Magdalena Woźniak
Royal Iconography: Contribution to the Study of Costume...................................................... 929

Dobrochna Zielinska
The Iconography of Power – The Power of Iconography: The Nubian Royal Ideology and Its Expression in Wall Painting ................................................................. 943

Adam Łajtar
A Survey of Christian Textual Finds from Gebel Adda in the Collections of the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto ........................................................................................................ 951

Giovanni Ruffini
May God Increase Your Years: Unpublished Old Nubian Correspondence from Qasr Ibrim .................. 961

Grzegorz Ochala
Old Nubian Lists of Goods and Money: A Preliminary Presentation ........................................ 971

Claudia Nâser and Alexandros Tsakos
From Bits and Pieces. A Corpus of Medieval Manuscripts from the Humboldt University (H.U.N.E.) Concession in the Fourth Nile Cataract ................................................................................... 977

Alexandros Tsakos and Henriette Haftsaas-Tsakos
A Note on the Medieval Period of Sai Island ............................................................................... 985

Robin Seignobos
Nubia and Nubians in Medieval Latin Culture. The Evidence of Maps (12th-14th Century) .............. 989
## ISLAMIC TO MODERN

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NADA BABEKIR MOHAMMED</td>
<td>Fangool Archaeological Site: A Brief Note</td>
<td>1005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RAGEH Z. MOHAMED</td>
<td>Bani Ady, Darb el-Arbain’s Last Station between Upper Egypt and Nubia in the Islamic period</td>
<td>1009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex DE VOOGT</td>
<td>The Introduction of Mancala to Sai Island</td>
<td>1017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HAIFA MOHAMMED HASSAN ELTAYEB</td>
<td>Sudanese Beautification Ornaments between the Past and the Present</td>
<td>1021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armgard GOO-GRAUER</td>
<td>House Decoration by Nubian Women Prior to 1964 Resettlement</td>
<td>1025</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne M. JENNINGS</td>
<td>The Changing Face of Tourism in West Aswan Village</td>
<td>1027</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Costanza DE SIMONE</td>
<td>Perceptions of Nubia in Museum Collections and Displays</td>
<td>1031</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salomé ZURINAGA</td>
<td>The Preservation of the Documentary Heritage of the ‘Nubian Campaign’ kept at the Spanish National Archaeological Museum, Madrid, Spain</td>
<td>1035</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## MULTI-PERIOD

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>KABBASHI HUSSEIN GISSEMA</td>
<td>The Merowe Dam Salvage Archaeological Project (Sudan)</td>
<td>1049</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FAWZI HASSAN BAKHEIT</td>
<td>Rock Drawing Studies: Four Seasons In The Middle Nile Region</td>
<td>1057</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joanna THEN-OBLUSKA</td>
<td>The Code of the Hidden Beads – From the Kerma to the Islamic Period According to the Fourth Cataract Material from the Gdańsk Archaeological Museum Expedition Excavations</td>
<td>1069</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ROSS THOMAS</td>
<td>Changing Societies in the Fourth Cataract: Identity Displayed through Ceramic Use and Consumption Practices</td>
<td>1091</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YAHIA FADL TAHIR</td>
<td>Archaeology and Palaeoecology of el-Ga’ab Basin</td>
<td>1099</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALI Osman Mohamed Salih</td>
<td>Archaeology and Settlement in the Third Cataract Region. Abu Fatma: A Nubian Settlement from the Kerma Period to Modern Times</td>
<td>1107</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Margaret Judd
Growing Up in Gabati: An Overview of Health ................................................................. 1115

Siddig Babiker Ahmed
The Archaeological and Ethnographical Reconnaissance in the Sabaloka Area (Western Bank of the Nile, North of Omdurman District) ........................................................................................................... 1125

Tim Karberg
Rock Art from Wadi Abu Dom. Recent Discoveries of the W.A.D.I. Project (Münster/Germany) ............ 1135

Khidir Adam Eisa
The Recent Archaeological Survey and Salvage Excavations on the Eastern Bank of the White Nile, 8th Season – 2009 .................................................................................................................. 1143

Andrea Manzo
Beyond the Fourth Cataract. Perspectives for Research in Eastern Sudan .................................................. 1149

Yousif Elobeid ElSheikh Salih
GIS in Archaeology .............................................................................................................. 1159

Language and Linguistics

Claude Rilly
Language and Ethnicity in Ancient Sudan .................................................................................. 1169

Herman Bell
A World Heritage Alphabet: The Role of Old Nubian in the Revitalization of the Modern Nubian Languages 1189
A NOTE ON THE MEDIEVAL PERIOD OF SAI ISLAND
ALEXANDROS TSAKOS AND HENRIETTE HAFSAAS-TSAKOS

INTRODUCTION

In the history of the Nubian Studies conferences, there has been no presentation dedicated to the medieval period on Sai Island, although in the first two meetings of the series, Jean Vercoutter referred to the importance of the Christian antiquities of the island (1970, 158-159; 1975, 133-134). There have, of course, been articles discussing various aspects of the Christian past of Sai (e.g. Łajtar 2006), but fieldwork conducted on the island has focused on other periods (mainly Prehistory, Kerma, Pharaonic and Meroitic periods). Since 2009, however, an archaeological expedition, consisting of one Greek and one Norwegian archaeologist, started work on Sai with its focus on the medieval period in general and on the so-called ‘Cathedral of Medieval Sai’ in particular.

Therefore, it seemed appropriate that the oral presentation of the first two field seasons on Sai by the Greek-Norwegian Archaeological Mission (GNM) during the 12th international conference in August 2010 should be followed by a written paper. Already, reports from each of the two seasons of the GNM are published in *Beiträge zur Sudanforschung* 10 (2010) and 11 (in press), a constant update on news and thoughts is presented in the internet space “The Medieval Sai Project”, and a special study has been devoted to the very important funerary inscriptions from Christian Sai (Tsakos, in press). Thus, the present contribution will only be a short note to enrich the bibliography on an important case study for Nubian Studies, namely the remains of a medieval bishopric see, and constitute a point of reference for whoever chooses the London venue as a starting point for related research.

Finally yet importantly, the present note wishes to function as a reminder of the existence of important antiquities in a region, which is currently threatened by the plans for the construction of the Dal Dam 42km downstream from Sai Island (see Hafsaas-Tsakos 2011 for a discussion of archaeology and dam building in Sudan).

2009: THE FIRST SEASON

The first season witnessed the recording of the medieval stray finds, which had found shelter in the dig house of the Sai Island Archaeological Mission of the University Charles-de-Gaulle – Lille 3, France, which has held the archaeological concession of the island since 1969. Besides masses of pottery finds, it is worth noting the 75 architectural stone blocks (Hafsaas-Tsakos and Tsakos, in preparation) and the 37 inscribed stelae (Tsakos 2012) testifying to the importance of Sai at least in the Early and Classic Christian periods of Christian Nubian civilization.

Working under the auspices of the French mission, GNM also conducted a survey of the island on foot during the first field season with very promising results and quite a few surprises. An overview of the results from the survey can be seen in the attached map (Figure 1). The most intriguing surprise concerned the discovery of a locality with extensive remains of a production centre for pottery vessels (Hafsaas-Tsakos and Tsakos 2010, 84-85). Finally, a detailed visual examination was undertaken at the so-called Cathedral site (Hafsaas-Tsakos and Tsakos 2010, 83-84), which was named 8-B-500, in compliance with the system of the *Archaeological Map of Sudan* (Hinkel 1979).

2010: THE SECOND SEASON

The second season witnessed the beginning of archaeological activities at site 8-B-500. These consisted of the production of a topographical map of the site, its protection from vehicles crossing it, as well as the beginning of excavations from the northernmost end of the artificial mound upon which four granite columns and three granite bases are standing (Hafsaas-Tsakos and Tsakos, in press). Those remains have led to the suggestion that this was the cathedral of the island in medieval times (Plate 1).

The existence of a bishopric on Sai has been recorded in contemporary medieval written sources (cf. Monneret de Villard 1938, 162), but its location has only been a matter of conjecture: the granite columns seemed to indicate the most important Christian site on the
island, and therefore, Vercoutter (1970, 159) proposed that as the cathedral. However, extensive interventions by the Ottoman occupants of Sai at the fortress (Alexander 1995; 1997; Elzein 2009) and an unfortunate lack of thorough reporting by earlier excavators (the last report is Vercoutter 1975) do not help in evaluating the role of the fortress in the medieval period. The discovery of a fourth granite base at the fortress, from which also come all the gravestones commemorating the bishops of Sai (cf. Tsakos, in press), further strengthens the case, as discussed in the report of the second season, namely that although the granite columns and bases probably derive from the cathedral church of Sai, it remains doubtful that site 8-B-500 was its original location (Hafsaas-Tsakos and Tsakos 2012).

Moreover, on the basis of the distribution of important medieval sites on the island located during the survey of 2009, the investigation of related sites in the vicinity of Sai, and the study of Christian material that has come from those, we wish to nuance our understanding of the administrative divisions of church and state in medieval Nubia. The existence of parishes and internal hierarchies in the various identified Bishoprics is a theme which has been neglected. However, it can provide on the one hand an impulse for more thorough studies and on the other more intensive interest in the

Figure 1. Map of Sai Island with sites located during the survey by GNM (drawn by F. Lenoir).
region, thus raising the awareness of a local past, most probably still preserved in the (sub-)tribal identity of the Sikoot Nubians.

Finally, the open-area excavations at 8-B-500, with respect to the stratigraphic sequence of the features on the site, has already given an insight into the gradual shift of a Christian society of the medieval era to an Islamic one in the post-medieval world. The continuity of settlement and activity on Sai Island is a factor that aids the archaeological investigations through the recording of oral histories. These can subsequently also be used by the bearers of this memory to enrich their argumentation in the struggle against the process of uprooting that the construction of a dam at the Dal Cataract will surely cause.

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**Web-pages**

Medieval Sai Project: http://medievalsaiproject.wordpress.com