

Title The Old Nubian Villages *Bāb* und *Al-Ġūwānī*. Witnesses of a lost Culture.

Abstract

Two abandoned Nubian villages, lying south of Aswan and located at the east bank of the Nile in the area between the High Dam (1960-1970) and the old British Dam (1898-1902) were investigated by the Austrian Archaeological Institute/Cairo Branch. This was carried out as part of a historical-anthropological case study, using an interdisciplinary research strategy drawing on a combination of methods and techniques from architectural studies, archaeology and cultural and social anthropology. The traditional adobe structures of the villages, named *Bāb* and *Al-Ġūwānī* are still in surprisingly good condition and are mostly preserved up to the roof construction. An investigation of early, photographic and cartographic material provided evidence these houses were not built before 1909 when the rising water from the first heightening of the British Dam necessitated relocation of the settlement, and were abandoned in the 1930s prior to the flooding caused by the second heightening of the British Dam in the years 1929-1934. The official cadastral maps of 1932 give a very detailed analysis of the two villages before the second heightening, indicating that the dwellings were expected to be lost due to the increased water level. Interviews with resettled locals from these villages confirm that they were indeed abandoned after the second heightening of the British Dam, even though parts of both villages were undamaged and intact. As soon as the old roads along the Nile river bank were flooded, the remaining dwellings were cut off and were accessible only over the high plateau of the nearby desert or by boat. Due to the difficult access, no large-scale scavenging or displacement of deposits for reuse or similar occurred after the last inhabitants left the settlements, ahead of the rising water.

A functional and structural analysis of the villages provided a knowledge-base for Nubian settlement architecture which reflects the social framework and interaction of the communities that lived there. Besides a general settlement analysis, the architectural study focused on a detailed documentation of the buildings of selected residential units, with an emphasis on building techniques and decorative systems, which are both considered unique, particularly as regards Nubian house architecture. The archaeological documentation of immovable and associated movable cultural remains and deposits was analysed, with a view to answering questions with regards to what was left and why, in a settlement which was systematically abandoned. A core issue has been the crucial question as to whether the material assemblages of the abandoned sites accurately reflect the conditions of their occupation. Furthermore, cultural and social anthropological field studies, in the few still inhabited Nubian settlements in the immediate vicinity, completed and cross-checked the study, by covering questions relating to traditional oral knowledge.

Abandonment and post-abandonment behaviour and its effect on the formation of archaeological records has rarely been studied, and has not yet received enough acknowledgment in archaeological fieldwork. In the case study presented, formation processes and the archaeological inferences were evaluated through research strategies involving Archaeology, Building Research as well as Cultural and Social Anthropology, covering the great variety of movable, immovable and intangible cultural heritage.

Moreover, the documentation of the abandoned Nubian villages in the immediate vicinity of the fortress of *Hisn al-Bāb* represents a significant addition to the ongoing Project of the Austrian Archaeological Institute covering the investigation of a cultural landscape which includes cultural remains from different periods of history without neglecting historically sensitive periods of contemporary history. The two preserved abandoned villages near the fortress represent unique witnesses to the first historical Nubian exodus caused by the construction of the early British Dam, and are therefore valuable ephemeral memorials. Without constant care the durability of the mudbrick architecture is limited, so that detailed documentation was very much needed. The project did not make any modifications to the site, either in terms of excavation, the cleaning of certain areas, or in terms of collecting find material. Instead of conservation procedures, it is more likely that long-term monitoring and observation will be undertaken, focusing on the different stages of decay and the transformation of the sites into their archaeological context.

We need to emphasise that the close cooperation of the descendants of the village inhabitants, and other Nubians still living near the research area, contributed to the special nature of this project and were essential for meaningful results

and the overall success of the project. The scientific interest of outsiders regarding the socio-cultural practices of Nubians in the 1st quarter of the 20th century probably also strengthens the insiders' view on traditional values and their self-awareness as having a unique culture. This project is therefore not only of great significance for the scientific community in a variety of fields and in discussions on methodologies, but finally, and perhaps of greatest importance to the Nubian community itself, that the project has documented and appreciated their way of living before the traumatic years of resettlement and the loss of their homeland.

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