

Qasr Ibrim, between Egypt and Africa A case study of cultural exchange



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5000 years of cultural continuity and change in Nubia

Prof. Dr. William Y. Adams (Lexington, Kentucky)

Public lecture:

Friday 11 December, 20.00 hrs, Taffeh Hall.

During the first half on the twentieth century, the course of Nubian cultural development was generally understood in terms of what I call a “migrationist” model. That is, each major cultural change, over a period of 5,000 years, was attributed to the coming of a new people bringing new cultural practices. When I began to work in the area in 1959, however, I very soon became dissatisfied with this mode of explanation. To my anthropologist’s eye there was much more similarity than difference between each cultural

period and the next. I began therefore to advocate a “continuationist” model of explanation in which Nubian prehistory and history are seen as a continuum of cultural development, among a single people, in which migrations have played only a minor part.

The continuationist model has found general acceptance and is today the standard paradigm for understanding Nubian prehistory and history. In the present lecture I will offer an overview of that development during the last 5,000 years, identifying the major cultural changes and their probable source, as well as the things that have not changed.

Qasr Ibrim: Connecting the dots

Prof. Dr. William Y. Adams (Lexington, Kentucky)

Introductory lecture.

The site of Qasr Ibrim exhibits the most complex stratigraphy of any townsite known to me. During its more than twenty-five centuries of occupation it was subjected many times to “urban renewals,” during which large areas were cleared of their standing buildings before others were overbuilt. It was also true at times

that long-abandoned buildings were cleared of their accumulated rubbish and returned to use. As a result, the deposits do not occur in an orderly series of layers. The excavator can never be sure that any building is of the same age as the ones alongside it, or that the underlying ones are not centuries older.

Thanks to the rainless climate, Qasr Ibrim also produces unprecedented quantities of artifactual finds, of both organic and inorganic materials. They are found sometimes on house floors, but just as often scattered randomly all through the overlying refuse deposits.

The challenge for the excavator is to sort out this confused tangle of evidence, and to figure out “what goes with what,” – that is, which buildings are contemporaneous with which other buildings, and with which artifacts. It is only through such a sorting of evidence that a coherent picture can be drawn of the nature

and culture of the community at any given moment in time.

The desired result can only be achieved by dating every individual deposit and building as accurately as possible, and this in turn cannot be accomplished except by a continuous process of studying the abundant potsherds. The methodology employed is that of frequency serration, in which deposits are dated not just by pottery wares present or absent, but by the percentages of the wares present. The methodology will be explained in this lecture.

Influences from Abroad: The Evidence of the Textiles *Nettie K. Adams (Lexington, Kentucky)*

Although we tend to think of Qasr Ibrim as being very isolated, as it is today, in historic times it was a vibrant political, economic and religious center. It controlled commerce on the Nile, attracting people and goods from both the north and the south. Ptolemaic and New Kingdom remains on the site indicate its importance to Egypt, and as a religious center during Meroitic / X-Group and Christian times, it drew pilgrims and worshippers from a wide area, including northern Sudan.

The very large textile collections recovered during excavations exemplify the influences which were present during the whole of Qasr Ibrim’s history. Textiles from the New Kingdom and Ptolemaic levels are almost entirely of linen; there is no indication that flax was grown at Qasr Ibrim, so it is clear that linen was being imported from Egypt. Cotton is found

at the beginning of the first millennium AD. It was introduced from further south by Meroitic peoples coming to Qasr Ibrim. The Christian period brought a burst of new fabrics and dress styles from the great weaving centers of Egypt, Syria and possibly beyond. With the Ottoman occupation the textiles exhibit influences from Turkey and even India.

The presence of textiles from so many different parts of the world, over a period of some 3,000 years, indicates the economic and political power held by the inhabitants of Qasr Ibrim. Although the cultural affiliations of the population varied through the centuries, Qasr Ibrim itself remained paramount in Nubia, and a power within the Mediterranean World.

Contacts Between Qasr Ibrim and the Surrounding Deserts *Dr. Hans Barnard (Los Angeles)*

Guarding and facilitating both riverine and desert trade routes, Qasr Ibrim can be expected to have had close contact with the pastoral nomads of the surrounding desert.

Archaeological evidence for this, however, appears surprisingly limited. Only a handful of Eastern Desert Ware sherds, attributed to the indigenous dwellers of the desert, have been

found. Some of the artefacts with unknown affiliation could also have originated in the desert. On the other hand, several of the major textual constituents in the debate on the enigmatic Blemmyes are from Qasr Ibrim, including the difficult to understand Letter of Phonen (King of the Blemmyes) and the Arabic document on which the identification of the Blemmyes with the Beja is usually based. The

particular status of Qasr Ibrim, a fortress and religious centre with more or less restricted access rather than an open commercial hub, may explain the disconnect between the textual and archaeological sources. A summary of the current understanding of the pastoral nomads of the Eastern Desert and their possible relations to Qasr Ibrim will be discussed.

Roman occupation of Qasr Ibrim as reflected in Greek papyri from the site

Dr. Tomasz Derda (Warsaw)

Adam Łajtar and I have recently launched a project, financed by the Ministry of Science of the Republic of Poland, devoted to editing Greek papyri found by the British Mission at Qasr Ibrim. We started with documents unearthed in 1978 and 1980. The aim of my paper is to

present several texts, mostly letters, originating from the military milieu. The documents are dated to the 9th year of Augustus, and one to his 8th year. Among the papyri studied so far there are no Latin texts, which is noteworthy, given their provenance: Roman Ibrim.

Qasr Ibrim and the Religious Transformation of Lower Nubia in Late Antiquity

Prof. Dr. Jitse H.F. Dijkstra (University of Ottawa)

The 'conversion' of Nubia has often been assumed to start with the Byzantine missions sent to the Kingdom of Noubadia in the sixth century and dramatized by John of Ephesus in his Syriac *Church History*. Scholars of Late Antique Nubia have long realized, however, that Christianity reached Lower Nubia much earlier, in the fourth and fifth centuries. In this presentation it will be argued that these centuries were in fact critical for the expansion of Christianity in Lower Nubia. This was a time in which the Roman Empire had withdrawn its troops from the Dodekaschoinos and the Kingdom of Meroe had lost its sway over Lower Nubia, resulting in frequent political, cultural, economical and military interactions between

Egypt and the complex tribal society of Lower Nubia. It is in this context of interaction between North and South that the spread of Christianity in Lower Nubia will be seen. Moreover, it will be argued that this view of a complex and gradual process of religious transformation in Lower Nubia in the fourth and fifth centuries leads to a better understanding of why the Noubadian king converted to Christianity in the sixth century. Since Qasr Ibrim was one of the main centres of Noubadian chieftains in the fifth century and remained important under the Christian kings of Noubadia, it provides some of the key witnesses to this process.

Nobadia's role in the internal and external politics of the Kingdom of Makuria

Prof. Dr. Włodzimierz Godlewski (Warsaw)

The intensive exploration of Lower Nubia during the Nubian Campaign and later effectively biased research, making of this region the sole holistic picture of Nubian civilization in Late Antiquity and medieval times as well as earlier. This bias in Nubian studies was additionally reinforced by the available external sources, whether Latin, Greek or Arab.

Yet to understand the actual role played by Lower Nubia in the relations of the African kingdoms – Kush and Makuria – with Egypt of the Ptolemies, Romans, Byzantines, Copts and finally Arabs, one must reverse the perspective of our studies from external to internal. The role of Lower Nubia in the late and post-Meroitic and Makurite times was determined by the mutual relations of the Kingdom of Kush, the Meroe state and the kingdom of Makuria

with the political rulers of Egypt. A short period of certain self-sufficiency for Lower Nubia falls in the time of the kingdom of Nobadia. A number of simplified interpretations of the functioning of this kingdom, the eparchate of Nobadia and the role played by the eparchs of Nobadia and bishops in the civil and church administration of Makuria are current in the literature. Thus, I have put to myself the task of integrating Lower Nubia (Nobadia) with the Kingdom of Makuria and defining the role of this territory and its main centers, Qasr Ibrim and Faras, (and Gebel Adda for the period of Late Makuria), in the power system of the Makurian kingdom and its relations with the outside world.

Small pieces of the puzzle:

Coptic and Old Nubian MSS from Qasr Ibrim and the story of Christian Nubia

Drs. Joost L. Hagen (Leiden)

Since the start of the EES excavations at Qasr Ibrim in the 1960s, several times people have expressed their interest, and impatience about the delay, in the publication of its finds and findings. Among other things, textual remains from Nubia's Christian period were expected to shed more light on the stories illustrated in the famous medieval wall paintings like those at Faras, and on the history and organisation of the Nubian kingdoms and bishoprics, best known, if at all, from outside sources.

For my research on the Coptic literary and documentary manuscripts from Qasr Ibrim (work originally started by Prof. J.M. Plumley), I have looked again at the role of the four medieval languages Greek, Coptic, Arabic and Old Nubian, and come to the conclusion that

Coptic at Ibrim, and in Nubia, was more important than hitherto thought. Although my discoveries shed little light on wall paintings, they include fascinating new (literary) stories and (true) histories.

From an anecdote about Egyptian abbot Shenoute and Greek church father John Chrysostom meeting in heaven to the first non-Slavonic version of the Old Testament pseudepigraphon 2 Enoch, the Qasr Ibrim material proves to be a real treasure trove for the study of Coptic literature.

Then there are the "true stories" in the documentary sources. Some of these, from among the few texts already published, are well-known and maybe even too much taken for granted, like the Tantani Letters and the

Timotheos Scrolls, defining beginning and end of Nubia's "Coptic millennium". Others still have to take their proper place in the story of Qasr Ibrim, like the letter of Pe(t)ro, who ran out of money while travelling in Middle Egypt during the reign of the Caliph Al-Hakim, and the debt-settling document involving four women found at the Church on the Point. Most important in this category are five papyrus letters (one in Arabic) with unprecedented information about the political, economic and religious contacts between Christian Nubia, Muslim Egypt and the Blemmye / Beja nomads in the middle of the eighth century. All of these texts add their own pieces to the puzzle.

Finally, I can tell another "real story", reconstructed from several sources in Old Nubian. Taken together with already published

texts (a royal proclamation and about a dozen land sales), three "new" lists of church estates tell us about the episode of "Wine for the Bishop", provide much new information about Lower-Nubian dioceses and districts, and help identifying "anonymous" church buildings (including Qasr Ibrim cathedral). Combined with information on saints known from wall paintings and homilies, they contribute to a more complete picture of Nubian religious life.

Originally bound up with the personal history of excavators and scholars, these "stories" should eventually be woven into the overall story of Qasr Ibrim and late-antique, medieval Christian Nubia.

Meroitic Ostraca from Qasr Ibrim

Dr. Jochen Hallof (Würzburg)

The paper gives an overview of the Meroitic ostraca found in the course of the excavations at Qasr Ibrim in the last 45 years.

Some ostraca with discernible text structures and the Meroitic numbering system are explained in detail.

Medieval Arabic Documents from Qasr Ibrim

Prof. Dr. Geoffrey Khan (Cambridge)

Arabic material has been discovered at Qasr Ibrim that is datable to a period ranging from the 8th century A.D. to the Ottoman period. The material from the early and late periods has been published, together with a document from the medieval period. An important collection of documents datable to the medieval period (11th-13th centuries) still remains unpublished. This paper will concentrate on these unpublished medieval documents.

The documents in question, approximately 50 in total, include commercial correspondence and legal contracts. Most of the letters are from merchants to the Nubian viceroy at Ibrim, whose title is *ṣāḥīb al-ḳayl* 'master of the horses'. A

large proportion are from the 'Kanz al-Dawla', who was the Egyptian counterpart of the Nubian viceroy. Some are documents requesting safe conducts for the bearers, others concern commercial and diplomatic matters. They provide new data on commerce between Egypt and Nubia and give information on Nubian administration. Various merchants are acting as commercial agents on behalf of the Eparch, selling slaves for him and buying spices to send to him. The legal documents attest to the fact that numerous Muslims were resident in Nubia, many of whom appear to have been the Nubian king's vassals.

Graffiti on the rocks of Gebel Maktub: Preliminary presentation

Dr. Adam Łajtar (Warsaw)

Gebel Maktub, literally “Inscribed Mountain”, is a hilltop to the east of the fortress of Qasr Ibrim. Its name is derived from the Christian graffiti that occur on its rocks. Together with Jacques van der Vliet, the present speaker was granted permission by the Egypt Exploration Society to publish this material. For our work, we use photos of the inscriptions taken in the 1970s and 1980s, as well as handcopies prepared by Martin Plumley.

The material consists of 156 items. Two are figural graffiti, the rest textual ones, the language of which is Greek and Coptic with the additional use of Old Nubian. The texts are composed according to the model “I so-and-so wrote (this)”, well attested in visitors’ inscriptions from Christian Nubia. This is sometimes supplemented with an invocation or a short prayer. Several inscriptions contain dates according to the Era of Diocletian / the Martyrs which, when transformed into the Common Era, range between 900 and 1046; this most probably is the date for the entire collection of the Gebel Maktub graffiti.

The people occurring in these graffiti are mainly ecclesiastics. Among them are two bishops of Qasr Ibrim, Iesou and Krato, and a plethora of priests and deacons including a

cleric Khael who was a son of the bishop of Faras, Kollouthos. One priest was oikonomos (probably of a church), another one koimeliarches, “treasurer” (apparently also in a church). Three people indicate that they were legal owners of churches; one of these churches (the church of Petros) was in Qasr Ibrim, two (the church of Raphael and another one the name of which has not been preserved) in Tamit. Of the laity the most important person mentioned is an eparch. Except for Qasr Ibrim, Tamit and Faras, no other toponym is mentioned, which suggests that the visitors to the place were locals.

The onomastic repertoire of the visitors is characterized by the predominance of Graeco-Nubian formations in which a Greek or Biblical stem is compounded with the Old Nubian formant -ou (Ioannou, Georgiou, Isou, Martyrophorou, etc.). Special mention deserves the occurrence of proper names with the element Abu- (Abusaeit, Abusure), which perhaps are influenced by Arabic onomastics.

The question arises why people came to Gebel Maktub and left inscriptions there. Several texts contain invocations of the Archangel Michael, suggesting the hilltop could have been his cult place.

Demotic oracles and ostraca from Ptolemaic Qasr Ibrim

Dr. B.P. Muhs (Leiden)

Demotic papyri and ostraca from Qasr Ibrim suggest that there was a significant Egyptian presence during the 2nd and 1st centuries BC. This agrees with the evidence of Egyptian material culture revealed by excavations, and contrasts with some interpretations of the classical and epigraphic

sources that have suggested that Ptolemaic control of Lower Nubia was limited, particularly in its southern reaches where Qasr Ibrim is located. This paper will examine the Demotic evidence from Qasr Ibrim, and will argue that it was the site of a Late Ptolemaic Egyptian settlement.

Forty years of excavations at Qasr Ibrim: an overview

Dr. Pamela J. Rose (Cambridge)

Excavations began in the fortress of Qasr Ibrim in 1963, and have continued roughly every two years since then. During that period, there have been many changes in approach to the excavations, and changes in strategy by which to best approach the complexity of the site. This talk will outline some of the main achievements of the excavations up to the present day, and, importantly, stress the framework within which the excavators were working, as this affects the interpretation of the materials from the site.

The paper will also give a brief overview of the results of studies of the environmental

materials from the site. Thanks to the dry climate and lack of insect activity at Qasr Ibrim, plant remains are sufficiently well preserved to enable us to construct a detailed picture of the agriculture that supported the population, its innovations, adaptations and links to neighbouring regions. The results of these studies enhance our perceptions of agriculture in the Nile valley, and particularly the relations of the middle Nile valley to the areas to the north and south.

Revisiting the Unpublished Old Nubian Archives from Qasr Ibrim

Dr. Giovanni Ruffini (Fairfield University, Connecticut)

In June 2009, I examined photographs and transcriptions held in the British Museum, London, and the Sackler Library, Oxford, of the unpublished Old Nubian texts from Qasr Ibrim described by William Y. Adams as Archives 1 and 4, as well as an extensive series of unpublished Old Nubian letters found elsewhere on site.

Plumley published the dates of the texts from Archive 1, where they could be established, and the names of the reigning kings and other office-holders attested in the protocols therein. From this data, for instance, it has long been known that the archive contains an Old Nubian legal text dating to 1464. But the full content of these texts has never been discussed. Three of them, including the text from the 1460s, are land sales very much like those already published from the 12th century (Adams's Archive 3). These texts will allow us to trace

continuity and change in Nubian legal practice regarding land tenure and sale.

Archive 4 included eight Arabic letters which have been described in Adams, *Qasr Ibrim. The Late Medieval Period* (1996). These letters included material dating to the century before the contents of Archive 3. Still, the Old Nubian portions of Archive 4 are – at least in certain cases – clearly contemporary to Archive 3, given clear prosopographical links which exist between the two archives.

Given further prosopographical overlaps between these archives and the unpublished letters from elsewhere on site, it may be possible to establish a more thorough sequence of office-holders at Qasr Ibrim and a broader map of the site's social networks, and from this material arrive at a relative chronology for large portions of the unpublished Old Nubian material from that site.