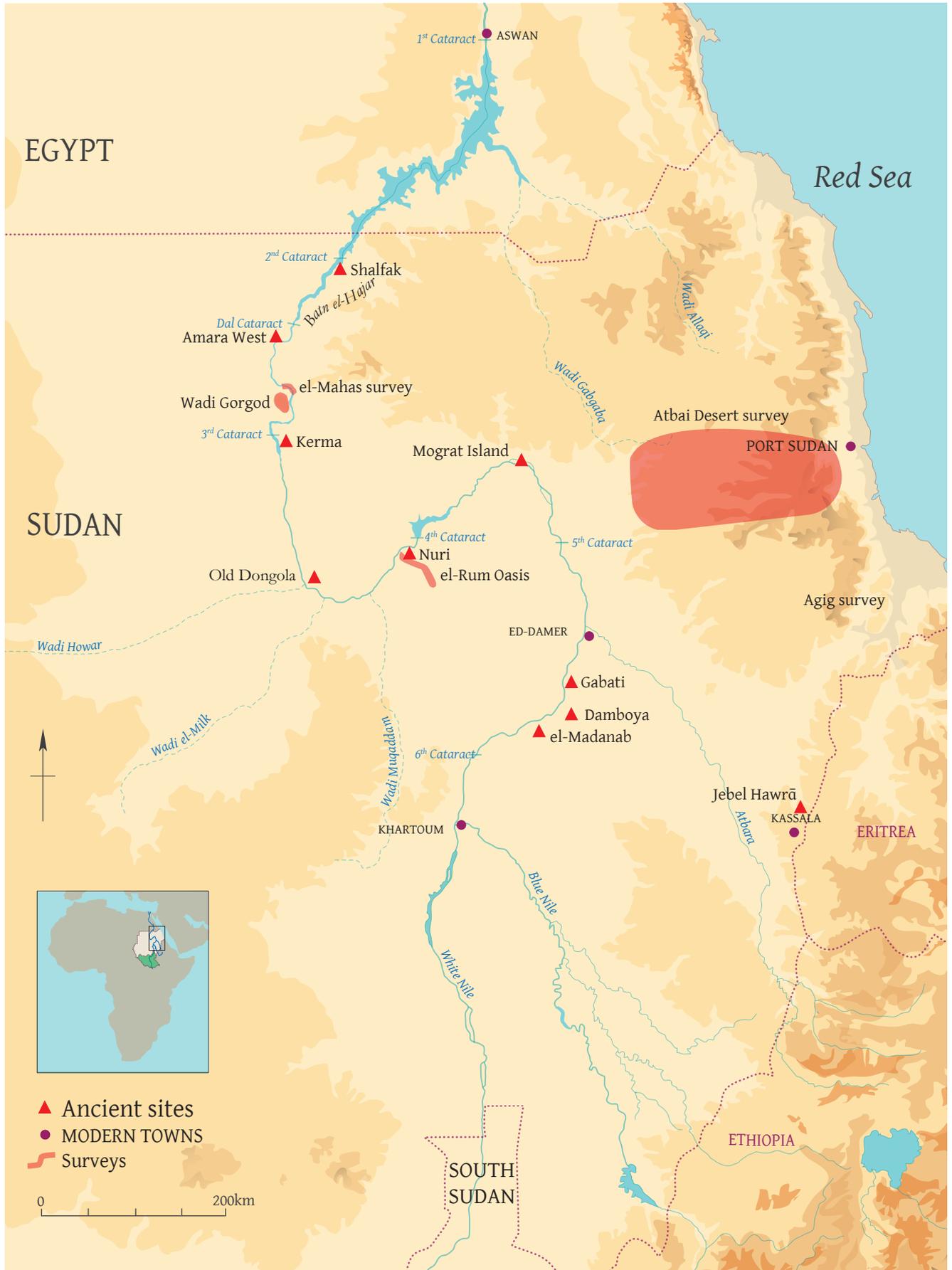


SUDAN & NUBIA 25





SUDAN & NUBIA

The Sudan Archaeological Research Society



Volume 25

2021

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Front cover. Cattle and two goats\gazelle from Site GRD-14 in the Wadi Gorgod (photo Hamad Mohamed Hamdeen).

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Book Review

Ashby, Solange 2020. *Calling Out to Isis. The Enduring Nubian Presence at Philae. Gorgias Studies in the Ancient Near East. Gorgias Press, Piscataway.*

ISBN 978-1-4632-0715-1

Pb, 332 pages, 32 figures, 5 tables.

Vincent Francigny

This book is based upon the PhD dissertation submitted by the author in 2016 to the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations of the University of Chicago. It focuses on the cult of Isis, widespread during Late Antiquity, and the involvement of the Nubian population in the sanctuaries of Philae, Dendur, Kalabsha and Dakka. Based on a corpus of inscriptions written in Demotic, Meroitic and Greek between the 1st and the 5th centuries AD, it mainly explores the role of Meroitic worshippers during the last days of Egyptian paganism, recalling the faithful and long-lasting understanding of the role of Isis and Osiris found in the royal traditions of the kingdoms of Kush, as compared to their altered versions spread across the Greco-Roman world.

It starts with a long and useful introduction presenting the historical and political context in which the inscriptions were engraved on the walls of these temples. It shows how the change of paradigm in the Egyptian religious landscape, with Christianity spreading from the cities to the countryside, had an impact on the old temples' funding, announcing the end of an era. The arrival of a bishop at Philae in the early 3rd century AD, while the Blemmye kings who controlled Lower Nubia continued to employ priests for the cult of Isis, illustrates this unique situation where the survival of an indigenous cult from Egypt partly relied on the fervour of a foreign Nubian power.

Inscriptions of Nubian origin are rarely used in studies of the Roman borders, despite their rich insights into the relationship between the Empire and its neighbours. One of the author's goals is to bring them to light and see what they can offer towards understanding the political, economic and diplomatic situation between the two.

Using a corpus primarily based on legal agreements and prayers, it also questions the location of these inscriptions within the temples and the relationship between clusters and certain decorations on the walls. Different themes and ambitions emerge from testimonies of personal piety or from official inscriptions engraved in the name of Kushite kings. The common assumption of graffiti only being left by Nubian pilgrims is replaced by a more complex analysis where Nubians with mixed origins are involved in the permanent administration of the sacred landscape of Lower Nubia. Thus, the difficult question of ethnicity becomes central to the discussion and is addressed early in the book. However, it is restricted to a socio-linguistic approach, and could have benefitted from more input from the field of funerary archaeology and recent bioanthropological studies based on ancient DNA and isotope analyses. Likewise, no references to Rilly's breakthroughs are used; in particular his 2010 work on comparative linguistics within the Sudanic Oriental North and the Nilo-Saharan family to which the Meroitic language belongs (e.g. Rilly 2010). Nevertheless, the author is able to re-assign a few Demotic graffiti from Philae to Nubian ('Meroitic') writers, based on their content and location. She also points out that Demotic and Meroitic graffiti did not follow the same structure regarding kinship, revealing some major cultural differences such as the 'clanic' preference as an important marker of Nubian identity.

Toward the end of the introduction, the text reviews some of the literature dedicated to graffiti at Philae and other Lower Nubia temples, and tackles major historical events, such as the Theban revolt (206-186 BC), that promoted worship of the non-Egyptian gods Arensnuphis and Mandulis in the region.

Despite the division of the corpus into three distinct periods (10 BC-AD 57/ AD 175-273/ AD 408-456 [10 BCE-57 CE / 175-273 CE / 408-456 CE]), the book does not just follow a conventional chronological plan. Instead, it unfolds in chapters each containing historical and socio-political perspectives. This sometimes leads to some repetition but overall provides a dynamic approach that allows each section to be read separately.

The first chapter introduces the corpus of 'agreements', a group of inscriptions engraved during the early Roman period to regulate the distribution of temple income. They represent a unique combination of legal contract and oaths that applied to a variety of temple staff such as priests, financial administrators, singers, etc. They could also describe the financial commitment of some towns to their temple, and some temples to the main sanctuary of Philae. They were used during a phase of transition between the disappearance of the Ptolemaic system and the implementation of new Roman procedures. As such, they can be seen as the result of negotiations, made publicly visible, between Egyptian and Nubian administrators.

Focusing on this set of inscriptions, the study provides a realistic vision of the relationship between the Meroites and their Egyptian counterparts adapting to Roman rule. It highlights the dedication of Nubian populations who, relentlessly, continued to seek a way to perform rituals and worship Isis and local gods in the region.

The correlation between these inscriptions and political events is quite remarkable. After the peace agreement with Rome signed in 25 BC they flourished, but when the region fell under the tighter control of the *strategos*, agreements were no longer written on the temple walls. Again, as soon as Roman rule weakened, at the beginning of the 3rd century AD, new *proscynem* written by Meroites appeared again at Philae, showing the consistent fervour of the Nubian population over centuries.

In these inscriptions, much can be said regarding the titles when compared to other occurrences found in funerary inscriptions. For example, *pelmos atolise*, a title first seen as having a military connotation similar to the *strategos*, seemed to have been purely religious and probably associated with rituals performed for Isis at Philae (Hofmann 1976). The author gives for most of them (*strategos*, agent of Isis, *shashimete*, *lesonis*, elders) a thorough description with examples and references.

The second chapter brings us to the heyday of Meroitic influence in Lower Nubia, when Roman Egypt ceased to be a major support for the temples in the region. The number of Nubian inscriptions observed during that phase (c. AD 175–273) is by far the largest, but also the most diverse in terms of languages and content. The Meroitic royal family involvement intensified through donations, and the procession of increasingly powerful local administrators such as the Wayekiye family, who seemed to have dominated the civil and religious life in Lower Nubia, where it can be traced through eight generations of records.

To explain this dramatic change, a combination of factors is discussed such as the 'crisis of the 3rd century' that affected the Roman Empire with great political and governance instability, or the plague that possibly originated from the region. On the Nubian side, the Meroitic kingdom strengthened its positions and its administrative network in the north, somehow creating the conditions for a future secession as local elite groups grew stronger and wealthier. Facing a weaker Nubian border, Upper Egypt was also exposed to more raids from the Blemmyes who soon would control part of Lower Nubia.

At Philae, the sanctuary island located between these two worlds, the situation resulted in greater visibility for Nubian inscriptions that spread into new areas, attesting to the higher level of cooperation reached between Meroitic and Egyptian priests. The content of the texts also evolved with a focus on rituals performed for the Meroitic royal family and, in particular, those associated with the funeral of the king. These inscriptions located near Osirian iconography and scenes associated with revivification themes, are consistent with the long-lasting traditions of decoration in the royal chapels, where the

influence of what Yellin called the ‘Abaton-style milk libation’ (Yellin 1982) resonates with a practice later widespread among provincial elites of Meroitic Nubia. On the political side, the author demonstrates that playing a key role in Nubian sanctuaries was also a way for the Meroitic king to assume some royal duties in the tradition of Egyptian pharaohs, at a time when Roman rulers turned their back on temples throughout the country.

Following the collapse of the Meroitic central state and royal administration, the third chapter examines the last Nubian inscriptions written in the first half of the 5th century AD. In a context where priests were secluded in a few sanctuaries supported by the Blemmyes, the story of the Esmet family serves as a final endnote for a religion born a thousand years earlier in Egypt. More than just having access to a centre of worship, taking control of a temple represented an important symbol in the territorial conquest of the valley. Soon, however, the growing power of the Nobades, who had already distanced themselves from the religious traditions of ancient Egypt, would pave the way for the adoption of Christianity and the disappearance of the cult of Isis in Nubia, her main sanctuaries being turned into churches.

To conclude, the large collection of Nubian inscriptions presented in this book and studied as a whole for the first time, no matter what writing system or language was used, creates a useful synthesis to understand the complexity of the religious life in Lower Nubia at the beginning of our era. Despite a few editing issues, such as the illustrations too often being illegible, it represents an important contribution to our knowledge of the cult of Isis in Nubia. It will also serve as a well-documented example for the larger debate regarding the Roman Empire interactions with the external world.

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Book Review

Elena A. A. Garcea. *The Prehistory of the Sudan*. New York, Springer, 2020. xvii + 196 pp. ISBN 978-3-030-17187-3 (paperback) and ISBN 978-3-030-47185-9 (e-book).

Matthieu Honegger

This book, which presents a synthesis of the prehistory of the Sudan, is part of a series entitled *Springer Briefs in Archaeology*, which aims to publish concise summaries of cutting-edge research in compact volumes of 75-125 pages. This volume is the fifth in this series dedicated to African archaeology. It is part of the growing international interest in the archaeology of Sudan and Nubia, which has resulted in the publication of several volumes of syntheses in recent years (e.g. Cabon *et al.* 2017; Edwards 2004; Emberling and Williams 2020; Raue 2019). However, this is the only volume that focuses exclusively on prehistory, from the Early Stone Age to the 3rd millennium BC, when the first state societies emerged. The other publications have also included a significant place for prehistory, but primarily from the perspective of defining the substrate from which the Nubian kingdoms developed, which remain their main subject.

The author is well known for her archaeological experience in Sudan, where she has been working for 35 years. She is also very familiar with relations with other neighbouring countries, as she had the opportunity to work in Acacus (Libya) and also at the famous Gobero site (Niger). She thus has a global vision of the prehistory of North-east Africa, an indispensable skill when we know to what extent the

societies of the Nile basin were connected to each other, as well as to those of the Sahara.

The book perfectly achieves its objective. It is concise, clearly structured, and presents very synthetic and accessible information, based on the results of the most recent research. It is therefore an excellent reference-book for researchers, students, and those wishing to learn about the subject. It consists of seven chapters, each of 15-25 pages, followed by a short conclusion. The first chapter deals with the geographical space and its environment, which evolved according to the climatic variations and the hydrological regime of the Nile. It provides a useful overview of this complex subject, on which current work sheds a nuanced light, tending to show that situations vary quite considerably according to the characteristics of each region, which contrasts with more general theories aimed at detecting strong climatic signals with a large-scale impact. The author rightly highlights the debate on the extent to which these environmental variations might have had an impact on human societies. Some researchers insist that these variations were a driving force in the movement of populations and the density of occupation of different areas, while others emphasise the resilience of populations and the fact that they can find innovative adaptive solutions. The next four chapters follow a chronological framework and highlight the main issues regarding each period. The chapter on the Stone Age not only presents the techno-complexes in Sudan during the Early, Middle and Late Stone Ages - a presentation that is necessarily rather descriptive - but it also gives the author the opportunity to insist on the problematic of the Out-of-Africa dispersals of Anatomically Modern Humans in the Levant and the Arabian Peninsula during the Middle Stone Age. Today, this scenario must be seen as a succession of exits from the continent that occurred during the most favourable climatic episodes, between 240,000 and 30,000 BP. Due to its geographical position, Sudan occupies a predominant place in the reconstruction of the North-South routes, and although recent discoveries allow us to appreciate the country's potential in this respect, it is primarily future research that will make it possible to answer questions about possible contacts between this part of the Nile Basin and the surrounding regions, such as the Levant and the Arabian Peninsula. Following the Palaeolithic, two chapters are devoted to the rich Sudanese Mesolithic period, characterised by the presence of numerous sites along the Nile. These consist of the remains of semi-sedentary settlements often accompanied by tombs and even cemeteries. In view of the scarcity of known sites along the Egyptian Nile during this period, Sudan offers exceptional evidence, which covers the first half of the Holocene and concerns populations practising hunting, fishing and gathering, while also producing ceramics. The discussion regarding settlement strategy and sedentism is perhaps the most interesting, while the long list of sites and the presentation of the material culture are part of a more traditional cultural-historical approach. This is followed by the Neolithic period with particular emphasis on the process of Neolithisation, which has been the subject of much debate over the past 20 years. The author devotes two chapters to these subjects: she lists the known sites, describes the cultural complexes, and traces the scenario regarding the adoption of livestock and agriculture, while reconstructing the subsistence strategies developed. Although cereals appear to have circulated rapidly along the valley, Neolithic societies continued to present the image of relatively mobile groups heavily involved in pastoralism. The richness of their funerary traditions is underlined and witnessed by the abundance of ornaments found in the burials, as well as the highly elaborate ceramics, weapons and tools. The distribution of goods in tombs is an opportunity to question the social distinctions and the beginning of the hierarchisation of society. The chapter that closes this chronological panorama is devoted to the 4th millennium and to cultural groups such as A-Group and Pre-Kerma, which herald the rise of state formations such as the Kingdom of Kerma, and illustrate the complex relations with the Egyptian neighbour that progressively established its hold over Lower Nubia and its C-Group occupants. Further south, the Butana and the Gash groups in particular also show signs of greater complexity and long-distance contacts. Finally, the concluding chapter takes

up the salient points of the prehistoric panorama presented in this book, to conclude with a discussion of the most important issues.

Reading of this book gives the immense satisfaction of providing an overall panorama of the prehistory of the Sudan, which is concise and intelligently synthesised. At times, it can also give a feeling of frustration, given the desire to see the main issues dealt with in greater depth, to the detriment of a more historical-cultural presentation of the classification of the material culture and the definition of cultural groups; which last, involving their description and enumeration, could have been presented in a different manner. Possible improvements include the iconography, the quality of which is not always optimal, as well as the lists of sites presented for each period. These lists are very useful, except that there is no indication about the treatment of the C¹⁴ dates associated with each site – are they a selection? how reliable are they? and finally, what are their reference numbers? In the absence of a more critical debate on the question, we will continue to see dates of variable quality and, as a result, chronological intervals that are sometimes surprising for certain sites.

This synthesis inevitably encounters the geographical limits dictated by national borders. The author is well aware of this, since she states in her conclusion that one of the objectives of this work is to show to what extent the prehistory of the Sudan is associable with that of the surrounding countries of North-east Africa, since the connections are so strong and the issues similar. We can see here the interest of a larger future synthesis, covering the whole Nile basin and its fringes, taking better account of geographical and cultural realities. However, this will not resolve the spatial disparity of research, as the maps illustrating the book clearly show, such as the fact that most of the information is confined to the territories close to the Nile and that the more distant regions are only poorly covered. Those in charge of Sudanese archaeology are well aware of these disparities, which are dictated by research traditions and politico-economic difficulties that may have hindered the deployment of research programmes in regions considered peripheral. In recent years, and particularly since the country opened up to a democratic process, the importance of developing archaeological programmes in areas whose heritage is largely unknown and understudied has been emphasised. It is thus to be hoped that the relationship between the Nilotic societies and those occupying the vast plains on either side of them will be better understood.

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The Society is extremely grateful to its late Honorary President, Professor William Y. Adams, for the very generous donation of his extensive personal library of books and offprints relating to the archaeology of Sudan and Nubia and related subjects. This donation elevates the Society's library to amongst the best libraries of its kind in the UK. The pre-existing library, consisting of books from Sir Laurence Kirwan, along with donations from a number of individuals including Harry James, onetime Keeper of the Department of Egyptian Antiquities at the British Museum, are being integrated into the new library and the catalogue will be available shortly online. The Library sits alongside the Society's archive, which together form a valuable research facility principally for the Middle Nile Valley but increasingly for areas further afield to the east, west and south.

Grants from the Society

Unfortunately small grants from the Society will not be available in 2023.

Support for the Society

The Society is heavily involved in fieldwork and in the publication of recent, and not so recent, excavations and surveys. These activities are only made possible by the generous support of a number of organisations and individuals. Particular thanks for support over the last year go to the Institute for Bioarchaeology, the British Museum and the Society's own individual Patrons. As always we receive unstinting cooperation from our colleagues in the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums. The Society is enormously grateful to all who have given it their time and resources.

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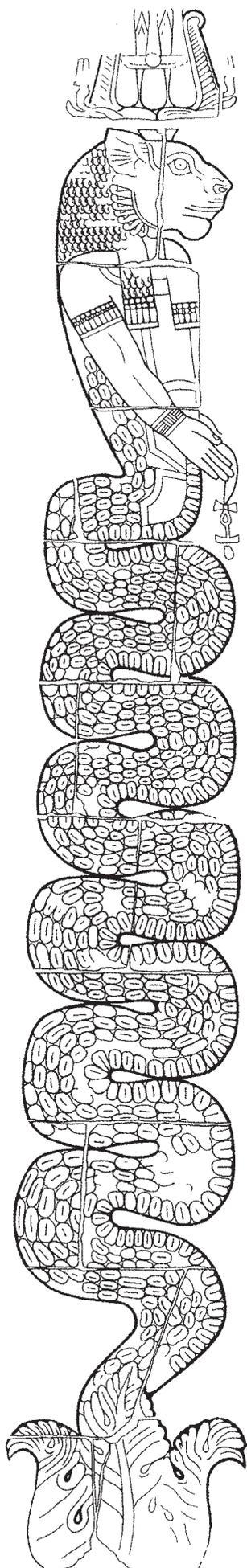
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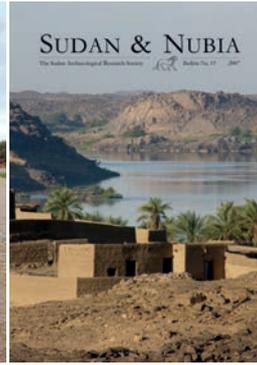




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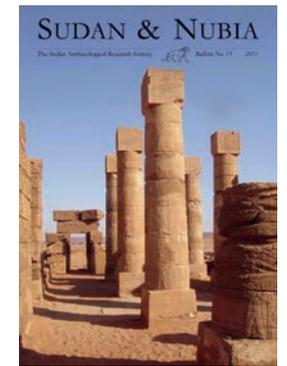
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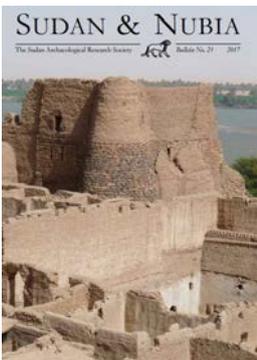
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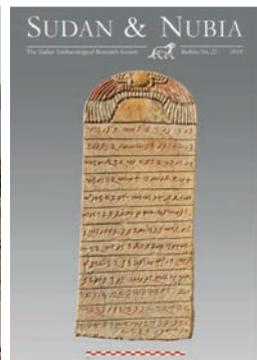
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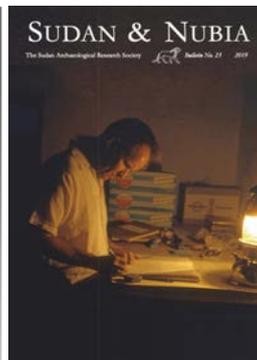
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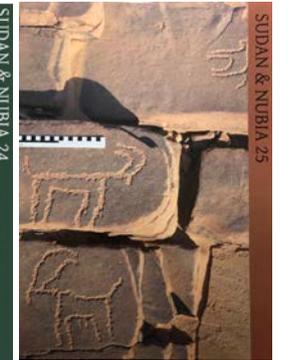
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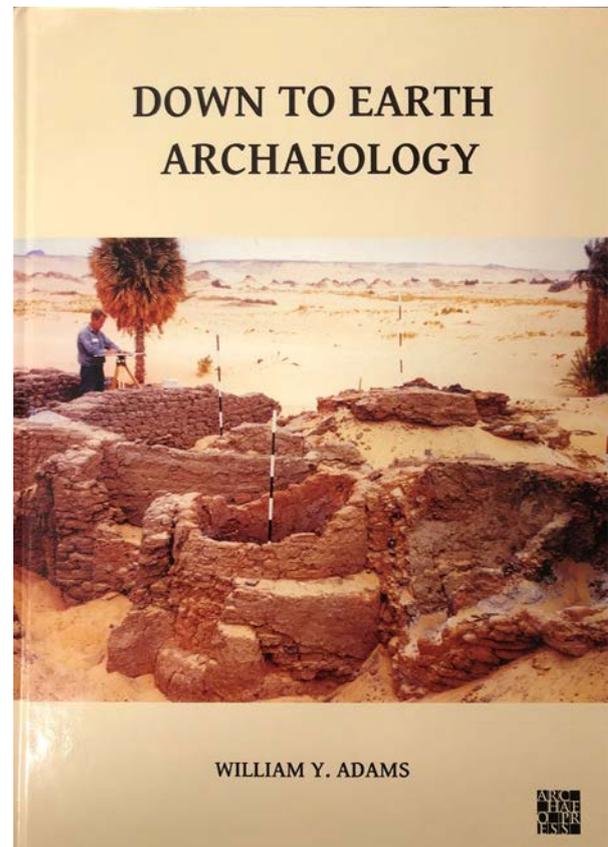
Down to Earth Archaeology

W. Y. Adams, 2022

244 pages; 29 figures, 23 plates, 1 map (colour throughout).
ISBN 9781803272290.

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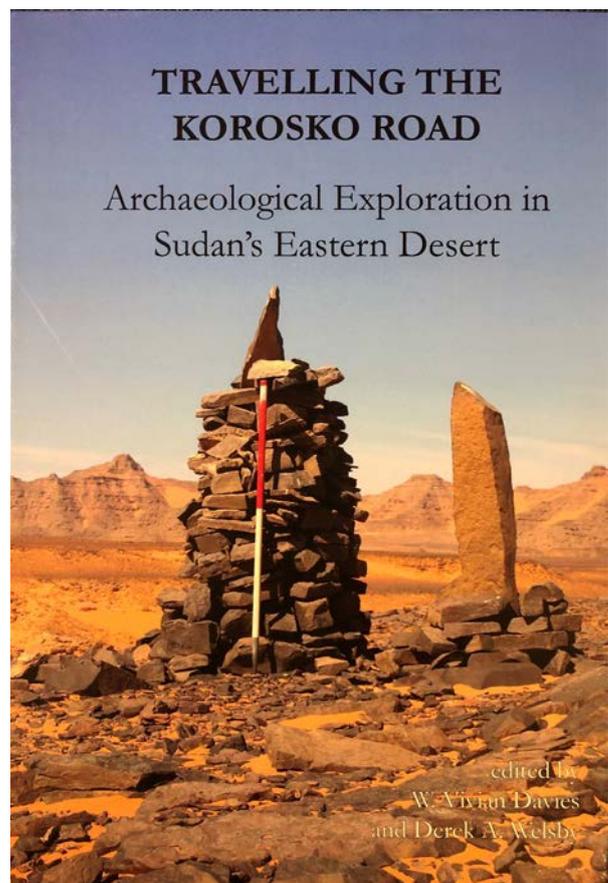
Travelling the Korosko Road. Archaeological Exploration in Sudan's Eastern Desert.

Edited by W. Vivian Davies and Derek A. Welsby, 2020.

252 pages; 493 plates, 74 figures (colour throughout).
ISBN 9781789698039.

This volume publishes the results of archaeological exploration carried out during the last 30 years in the Sudanese Eastern Desert. It is divided into two parts; the first detailing the work by the Centro Ricerche sul Deserto Orientale (CeRDO) along the Korosko road between 1989-2006; and the second outlining a short season of documentation by the Sudan Archaeological Research Society in 2013.

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Lantern slide image showing the *Sheikh* and *Melik* moored together at Khartoum in 1925 (courtesy Paul Nicholson).



Wall painting in Debeira West, R.8, taken 1963 (photo SARS Bonner archive, BON S010.12).