

SUDAN & NUBIA

The Sudan Archaeological Research Society



Bulletin No. 15

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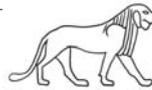




The map reflects the new territorial situation following the independence of South Sudan in July 2011.

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Kirwan Memorial Lecture

Qasr Ibrim: The last 3000 years

Pamela J. Rose

The present Egypt Exploration Society work at Qasr Ibrim has drawn to an end after 26 seasons of excavation and study. We can now take the opportunity to look back at this work, and to consider what has been achieved at this unique and magnificent site. I should stress at the outset that what follows is very much a personal overview of these achievements, constrained by the attempt to boil down 50 years of work into a few pages of text, and no offence is intended by the omission of references in the following pages to any of the many scholars who have participated in the excavations or in the study of the material. It is merely due to lack of space.

Background to the excavations at Qasr Ibrim

The EES became involved at Qasr Ibrim in Egyptian Nubia when it responded to the UNESCO appeal to save Nubia's heritage preceding the construction of the Aswan High Dam in the late 1950s (Figure 1). The Society's interest at that time was to excavate the cemeteries below the fortress, where Walter Emery had worked in the late 1920s, and indeed Emery

carried out new excavations in the cemeteries on behalf of the EES in 1961 and 1962 (Mills 1982). However, the EES was also required by the then Egyptian Antiquities Service to agree to work in the citadel, as this too was expected to disappear under the waters of the lake (Plate 1). The task of overseeing these excavations fell to J. Martin Plumley, Herbert Thompson Professor of Coptic at the University of Cambridge, who began work in 1963 (Plate 2).

Plumley and his team faced the challenge of a more or less intact city, abandoned only in AD 1812. Its fortification walls, the dense agglomeration of Ottoman houses inside, and the upstanding cathedral (converted to a mosque) at the centre of the town were all extraordinarily well preserved (Plate 3). The decision as to where to start work and how to proceed, given the expectation of the site's imminent destruction, must have been truly daunting. Furthermore, very little was known about the archaeology of the site. Early travellers had visited Qasr Ibrim and recorded their impressions of the latest, Ottoman, remains; the major stone structures, the cathedral and Temple 1 were at least partly documented. Otherwise, only the New Kingdom shrines below the fortress and inscriptions in the area had attracted attention. No documented archaeological work had taken place in the fort itself.

After mapping the standing remains, Plumley concentrated his efforts at first on the cathedral, with more limited excavations around the podium, a stone platform-like structure built into the fortification walls, and Temple 1, a small stone building with a pylon entrance standing in isolation at the northern tip of the hilltop (Plate 4). In later seasons excava-

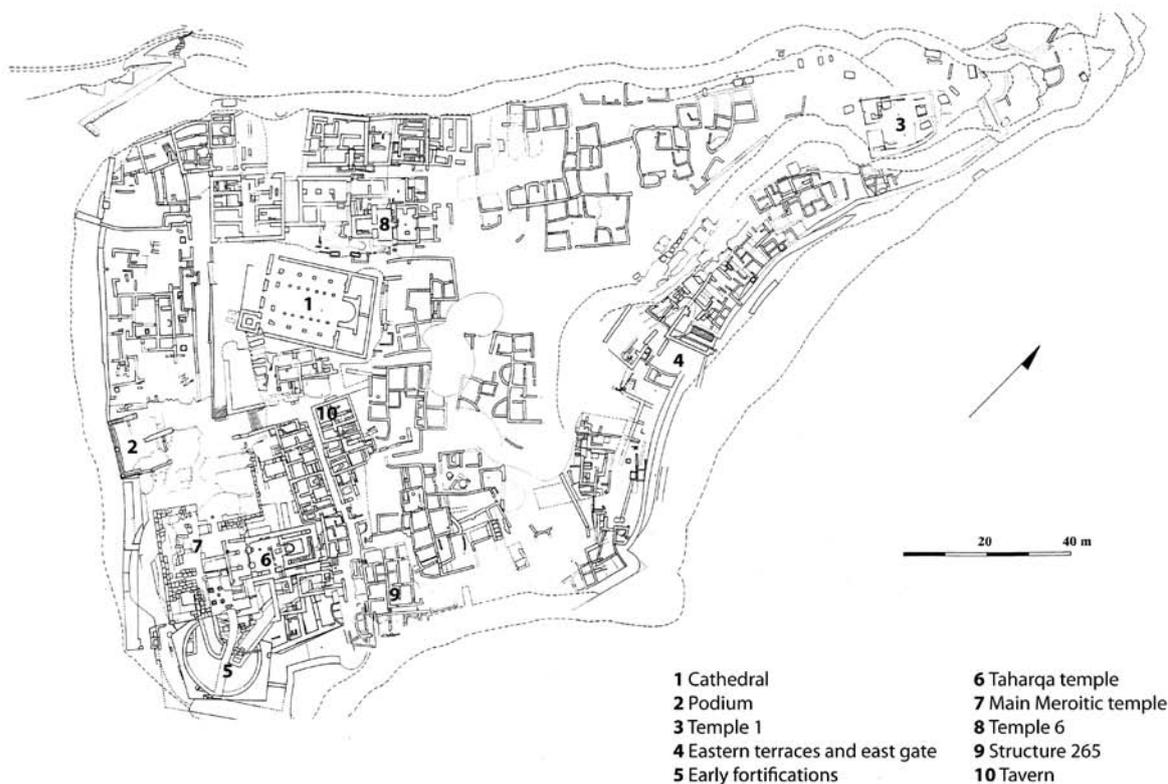


Figure 1. Plan of Qasr Ibrim showing the standing remains in 1988, marking the main structures and areas mentioned in the text.



Plate 1. View of Qasr Ibrim as the waters of Lake Nasser were rising (1966).



Plate 2. J. Martin Plumley standing in one of the Ottoman houses (1964).



Plate 3. Aerial view, showing the Ottoman settlement before excavation began.



Plate 4. Temple 1 (1969).

tion progressed eastwards from the cathedral across areas of Ottoman houses, and many of these structures were removed with little if any documentation in order to expose earlier layers, which were considered to be of much greater archaeological interest and significance (Plate 5). This work was done under the pressure of revealing the archaeology of a city thought to have been occupied perhaps for 3000 years, both against the clock, and with increasing logistical difficulties caused by the rising waters of the lake. In addition, it rapidly became apparent that the preservation of organic materials was of such excellence that the quantity of finds, including large quantities of texts, was overwhelming. Faced with these pressures, Plumley has to be credited with achieving as much as he did.

After 1976, the excavations were directed by Prof. William Y. Adams of the University of Kentucky, a veteran of the Sudanese part of the High Dam campaign (and now the honorary president of SARS). Initially the EES was represented on site by Robert Anderson, and then from 1980 by Dr John Alexander of the University of Cambridge. At about that time it became clear that Qasr Ibrim would survive the



Plate 5. Removal of stratigraphy. Ottoman houses are visible at the top of the picture (1966).

flooding of the lake, albeit as a small island, and it then became possible to revise the excavation strategy from rescue to more systematic research. Primarily the latter consisted of wide area clearances, peeling back the occupation levels of the site period by period, but leaving an area standing to represent the remains of whichever period it was that was otherwise being removed.

There were in addition test excavations made into earlier levels, to take advantage of the drop in lake level in the 1980s, which saw Ibrim briefly reunited with the mainland. This allowed access to previously flooded remains, most significantly the late Kushite and Roman terraces by the east gate, and some parts of the east gate itself (Plate 6).

When Adams, and then Alexander, stepped down, the direction of the excavations fell to Dr Mark Horton of the University of Bristol, who began work in 1988. The excavation strategy now concentrated on the exposure of vertical stratigraphy in a restricted area, with the aim of establishing the detailed sequence of occupation. The area chosen, at the south-west corner of the site, presented a range of features from Pharaonic to early Christian times, and concentrated especially on the early fortifications and on a late Kushite house (see below).



Plate 6. The eastern terraces after re-emergence from the lake in 1986. The previous high water level lies just behind the tripod. The ruins of Temple 1 can be seen in the background.

In 1996, the author became field director for the project. This more or less coincided with a dramatic rise in the water level in Lake Nasser, and a necessary return to rescue archaeology. Given the nature of the threat posed by the high water level, and the increasingly restricted financial resources available for fieldwork, we chose to undertake small-scale excavations in the highest part of the site remaining above water level, with the specific intention of investigating the earliest occupation of Ibrim. The last field season was in 2006, and since then we have undertaken a number of study seasons to complete as best we can work on the vast quantity of finds that the excavations have generated.



The excavations

The date of the earliest occupation at Qasr Ibrim remains uncertain. The 18th Dynasty shrines in the cliff face below Ibrim suggest the possibility of contemporary occupation on the hill top, but as yet there is no unequivocal evidence for this. There is some circumstantial evidence, however, in the form of inscribed stone blocks. Many such reused blocks have come to light in the course of the excavations, and a recent example shows a cartouche of Thutmose II. Can such items have come to Ibrim purely as reusable materials for building, or do they come from as yet undiscovered structures originally standing on the site? A further hint of New Kingdom presence comes from a number of tomb shafts at the extreme northern tip of the site (Alexander 1999). These are mainly small rectangular trenches cut into the bedrock, but one is much more substantial, and is located under the later Temple 1. None has a preserved superstructure, and nothing was left *in situ* so they cannot be dated, but parallels for the largest shaft suggest it is New Kingdom in date (Rose 2008, 197-198). It may be that a number of finds made in Third Intermediate Period levels come from these burials, including cartonnage, painted textiles, a wooden false beard, and pads of cloth originally placed within mummy wrappings.

It is certain, however, that there was occupation at Qasr Ibrim from the very end of the New Kingdom or very early Third Intermediate Period. The evidence for this comes from thick fortification walls excavated in the south-western part of the site. One narrow and much altered gateway through the walls was found (Rose 2008) (Plate 7). The alterations to it seem to have been aimed at increasing security, and thus probably a period of unrest. Radiocarbon dates suggest that the wall is dated to the later New Kingdom or the very early Third Intermediate Period. This brings to mind the conflicts with Panehsy in Nubia at the very end of the New Kingdom. Since Panehsy was buried at Aniba, across the river, it is tempting to make a connection between the fortification of Ibrim and the threats of the period, but this cannot be proved. A further suggestive element is an inscribed column reused in a Third Intermediate Period house, which probably originally belonged to an overseer of the Nubian treasury in the reign of Ramesses VI, who was also buried at Aniba (C. Näser, pers. comm.). This house, which has not been fully excavated, included facilities for storage and food preparation (Rose 2008) and was part of a cluster of structures near the north-western edge of the site, amongst which was a small shrine (Plate 8). Test trenches some 2m below the 25th Dynasty Taharqa temple show further evidence of occupation, but too little can be revealed here to say more about it. A further point of interest is that there is some evidence for the presence of camels at Ibrim already at this period (Rowley-Conwy 1988).

Because of the limited scope of excavation it is not certain



Plate 7. The gateway through the early fortification walls.

whether this population was still resident at Ibrim by the time of Kushite occupation of the 25th Dynasty. At that time the mud-brick temple of Taharqa was built. This had stone door jambs and lintels naming the pharaoh, and although none was found *in situ*, many fragments from them were found reused over the site. In the sanctuary of the temple two wall paintings showed the pharaoh before various gods. One of the paintings was destroyed in the water level rise of 2000-2002, and the other was removed and is now undergoing conservation for display in the Nubian Museum, Aswan (Miller *et al.* 2007) (Plate 9). Part of the older fortification walls seems to have been dismantled to accommodate an outer part to the temple.



Plate 8. Food preparation installations, storage vessels and part of the inscribed column found during the recent excavations.



Plate 9. The conserved wall painting (photo O. M. Murray).

Other more or less contemporary remains include another small shrine with a staircase entrance leading up to a platform (Plate 10). Quantities of deliberately buried items of religious use, such as copper-alloy Osiris statuettes, faience amulets and figurines, and menat counterpoises (Plate 11) hint at the presence of another temple in the northern part of the site, although as yet this has not been identified. A fragment of papyrus showing what is probably an oracular scene suggests a functioning oracle at Ibrim at this time (Plate 12). It appears that there was a hiatus after the early Kushite occupation; at least, no clear later remains have been identified in the excavations so far. The next archaeologically attested phase is Ptolemaic. Such an occupation had been postulated since



Plate 10. Entrance to the shrine.



Plate 11. Menat counterpoise of copper alloy.

excavations were carried out on the Roman fortifications in the 1980s, but without definite proof. However, a C¹⁴ date for the construction of the podium suggests it is a Ptolemaic construction (Rose 2009). Such a structure is undoubtedly associated with a temple, but no remains of any such structure have ever been located, and it is possible that the attempted Ptolemaic settlement at Ibrim proved short lived. However, two Demotic documents hint at a well established Amun oracle at Ibrim in the period immediately preceding the Roman occupation, with connections to Upper Egypt (Ray 2005).

Whilst this occupation seems to be very much associated with Egypt and Egyptian material culture, inland from Qasr Ibrim survey has shown the presence of a later Kushite cemetery, although there is no evidence of this population within the fortress (Rose 1996). Who they were, where they lived, and whether they were the descendants of the 25th Dynasty occupants of Ibrim, is unknown.

By the turn of the millennium the expansionist policies of the Kushite state had brought them into Lower Nubia, and into direct conflict with Roman Egypt. Part of this conflict, recorded by Strabo amongst others, was centred around Ibrim, and on the headland to the north of Qasr Ibrim are the remains of two adjacent Roman marching camps. These are temporary establishments of a well-known type, presumably constructed by the Roman army on their way to confront the Kushite forces at Qasr Ibrim (Horton 1991, 271). The Roman victory resulted in the establishment of a short-lived Roman garrison at the site. Large quantities of military finds reflect this occupation, including ballista balls (Wilkins et al. 2006), projectiles for bolt shooting catapults that are apparently European imports (James and Taylor 1994), and large quantities of shoes, belts, and clothing (Adams and Crowfoot



2001; Wild and Wild 2006, 18). Alongside these finds is evidence of recreational activities; a Latin papyrus contains the only known manuscript of the poems of Cornelius Gallus (Anderson *et al.* 1979).

Archaeological evidence suggests that after the Roman garrison's withdrawal Qasr Ibrim became part of the Meroitic Kushite state. Aspect of daily life, including the crop regime and the introduction of cotton as the principal material used for clothing, show African connections, and it is possible that at least part of the population had moved to Qasr Ibrim from further south. The religious importance that Ibrim had had earlier continued, and grew, and several temples are known both archaeologically and from inscriptions. A number of individuals with priestly titles connected with cults at Ibrim are known from funerary inscriptions in Lower Nubian cemeteries.

The principal temple at Ibrim only survived at foundation level, as the stone from it was reused to build the cathedral (Rose 2007). This temple incorporated the earlier Taharqa temple as a side chapel. One of its most interesting features is the decoration, partly known from fragmentary *in situ* wall paintings, and partly from pieces of brightly painted wall plaster in the archaeological deposits. The decoration finds close parallels in temples from much further south, in the Island of Meroe, and suggests a direct royal interest in Qasr Ibrim. This interest recurs late in the period with the erection of two lion statues by King Yesbokheamani flanking the temple entrance (Hallof 2003). Ibrim was also a place of pilgrimage, early visitors leaving carved images and inscriptions on the temple floor and walls, and later ones many Roman coins embedded in oil, perhaps left by visitors from Egypt (Frend 2004).

Other temples include Temple 6, a small mud-brick building destroyed early in the Christian period. Some of the temple furnishings seem to have been stored, or perhaps deliberately hidden, in crypts in one of the temple courts (Driskell *et al.* 1989). They include decorated and inscribed wooden plaques, apparently intended to be hung on the walls,



Plate 13. Wooden plaque from Temple 6.



Plate 12. Painted papyrus.

showing what seem to be local deities, including many snakes (Plate 13). An almost adjoining building housed a textile manufactory, with finds including spindle whorls, loom weights, spools of thread, and many 'test pieces'. Such an institution may have had an association with the Isis cult, so perhaps the nearby temple was dedicated to that goddess (Adams 2006).

Of the temples, Temple 1 is the latest, and can be dated by ceramics retrieved from under one of the walls to the late 3rd/early 4th century AD (Alexander 1999). Nothing remained of any interior divisions, if such existed, and its location, over three older graves, may perhaps suggest that the graves were reused and that the temple had a funerary purpose. Ibrim also played an administrative role, although the density of the population in Lower Nubia was probably small. This is attested by the huge number of Meroitic texts discovered at the site, and indeed Ibrim has produced the largest quantity of Meroitic papyrus known anywhere. Since the language is not yet deciphered beyond simple elements, their contents remain on the whole obscure. However, progress is being made: one humble ostrakon from Qasr Ibrim has recently been shown to give the Meroitic numbering system up to a million (Hallof 2009).

In the desert behind Qasr Ibrim a contemporary building complex may perhaps have controlled access from the eastern desert (Plate 14). A small number of pyramid burials of this period lay in a cemetery to the north of Ibrim (Mills 1982).

The collapse of the centralised Kushite state gave rise to local polities, and Ibrim was the seat of one of these. The occupants of Qasr Ibrim occupied a dense settlement of houses, well-built structures in which kitchen installations and other domestic features can be identified (Plate 15). This settlement looks, then, like a rare period of 'normal' settlement. However, an unusual feature of the houses is the presence of many large crypts under the rooms. These were



Plate 14. Late Kushite complex in the eastern desert behind Qasr Ibrim.



Plate 15. Post-Meroitic house 265, looking south east.

provided with wooden trapdoor entrances (Plate 16). Whilst these are apparently for storage, it is possible they had some more esoteric purpose. One excavated in 1998 (structure 265) contained large numbers of intact pottery vessels, and was full of stalks of lablab, an African cultivar, known at Ibrim from the late Meroitic period and providing what is



Plate 16. Trapdoor to crypt in house 265.

the earliest record of its cultivation in the Nile valley, if not Africa (Rose and Edwards 2008, 65-73). A further unusual feature was the presence of the earliest known domestic chicken south of the Tropic of Cancer, found carefully buried beneath the primary floor of the house (MacDonald and Edwards 1993).

An important building of this period is the so-called tavern (Plate 17). This well built stone structure takes its name from relief carvings of grapes and of an amphora in a stand on the outside of the building (unfortunately destroyed in recent vandalism). The identification is supported archaeologically by the large quantity of amphorae and drinking vessels found inside it. The quality of its construction, however, strongly suggests again a more esoteric purpose than a simple drinking establishment.



Plate 17. The tavern and adjacent post-Meroitic housing (1974).

Finds of the period flesh out the structural evidence. Texts show that the local ruler at Ibrim was in conflict with neighbouring Nubian polities, but also had significant diplomatic contacts with late Roman Egypt to the north. The military aspect is reflected in a fine piece of body armour found in 1974 in the east gate. Items such as fine bronze vessels may come from the late Roman world and represent diplomatic gifts intended to encourage the recipients to keep the peace on the frontier of Egypt.

Large cemeteries of this period lie to the north and south of the fortress (Mills 1982).

Christianity gradually penetrated into this milieu from Egypt, prior to the official conversion in the late 6th century. By this time, Qasr Ibrim was part of the Christian kingdom of Nobatia, itself shortly thereafter absorbed by the Kingdom of Makuria. Ibrim again became an important religious centre and a place of pilgrimage. It was the seat of a bishop based in the cathedral (Aldsworth 2010); one of the early discoveries at Qasr Ibrim made by Plumley was the body of one of the last bishops of Qasr Ibrim, Timotheos, who died in about 1373, and was buried in a somewhat hasty manner on the steps leading down to one of the crypts in the cathedral with his scrolls of appointment (Plumley 1975a). As well as Timotheos, the burials of other bishops, not only from Qasr Ibrim but from nearby dioceses, were found close to the cathedral. It is likely that the earliest bishops were buried in rock-cut crypts within the cathedral itself, although the burials had been almost entirely robbed by the time archaeological investigation took place. There was a number of other churches in Qasr Ibrim and the area, known both from their archaeological remains and textual references, and a large numbers of religious texts have been found, in Coptic, Greek and Old Nubian (for example, Hagen 2009, 118-119) (Plate 18).

One of these close to Qasr Ibrim was the so-called Church on the Point, a hilltop structure that was the subject of a full scale and meticulous excavation by Martin and the late

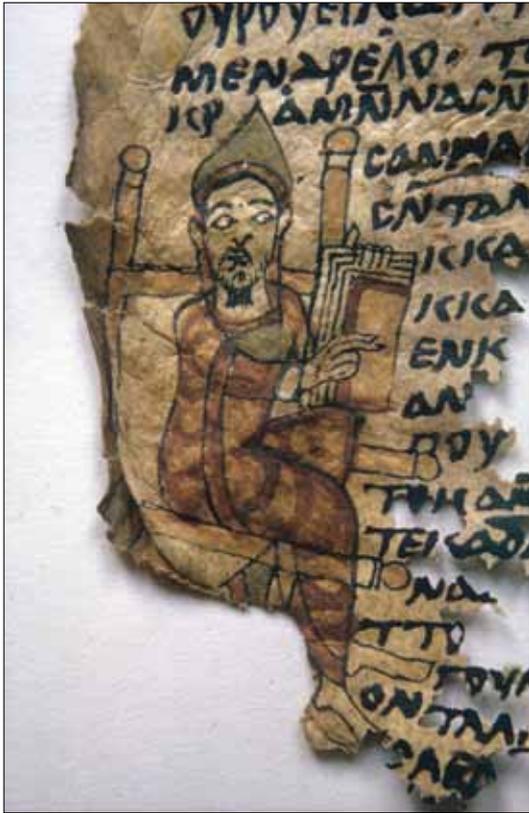


Plate 18. Old Nubian illustrated manuscript.

Birte Kjølbye-Biddle (Kjølbye-Biddle 1994), and comprised a church, and a short-lived monastic complex (Plate 19). It was eventually converted to mosque and housed the burial of a local Moslem sheikh. Further into the desert, on a hilltop in the foothills of the eastern desert overlooking the road to Ibrim, is a large number of rock inscriptions probably clustered around a hermit's cave. These were initially documented by Plumley, and recent research by Adam Lajtar has shown that they date to the 10th and early 11th centuries. Alongside its religious role, Qasr Ibrim was also at times the seat of the



Plate 19. Church on the Point (1966).

eparch or deputy of the King of Makuria, and thus was a major political and administrative centre. Solidly-built houses have been excavated along the north-western edge of the fortress of this period, and Adams suggested that one of these was the eparch's house or office (Adams 2010, 40). The responsibilities of the eparch included regulating relations with Egypt, and many of the texts that have been found during the excavations are revealing on this topic. One of the most important is a long letter from the Fatimid caliph in Egypt concerning the breaking of conditions of the *baqt*, a peace agreement between Egypt and Nubia (Plumley 1975b). In fact this period was relatively peaceful, and fortifications do not seem to have been maintained with any diligence, although known incursions from Egypt included a raid by Shams ed-Dawla in 1172/73 as a result of which it was claimed that the cathedral was briefly converted to a mosque and numerous pigs were slaughtered.

By the later medieval period, religious usage appears to have become less significant, and it appears that large parts of, if not the entire fortress, was more or less abandoned by the time of the Ottoman advance into Nubia. This took place in the late 16th century, and Qasr Ibrim was occupied by a garrison of Ottoman troops. For a short period Qasr Ibrim was the southernmost border of the Ottoman Empire, but became something of a backwater as the border was moved further south to the region of the Third Cataract. The isolated troops in this backwater intermarried with the Nubian population and became permanent residents, living in large (though increasingly subdivided) courtyarded houses, and a mosque was built inside the old cathedral. Reflecting their military role, the garrison rebuilt older fortifications, and may have used Temple 1 as a magazine for gunpowder, reutilising an ancient rock-cut tomb in it for storage. As their military *raison d'être* dwindled, and having become landowners in the region, the inhabitants over time deserted the fortress in order to live more conveniently in the valley below. The fortress was finally abandoned in the early 19th century.

The finds from the Ottoman levels reflect this story: military items include many pay docketts written in Turkish (Plate 20), both for the soldiers at Ibrim and for those stationed further south at Sai, numerous lead bullets and a sword. There are also domestic items such as numerous smoking pipes, fragments of brightly-coloured glass bracelets, and children's toys.

Conclusion

It is impossible in an overview to do justice to or mention by name the numerous archaeologists, finds specialists, and linguists who have worked on and continue to work on aspects of the archaeology and history of Qasr Ibrim and its Nubian context. The importance of the textual sources will I hope already have become clear, and studies of the Coptic, Greek and Meroitic texts are



Plate 20. Turkish pay dockets.

ongoing (for example, Łajtar and van der Vliet 2010). The abundant remains of textiles and leather goods have provided unique information about the clothing of the inhabitants of Qasr Ibrim over time. Perhaps more obscure, though, is the enormous contribution the study of less immediately promising materials has made. Thus the remarkable preservation of plant material has enabled us to reconstruct the diet at Ibrim (along with the study of the animal bones) and, importantly, its changes over time, marking the introduction of new crops which show a shift from a Mediterranean crop regime in Pharaonic times to an African-based regime under the Meroites (Rowley-Conwy and Clapham 2006). The Qasr Ibrim material is so well preserved that it is proving extremely valuable for modern studies of ancient DNA, including the study of adaptations in barley which have implications for drought-ridden areas in the modern world (see <http://planetearth.nerc.ac.uk/news/story.aspx?id=487>).

Put together, the archaeological remains, the finds, the texts, and the plant and animal remains give us a truly vibrant picture of life at Qasr Ibrim over its 3000 year history. During that time it served as a fortress, a religious centre, and a political and administrative centre, and often fulfilled several of these roles simultaneously. Its inhabitants were culturally sophisticated and many were literate; we know how they dressed and what they ate; we can trace their contacts with Egypt to the north and Sudan to the south, and sometimes even to the Mediterranean world. It is almost impossible to assess how much of Ibrim has been excavated; but there is certainly great potential for further revealing work in the future.

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