

Anthony John Arkell as Commissioner for Archaeology and Anthropology (1939-1948).

A look into an early experiment with interdisciplinary administration

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Between 1939 and 1948, Sudan had a Commissioner for Archaeology and Anthropology, a post that remained unique throughout the existence of the Antiquities Service and successor organisations. The combination of both disciplines was created – and allowed – only for the sake of Anthony John Arkell (1898-1980), and ‘Anthropology’ was already dropped from the title for Arkell’s successor, Peter Lewis Shinnie. The latter later noted in a short memoir that anthropological studies, much encouraged by the Sudan Government at that time, were to be supervised by Arkell, but that he did not ‘remember much of this work being carried out whilst [he] was Arkell’s assistant’ (Shinnie 1990, 223). Although Shinnie noted a – practically often inconsequential – continued debate of such interdisciplinary attempts, he also highlighted that his own arguments for ‘the integration of archaeology, social anthropology, ethnography and linguistics’ (Shinnie 1990, 231) were ignored in the early 1950s by British officials in charge of ‘the intellectual climate of government’ (Shinnie 1990, 231).

It seems still relevant for the history of both disciplines in Sudan to have a closer look at how this short experiment came about and what its main protagonist achieved during its course. Accordingly, this article recounts how Arkell came to take this position and examines whether, and how, he succeeded to relate its ‘anthropology’ part to his main archaeological work. The text is based on Arkell’s correspondence and papers held at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) Archives,¹ London, UK as well as his published writings.

A new position

On 19th May 1937, the then Civil Secretary Angus Gillan addressed Governor-General Stewart Symes with a ‘Note on anthropological and archaeological coordination’ (PP MS 71/02/01/1-5), shortly before his retirement in 1939. The described status quo was that research by officials and missionaries in southern Sudan, anthropological as well as linguistic, was regulated and subsidised by the Secretary for Education, while distribution of outputs ‘of interest to officials’ was done by the Civil Secretary’s Office and its library.

¹ See <https://archiveshub.jisc.ac.uk/search/archives/abf89087-b18b-3c6c-9763-bfbcb4755c53>.

Publication happened through either the subsidised *Sudan Notes and Records* (SNR) or the Official Publications Board, while non-published reports were kept in so-called tribal files of ‘ethnographical groups’; many District Commissioners (D.C.), however, failed to share what they collected.

In 1929, a recommendation of Gillan’s predecessor Harold A. MacMichael led to the formulation of a policy to support anthropological research with an annual sum of £600, which was not implemented due to the effects of the financial crisis.² However, governmental support was given to so-called *ad hoc* surveys, which it was hoped would yield directly applicable results for the ‘administrative problem of the South’ (C.S.17.M.1, 10th January 1929), especially once anthropology started to be understood not to be limited to physical anthropology, but to mean also the administratively much more relevant cultural and social anthropology.

But now Gillan questioned whether the effort of time and money was merited considering the output; not because of its quality, but because of a lack of coordination that could lead to a much wider integration of available data, especially data created by colonial administrators. He argued that ‘a time of material expansion’ – experienced in the 1930s – leads to potentially problematic changes that cannot be appreciated without knowledge of cultural background. At the same time, more prosperity brought more administrative duties; therefore, there was no capacity among existing staff to increase coordinative efforts. All involved officials had taken ethnographic notes on a part-time basis, and the Civil Secretary’s office could no longer maintain the links to SNR. Meanwhile, state governors, such as the one of Kordofan, made active requests for anthropological studies.

Regarding archaeological research, Gillan claimed that it had rested up to then on ‘gifted amateurs’ who made do on a ‘hand-to-mouth basis’, such as John Winter Crowfoot and Frank Addison, both educators, followed by George Walter Grabham and James Marmaduke Edmonds, both geologists. Although Gillan still did not consider the Conservator of Antiquities as a full-time job, it was extensive enough to distract those from their ‘actual’ duties.³

On this basis, Gillan proposed a new position for the collection of existing anthropological, ethnographical and linguistic materials, in addition to some consolidation of the archaeological research. Both functioned separately, so the argument was that it would not merit two full-time positions,

² Edward E. Evans-Pritchard mentioned in a letter to Arkell on 7th September 1937 that his annual salary at Oxford was £300, and for his Nuer study in that year he could only hope to get a governmental grant of free transport and £100, as he had to cover expenses basically himself. Archaeologist Aylward M. Blackman invited Arkell on 9th September 1937 to join the Sesebi excavation in that winter but decried a similar lack of funds to do more than half a season, hoping to find some money to work in Amara West.

³ A letter by Grabham to Cox on 1st September 1937 represents very well the interlocking of his Public Works duties with archaeological work, as he used repairs in the water supply system at locations like Naqa and Sedeinga to be present in areas of excavation.



but it would be 'at least a useful experiment' to combine Anthropological Adviser and Conservator of Antiquities into one position, liaising with both the Civil Secretary and the Education Department. The museums' budgets should also be transferred to the latter from the Public Works Department, where it was before due to Grabham's and Edmond's attachment.⁴

A successful implementation of this idea was 'largely based on having available [...] the right man for the job', and Gillan suggested Arkell to 'fit the dual bill'. Arkell had joined the Sudan Political Service in 1920 and spent most of his early years in Darfur (up to 1926), transferred first to Kosti (1927-1929), where he engaged in anti-slavery campaigns, and then to Sennar (1930-1932). In 1932, he returned to Darfur as Deputy Governor and remained there until 1937. During these years, he had shown an interest in African archaeology and, so Gillan, 'though doubtless it is a controversial subject', achieved some kind of recognition for it. He had received no anthropological training but was 'well versed in the subject as an amateur', while his administrative skills would make him more useful in the planned position 'than a trained anthropologist from home'. Furthermore, so Gillan's interpretation ran, Arkell's ambitions would rather be to pursue such studies than to aim at a governor position, as he would be eventually entitled to.

Given such an offer, Arkell wrote to Charles Seligman, who was basically an anthropologist, but had also an interest in Nile Valley archaeology. In a letter of 9th June 1937, Seligman very clearly suggested that Arkell, although he had a general knowledge and was gifted as an amateur, would need some formal training in both disciplines before taking up the offer so that he, 'at least in the more important issues, have something of the experience of & inspire the same confidence as a professional anthropologist'. He agreed that a governmental position benefits from administrative expertise, although from a scientific perspective a proper anthropologist would be better. Therefore, he suggested a one-year or at least 6-month training, preferably at Oxford, with reference to the recent re-organization of the anthropological department there under Alfred Radcliffe-Brown and the presence of Evans-Pritchard. He added the same concerning the archaeological part, both for the technical part of the work and for more familiarity with previous activities on Nile Valley archaeology, for which he suggested work on Wellcome Trust's Jebel Moya material, in contact with Crowfoot,⁵ George Andrew Reisner and Laurence Kirwan.⁶

⁴The Director of Education was already the president of the Archaeological and Museums Board, but both the Geological Survey and the Antiquities Museum were attached to Gordon College, not the Education Department (letter of Arkell to Gillan, 21st September 1937).

⁵Crowfoot wrote Arkell on 7th September 1937 and suggested, among other things, to do some work with Dr Mortimer Wheeler or alternatively his student Kathleen Kenyon. Arkell seems to have taken up the suggestion, as some notes exist on 'Principles of Field Archaeology' with Mortimer Wheeler as a reference (PP MS 71/07/01/127-128).

⁶Frank Addison worked with Kirwan on the Jebel Moya material at

The following days saw busy interactions on that issue. Arkell immediately communicated Seligman's suggestions to Gillan, who answered on 20th June 1937 favourably but referred to the need to wait for an answer from Christopher W. M. Cox, then Director of Education at Gordon College. On the previous day, a letter written to Cox by Donald Benjamin Harden, Keeper of the Ashmolean Museum, and Batiscombe Gunn, Professor of Egyptology, had claimed that such a position would be welcomed by both anthropologists and archaeologists at Oxford, especially concerning an anticipated shift of researchers from Egypt to Sudan considering the increasingly tense relation with the government there. The writers suggested bolstering this effort with a proper museum in Khartoum; however, they added that 'whoever is appointed should be given the opportunity of equipping himself for his task, and obtaining the requisite technical knowledge'.

The official offer of the position came to Arkell in el-Fasher on 17th August 1937 (telegram M 94), to start 1st January 1938 on the pay scale of Deputy Governor⁷ and with possible additional task to edit *JNR*, which he accepted on the same day. A day later the Acting Civil Secretary formalised the offer in a letter, where Seligman's suggestion now appears as the Government's position that a 'study course at home is thought to be an essential preliminary to [...] taking up the post', to be pursued by a self-designed study plan, subject to financial approval and adjustments.

After several consultations with colleagues at home, Arkell replied on 21st September 1937 with a study plan, which included about 6 months for a Diploma of Anthropology at Oxford (including courses on archaeology), a 3-month period for work at museums (Ashmolean and Horniman Ethnological Museum, both in UK; museums in continental Europe, such as the Museum of the Belgian Congo in Tervuren and the Royal Museum for Ethnology in Berlin) and an excavation in England, as well as another 3 months to do a research degree with a thesis on Sudan, either a B. Litt. or D. Phil. He argued that these would cover his duties, namely supervision of anthropological research, museum collections and excavation in Sudan.⁸

Interestingly, the colleagues Arkell contacted tended to answer to only one of the disciplinary parts of the dual function. The anthropologist Charles K. Meek saw in a letter of 17th September 1937 the need to point out the importance, for a Government anthropologist, to give practical assistance, by being an expert in social and political organization, and

that time, which would trigger later some debate between him and Arkell (see Addison 1956).

⁷A 31st January 1938 letter from the Financial Secretary calls the position Advisor in Anthropology and Archeology [sic], at an initial salary of £1200.

⁸Another proposition was to work at Sesebi, being excavated by the Egyptian Exploration Fund, but the concentration of Middle East/North Africa excavations during the winter season did not fit in with the need to concentrate on archaeology in the summer months, between the anthropological terms (see e.g. William Boyd Kennedy Shaw in letter of 12th September 1937).

'raise the standard of anthropology among Administrative officials'. The archaeologist Blackman, on the other hand, urged him on 9th September 1937 to concentrate on archaeological literature, excavation practices and museums, and not to aim for a degree but just attend some anthropological courses, such as Buxton's lectures on physical anthropology.

William Boyd Kennedy Shaw referred in a letter of 12th September 1937 to the position as 'the Antiquities job';⁹ later that year, on 13th November 1937, Gunn spoke of Arkell's studies as an 'archaeology diploma', possibly at the Archaeological Institute about to be opened. Addison wrote on 6th September 1937 that the Jebel Moya material occupied him until the following July, so he could not help with active excavations, but suggested gathering the basics from reading and visiting museums, while he guessed Arkell could 'pick up' Egyptian hieroglyphs along the way and would not need to study them beforehand.

While this early period was full of optimistic expectations, there already appeared, subtextually, administrative and professional tensions that the position was to operate under. Acting Conservator Grabham was, in a letter to Cox on 1st September 1937, still under the impression that Arkell was basically appointed as Anthropological Officer and that his appointment as Grabham's successor will be suggested 'in due course' to the Archaeological and Museums Board, a seeming attempt to challenge any reduction of the board's decision-making power, and thereby the Civil Secretary's position vis-à-vis the Education Department. On 22nd September 1937, after a visit to Arkell in el-Fasher, he still described the position in a letter to Gillan as 'Ethnological post with prospects also of taking charge of the Museums and the Antiquities'. In an attached memorandum, where he equated Arkell with 'Government Anthropologist', he argued, subtly, that nobody could do both anthropology and handle archaeological licences, exploration, registration, conservation, etc. Nevertheless, he also dived into details of the future of museums and antiquities, which shows that he also envisaged 'the Ethnologist' to actually engage with these questions.

Evans-Pritchard confirmed, in a letter to Arkell on 7th September 1937, that he thinks Arkell will in this position 'make much difference to Sudan ethnological studies' and suggested to him later to concentrate in the first year only on social anthropology, with maybe a month excavation in the summer, when – according to him – most excavations took place, admitting then that he does not know much about 'that sorts of things' (letter to Arkell, 8th October 1937). Arkell took up the latter suggestion and wrote on 24th October 1937 to Gillan that he might cut down museum time to a minimum, do excavation with Wheeler during his leave in 1939 and furthermore concentrate on social anthropology as more immediately relevant to the

administration: 'My original plan was based on an attempt to make a fair division between the claims of archaeology and anthropology. This alternative is based on the supposition that the anthropological side of my appointment may be considered to come definitely first.'

However, he also planned now to attend a course of 16 lectures on archaeological fieldwork at the new Institute of Archaeology in London, parallel to the anthropological diploma, which also involved archaeology courses, such as the Ashmolean course in the Hilary term and Sandford on Quaternary chronology. Cox confirmed the schedule on 28th October 1937 and was of the opinion that a research degree would elevate Arkell from 'amateur status'. On this basis, Arkell left for Oxford to start his studies at the beginning of 1938.

Study to work

Early anthropology and archaeology had much in common in their basic interest in material culture, represented in huge collections, with museums as primary end points for both disciplines. But Arkell came to Oxford during a transitional period for British Social Anthropology, shortly before the foundation of the Association of Social Anthropologists (ASA) on 23rd July 1946. Radcliffe-Brown had been holding Oxford's first chair in Social Anthropology since 1936 and was to retire in 1947. During these years, two major processes took place: the increasing differentiation between academics and 'amateurs', and the self-assured emergence of independent social anthropologists, who challenged both a primary function as colonial science and the Committee for Anthropology's (as well as Royal Anthropological Institute's (RAI) and Oxford's) insistence on general anthropology, which also involved physical and evolutionary anthropology, and, by extension, archaeology.

When Radcliffe-Brown was president of the RAI from 1938 to 1939, Meyer Fortes brought forward a proposal to increase anthropology's engagement in the colonies, but 'tempers flared over whether the memo should mention the study of material culture and technology' (Mills 2003, 9). The initiation of the ASA showed in its lasting consequences the way a small, influential group around Evans-Pritchard preferred to go. The ambiguity of these new disciplinary boundaries became clear nevertheless, when the archaeologists Arkell [sic!] and Louis Leakey were invited to the first meeting of the ASA, but not offered membership. Furthermore, the members Siegfried Nadel and Max Gluckman represented opposite positions towards the colonial government, the former demanding the consideration of 'Applied Anthropology' in a cooperative sense, the latter pushing together with Evans-Pritchard to stress theoretical development and independence from governmental demands (Mills 2003, 9-10).

From the colonial government's point of view, the idea of having not only trained anthropologists at hand but to understand anthropology as part of an official's tasks, especially at the level of D.C., had gained much more traction during the

⁹ In the same letter, he mentioned Evans-Pritchard passing through Jerusalem on the way to 'a Bedu tribe with whom he could live with and anthropologize'.



1930s.¹⁰ What was envisaged, however, was rather a surveyor like Seligman, not the lengthy, sophisticated studies emerging in British Social Anthropology, and their critical edge, especially in the worker- and rebellion-oriented Manchester School under Gluckman, that did not fare well with a colonial vision of manageable ‘tribal’ social development in Africa (Boddy 2008, 9). Nevertheless, both kinds of anthropological research continued, and, as Boddy noted, several political officers continued later as professional anthropologists.

Apart from the effectively low status of social anthropological studies specifically among colonial administrators in Sudan, these developments confronted Arkell with the question of what he should and could achieve in his position vis-à-vis the emerging social anthropologists. Radcliffe-Brown’s marked dislike of physical anthropology and prehistoric archaeology (Mills 2009, 85) could have made Arkell’s interdisciplinary plans quite difficult already during his studies. But Arkell made a strong effort to acquaint himself with all the fields, as reflected in his reading notes:

- 180 pages on Radcliffe-Brown (PP MS 71/07/01)
- 130 pages on quarternary climates in Sudan (PP MS 71/07/02)
- 73 pages on Meroe archaeology (PP MS 71/07/03)
- 147 pages on Ancient History of Sudan (PP MS 71/07/04)
- 48 pages on Nachtigal’s *Sahara and Sudan* (PP MS 71/07/05)
- 21 pages on Evans-Pritchard (PP MS 71/07/06)
- 14 pages on Middle Eastern archaeology (PP MS 71/07/07)
- 157 pages on physical anthropology (PP MS 71/07/08, 10)
- 176 pages on (social) anthropology (PP MS 71/07/09, 13 and 16)
- 78 pages on Sudan Stone Age (PP MS 71/07/11)
- 43 pages on archaeology (PP MS 71/07/12)
- 106 pages on African religion (PP MS 71/07/14)
- 86 pages on travellers, mostly Chad / Darfur (PP MS 71/07/17)

By mid-1938, Arkell had received his anthropology diploma and Cox described in a letter of 3rd August 1938 his future job: after 6 weeks taking over from Grabham, he would be in charge of the antiquities, including being Secretary of the AMB and Conservatorship, with an archaeological office in the Khartoum museum, while office space for the anthropological stuff would be at the Civil Secretary.¹¹ A letter of 1st

¹⁰ Teaching anthropology to future colonial administrators was an idea already voiced in Lubbock’s 1870 book *The origin of civilisation*, and by 1908 Oxford and Cambridge provided anthropological training for so-called probationers before serving in Sudan (Warburg 2013, 82; Rivière 2009, 55). Concerning the 1930s, Boddy noted the probable further influence of Margery Perham on Gillan in that point, especially through her 1933 lecture ‘The Political Officer as Anthropologist’ (Boddy 2008, 8).

¹¹ However, the Office of the Commissioner had only one P. O. Box, No. 178 (contact data in several articles from that time), used by NCAM

November 1938 saw Grabham already deep in logistic issues with Arkell, all about museums and antiquities, after similar letters throughout the year since November 1937.

At work

The interdisciplinary experiment was set to fail already in the first years. The spatial division of labour was accentuated by the creation of a separate Anthropological Board in 1940 under the Civil Secretary, but with Education Office members as well.¹² Furthermore, the Second World War changed all priorities and added to Arkell’s position the duty of Chief Transport Officer (1941-1944), which occupied most of his time (SG 1950b, 125). In 1945, his main activities concerned the excavations in Khartoum (SG 1947, 126), and any reference to the ‘anthropology’ part of his position had been dropped from the official reports in this and the following years. This culminated in the abandonment of the dual position in 1948.

The editorial notes of *Sudan Notes and Records* give the best picture of this development. In 1939, congratulating him on his appointment, Arkell’s task is described mostly as being in charge of the Antiquities Service and the museums, while ‘it is hoped’ that he will still have time to supervise anthropological studies, thereby setting the tone already in his first year. While notes of the following years were often devoted to apologies for delays, mostly related to the war, the volume of 1945, when Arkell had taken over the responsibilities of editorial secretary, noted that he had been freed from his war tasks to work out plans for Sudan’s National Museum with monuments and ‘ethnologically interesting objects’. While the Antiquities Service prepared a report for the years 1940-3, no mention of such an issue for the anthropological part is included and was not forthcoming in the following years. At the same time, the upgrade of Gordon College from its previous existence as a secondary school pointed the way towards Sudan’s first university, and the editors noted that they ‘look forward to the day when there are on its staff research fellows in archaeology and anthropology’.

The note of 1946 started with the criticism by a subscriber of an ‘exclusively antiquarian and ornithological tone’, rather than closeness to colonial reality. While the criticism was met with reference to Wingate’s inaugural statement that any knowledge is targetted that conveys a better understanding of Africa’s ‘natives’, the rest of the note returns to details of museum plans, whose educational function was intended to ‘sow the seeds of a national culture, the roots of which can draw nourishment only from the past; and will lead to a

today. In the Government’s annual report, his activities were reported under the category ‘Education – Antiquities Service’.

¹² Only a few things are known about this board. Douglas Newbold mentioned in a letter of 20th February 1940 that the board had been established (Henderson 1953, 133), and the Henderson papers at the Sudan Archive in Durham contain a few pages from 1948 (SAD.478/2/4-14), but overall almost no documentation of its activities seems to have existed or survived (Ahmed 1982, 69).

realization of the causes, both moral and economic, which once operated to raise the Sudan to a world power, and then reduced it to an unknown backwater, causes which are still operative today, and may lead to future disaster if ignored.'

This association of archaeological knowledge with contemporary social and political development was repeated in the following volume, again combined with a call for a proper national museum, which forecasts the strong shift towards 'nationalist archaeology' among Sudanese archaeologists perceptible at least since the 1990s (e.g. Salih 1992). In this sense, developments in the Antiquities Service and the Khartoum Museum were detailed, as well as the appointment of a Research Fellow in Archaeology, but apart from a short allusion to 'ethnological collections', social anthropology made no appearance.

In the 1948 volume, Arkell did not even feature as a member of the editorial team, as he had retired from his post to become Lecturer in Egyptology at London University, and, as if to mark this complete transition from an interdisciplinary position, he is only thanked for his historical and archaeological contributions. At the same time, it is stated that

[t]he Anthropological Board at its first and second meetings, which have been held in the past year, has recorded its opinion that the demands of archaeological work are more than enough for one man and that there is urgent need for a separate Commissioner for Anthropology. He would not only direct and coordinate the carrying out of researches in the field by anthropological workers employed by the Sudan Government or any outside body, but would also be available to interpret the results of research work and to advise the Government on the sociological implications of any proposed course of action.'

With this institutional acknowledgement of the failure to combine both functions, professionally and administratively, the experiment came to an end.¹³

Arguably, this had not been inevitable. Arkell had an office with the collected 'tribal files' and being general editor of *SNR* put him in touch with a wide range of anthropological issues during a time of transition to a more academic tone, completed during the 1950s. He also served as president of the interdisciplinary Philosophical Society of the Sudan in the inaugural year 1946-47 (Smith 1981, 144-145), and in his address to the First Ordinary Meeting on 26th February 1946, Arkell stressed the function of present-day studies to interpret historical findings, 'former habits and practices in the social structure' (PSS 1949, 2), combined with a call to create an 'adequate' museum. However, the first meetings were dominated by archaeological, historical and scientific

papers, none of them were sociological (or, in a narrower sense, philosophical).

Furthermore, his broad comparative outlook also benefitted his contribution to other circles: in a note to the Soil Conservation Committee in 1944, for instance, he supplied information on a probable southward trend of settlement in Darfur, which suggested progressing desertification, in addition to the resemblance of Neolithic pottery found in the Libyan Desert to pottery of the contemporary Nuba Mountains (mentioned in El-Tayeb 1972, 19).¹⁴

But his active engagement with anthropology, especially cultural and social anthropology in a more than ethnographical sense, remained descriptive and administratively inconsequential;¹⁵ his function as supervisor, as noted by Shinnie in the initial quote, was almost non-existent. One possible explanation is that influential colonial administrators never really warmed to the idea of relinquishing control over research done directly amongst their subjects. 'Administrative usefulness' meant mostly directing research to where there were difficulties in controlling populations, and accordingly almost none of the anthropological research took place in the northern areas. Professional anthropologists often struggled with the demand to provide 'useful' material and accept such constraints, while many of the highly-educated officials produced ethnographic data themselves of appropriate quality (Ahmed 1982, 68). It may thus have not been possible for Arkell to assume a supervisory role in such a politically sensitive and academically competitive field.¹⁶

There were, however, variations in the views of administrators. One of the most influential voices in this matter, then Governor of Kordofan Province, was Douglas Newbold, who wrote to Arkell on 28th October 1937:

It's difficult to assess (a) the relative values of anthropology and archaeology in the Sudan, (b) the relative urgency of your perfecting your training in one or the other. As an official I certainly think anthropology is more important. As D.N. I put archaeology first. Actually, I think you should,

¹⁴ Arkell also contributed a note on Khor Baraka to the Soil Conservation Committee's Report of 1944 (mentioned in El-Tayeb 1972, 24). In the editorial notes of vol. 26 of *SNR*, the work of this committee is described as 'a sphere in which archaeology can be of practical assistance to both geology and agriculture'. This understanding also led to Arkell's inclusion in the seminal handbook *Agriculture in the Sudan* with a historical chapter (Arkell 1948a).

¹⁵ His – in the widest sense – ethnographic output before this period comprises Arkell 1926; 1935a-b; 1936a-e; 1937a-c; 1938; during his time as Commissioner, he published Arkell 1939a-c; 1945a-b (b written in 1936); 1947; 1948b; later came only short notes, Arkell 1950; 1951; 1953; 1956 (based on a note from 1938).

¹⁶ One of Gillan's suggestions in his 25th May 1937 letter was for Arkell to do a field survey in the Nuba Mountains, shortly before Siegfried Nadel was hired to do an extensive survey of the region. Evans-Pritchard later expressed surprise that he had been hired without Arkell being consulted (letter to Arkell, 8th October 1937) and added that 'Governments [...] never ask anybody anything and consequently never get good advice'.

¹³ It was not completely abandoned, though, as Shinnie, although being Commissioner of Archaeology, 'became a member of the Anthropological Board which gave permits for research and exercised supervision' (Shinnie 1990, 223).



as regards *your* immediate professional needs, put archaeology first. There is much to be done urgently in curatorship – both in Khartoum and Northern Province. You can leave anthropological work to Evans Pritchard and Nadel, for the moment, so I should say concentrate in your study leave on excavation and museum work.’

(Henderson 1953, 79-80).

However, he added two things: for one, that ‘anthropologist’ should be part of the position’s name, to please the African Institute and the RAI but also because ‘[a]s Govt. Anthropologist you’ll be an addition to the small band of senior officials in Khartoum who represent native mentality and can stand up to technocrats’ (Henderson 1953, 80). On 11th November 1937, Newbold stressed that the position was foremost one of inspection, as Arkell ‘can’t be expected to be a professional anthropologist or excavator, but [he] should be able to know the ropes, and sift proposals, and judge applicants and maintain ‘*antikas*’ and generally keep the two subjects from rusting?’ (Henderson 1953, 80).

But neither seems to have been in Arkell’s reach – and/or ambition – in the end. If Newbold still wrote in a letter to Margery Perham, 20th February 1940, that ‘Arkell is mostly concerned with Archaeology at the moment [and] will get on to Anthropology shortly’ (Henderson 1953, 133), either the war hiatus or Arkell’s actual inclination never let it happen. It was only afterwards, when Arkell had already left Sudan, that anthropological research in Sudan took off with a very fruitful period, under a separate Government Anthropologist (Ahmed 1982, 69). In a similar way, the Sudan Antiquities Service had existed already for 36 years (since 1903) and Arkell was the first full-time commissioner to be appointed, but still ‘the Service was not systematically organized until the 1950s’ (Mohammed and Welsby 2011, 24).

A closer look at Arkell’s activities during these years gives a slightly less bleak picture of his attempts to fulfil a dual function. District Notes for Merowe, sent by the D.C. on 13th December 1937, suggest that Arkell had started early on to collect more ‘ethnographic’ data, specifically since the sent parts concern only the categories ‘Tribal and Religion’ as well as ‘Native Handicrafts’. The Governor-General’s report for 1939-1941 noted a ‘second’ visit to the Nuba Mountains by Arkell in March 1940, especially to meet Nadel (SG 1950a, 122), shortly before a yellow fever epidemic in late May. His discoveries there reappeared – probably privately communicated – in Nadel’s short note of Arkell’s excavation of a grave in the Tira hills in the Nuba Mountains, where the body’s unusual contracted position suggested an older population (Nadel 1947, 4). Some smaller works appear occasionally in publications: A note on suits of armour made during the Mahdiyya included some information on a mail maker of that period teaching the trade to his sons, based on observations in February 1940 (Arkell 1956). His text on Cambay beads (Arkell 1936a) shows him tracing beads encountered at his several postings in Sudan through contemporary and

then historical trade networks to an extended 1900-year-long outlook on the topic. In an article on Magdalenian survivals (Arkell 1951), he discussed a note written in 1938 on an enquiry of the origin of a spear-thrower, again starting with contemporary informants and observations, via comparison through museum items to the larger context of his own Neolithic studies at Khartoum and other sites.¹⁷

However, Arkell’s focus remained strongly archaeological, and ethnographic details appeared to have been only opportunistic notes on the sidelines of his main interests, with less effort than a D.C. would have made and none of the analytical effort a ‘trained anthropologist’ could be expected to employ. This might have had something to do with his largely administrative duties in Khartoum, which limited travel and certainly the kind of exposure provincial colonial administrators had, but it does not explain his lack of engagement with the existing data as had originally been envisaged. For instance, Nubia, or the Northern Province, although central to Arkell’s historical and archaeological interests, received almost no ethnographic attention.¹⁸ A descriptive approach, also towards a specific material such as pottery, remained his focus, and although he kept on taking notes from reading (71/08/01) as well as some informants (71/08/02), the documents do not indicate a more systematic approach to social analysis.¹⁹

Aftermath

This failure of institutional integration is the more deplorable, as it could have led to an early experience of inducing sociological thinking into archaeological work and archaeological methods into anthropological research. In fact, one of the proponents of the former, Peter J. Ucko, published later with Arkell an article on the predynastic Nile Valley that stayed very much in this temporal frame but added questions of social change to a material assessment for the sake of dating (Arkell and Ucko 1965), an innovative process of social archaeology that arguably had already started in the 1930s (Meskell and Preucel 2004).

The result of the experiment was a paradoxical situation: although Arkell had a position with ‘anthropology’ in the title, what he actually did had less to do with anthropology than any previous period in his Sudan Political Service employ-

¹⁷ In another way, his active interest in unusual research is hinted at with his introduction to Al-Shāṭir Buṣaylī ‘Abd al-Jalīl’s work on Greeks in the Blue Nile Valley (Bosayley 1945).

¹⁸ His collected notes on ‘Pottery’ (71/07/22) contain only four pages on the Dongola District: one description of the production process in Nawa (5th December 1939) and another more general description from Dongola (6th December 1939). This was a general pattern throughout colonial history – and beyond – arguably since the population was considered similar enough to other Muslims, especially the Egyptian population, to be ‘known’ without further study (Boddy 2008, 11).

¹⁹ Other collections may prove more fruitful in that regard. The Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology has 256 page of typescript notes on the Darfur and Sudan Collection by Arkell, while the Seligman Papers at the London School of Economics contain letters to and from Arkell up to 1935.

ment. Almost none of Arkell's later endeavours and honours had to do with anthropology. After being Commissioner and leaving Sudan, Arkell became Lecturer in Egyptology at University College London and Honorary Curator of the Petrie Museum (1948-1963), and he remained archaeological advisor to Sudan until 1953. In 1953, he was given honorary membership of the German Archaeological Institute and was awarded a D. Litt. degree by the University of Oxford in 1955 (Smith 1981, 146).

Should the whole experiment be thus dismissed as an ambitious, but doomed endeavour? In fact, the general optimism among colleagues when the idea arose, as well as the disciplinary doubts and blind spots that immediately appeared, speak of an ongoing effort and a difficulty in balancing material and interpretative aspects in 'human' studies. The implications of Arkell's research in the Nuba Mountains, especially his material on pottery, may give an outlook on the potential and challenges to move towards such a balance.

In general, it is not Arkell's publications, but his collected papers, which represent his most valuable contribution to Sudan ethnography. In the School of Oriental and African Studies's collection, this concerns 21 files on Darfur and 10 on White Nile Province and Sennar District, 'mainly [...] personal observations made while on trek or detailed and dated records of conversations with one or more informants, whose names are usually given' (O'Fahey 1974, 173). Not mentioned by O'Fahey are a small number of documents on the Nuba Mountains and the Northern Province, as well as an interest in Tuareg connected to Fellata in Darfur (PP MS 71/08/03).

The Nuba Mountains came into the scope of his work in White Nile Province against slave and arms trade between Sudan and Ethiopia (e.g. 71/02/04/01, 03 and 10),²⁰ but there is also extensive correspondence with Gawain Bell and Geoffrey Hawkesworth on the region (99 pages, 71/07/21) as well as notes on pottery (71/07/22). The penultimate item contains extensive correspondence and ethnographic notes between October 1936 and March 1940, often on the existence of Christian symbols and their historical implications. A closer look at the last item shows that they are the results of two tours, one in 1939, one in March 1940, with descriptions of pottery from more than a dozen locations, summarized in a final table by method, decoration and material.

Although the region thus represents Arkell's most extensive collective effort after Darfur and the Funj areas, only a small part of his findings made it outside his archived papers. In response to a request made at the Prehistoric Society conference 1949, for instance, Arkell submitted a short note with photographs of Moro homesteads, where

²⁰ Some biographical notes claim he established villages of freed slaves calling themselves 'sons of Arkell' or 'Beni Arkell'. See more details in Jedrej 1996, 12-17, including a story related by Ina Beasley in 1945 that one of the former slave traders saw Arkell working with prisoners digging trenches when he was CAA and presumed he had been finally punished for imprisoning slave traders.

the stone substructure of pigstys was the only construction and sign of human occupation likely to survive more than a few years 'to puzzle the archaeologist of the future as to how the pigsty can have housed a race of pigmies' (Arkell 1950, 101). Arkell's opus magnum, *History of the Sudan*, contains several general comparisons between prehistoric and historic artifacts, and contemporary material culture in the Nuba Mountains, namely 'some tribes' using red ochre documented for the Late Old Stone Age (Arkell 1961, 28), and pottery of south-western groups such as Shawabna as survivals of the C-Group (Arkell 1961, 52).

Arkell's fieldwork among contemporary societies, such as the Funj and Fur, was mostly informed by a quest to find origins; to unravel historical connections.²¹ These attempts at 'origin stories' were not always appreciated and convincing, partly on a very basic level. He suggested, for instance, that the Nuba group Nyima or Nyimang may have descended from the negroid Nimiu shown in Hatshepsut's temple at Deir el-Bahri bringing her gold (Arkell 1961, 106); this suggestion was refuted by the anthropologist Roland C. Stevenson because the endonym of the group is Āma, while Nyimang is a much more recent exonym based on the name of the peak of their main hill-range (Stevenson 1984, 63).²² At the same time, the extent and often uniqueness of his archaeological and ethnographic work in areas such as Darfur and the Nuba Mountains makes his archival material still important as reference points.

Regarding the Nuba Mountains, these appear to be untapped resources, especially from a material culture point of view, concerning an – in that aspect – vastly understudied region. A small indicator of some early collection activity was a display of 'ethnological specimens [sic] from the Nuba Mountains' (Field 1949, 75 fn 10) in the Khartoum Museum, including quartz flakes used in Heiban for cicatrization and cutting meat, and pottery from the region was part of some earlier notes (e.g. Bentley and Crowfoot 1924; Crowfoot 1925).²³ Much later, Hodder (1982, 125-184) applied an ethnoarchaeological focus on Nuba houses, burial practices and designs without an immediate interest in historical depth, but more to carve out the interlacing of material culture with social ideologies, i.e. to increase the interpretative depth when dealing with cultural artefacts.

But even a recent, in some sense first archaeological assess-

²¹ His unceasing enthusiasm for drawing comparisons and historical lines can also be observed in his smaller pieces on Tuareg ornaments (Arkell 1935a-b), Ya'qubāb insignia (Arkell 1938), North African finger-rings (Arkell 1939c), conical cups with central peg (Arkell 1945a) and a bone harpoon from Chad (Arkell 1953).

²² This criticism of his interpretative abilities and methodology, parallel to an appreciation of his observational diligence, is also known in archaeology (see, e.g. for Darfur, McGregor 2001, 8). In a more general sense, his racial concepts, especially the 'Brown race' concept, was early on criticised as imprecise or even mythical in the sense of Lévi-Strauss (Macgaffey 1966, 4).

²³ The British Museum also has photographs accompanying these studies, with a focus on Tegali and Eliri (Museum number Af,B6).



ment of the Nuba Mountains (Taylor and Beniada 2007)²⁴ seems to have remained unaware of Arkell's material, in addition to Hodder's work and several post-independence anthropological studies looking into material culture and their symbolism (e.g. Faris 1972). While the full report, which was not available to the author of this article, may cover the available material to a larger extent, there seems to be considerable potential to extend the analytical focus in a much-needed cooperation between social anthropology, archaeology, historical linguistics, environmental history, semiology and other fields.²⁵ Pottery may be a good test case, as 'one [of] the few media allowing for an interface between the past and the present' (Gosselain and Smith 2013, 125).

Arkell was at the threshold of an old dilemma of anthropological-archaeological cooperation, where the former often lacked technical skills for material documentation, and the latter delved into description and dating, often oblivious to their contemporary context and sociological questions (cf. Gosselain and Smith 2013, 119-120). However, neither the global political, nor the national administrative or contemporary academic context of his appointment – or even his own priorities – helped him to cross this threshold. Considering the recent attempt to initiate archaeological studies in this and other under-researched areas, his work may still provide an important contribution for advancing into an equally challenging region of interdisciplinary anthropological and archaeological inquiry.

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²⁴ A visit by an archaeological team under Lech Krzyżaniak occurred in 1972 (Taylor and Beniada 2007, 114 fn 4 noted February 1967), which produced only photographic documentation, housed in the archives of the Archaeological Museum in Poznań, ostensibly to look for cultural and linguistic relations with the Nubians of the Nile Valley (Maliński et al. 2013, 226). Another short visit by John Sutton, Derek Welsby and David Edwards took place in 1986, but was prevented from becoming a project by the outbreak of hostilities (Taylor and Beniada 2007, 114 fn 4).

²⁵ As acknowledged in the article, there have been other previous efforts in this direction, including the work of Roger Blench and other historical linguists, but many historical works on the Nuba Mountains also strive to formulate a direct link to the Nubian kingdoms in the north.

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