

SUDAN & NUBIA

The Sudan Archaeological Research Society



Bulletin No. 8

2004



Hidden Treasures of Lake Nubia

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The construction of the High Dam at Aswan inundated the whole of Egyptian Nubia and the Nile Valley in Sudan as far south as the Dal Cataract. A small number of temples were saved by being relocated to higher ground on the banks of Lake Nubia (Nasser) or to the Sudan National Museum. Several others were donated by the Egyptian Government to nations participating in the rescue campaign and were re-erected as far afield as New York and Turin. Apart from these, almost all the other major monuments were destroyed. The exception to the rule always cited is Qasr Ibrim. Sitting atop a high eminence dominating the river, Ibrim still survives although now badly damaged by the ever rising reservoir levels especially over the last decade. Today only the central portion of the site has never been inundated, although even within the cathedral, on the crown of the hill, water has been observed within the crypts.

Since the late 1960s, apart from at Qasr Ibrim, no archaeological work has been undertaken in the Nubian Nile Valley between the First and the Dal Cataracts, presumably as a result of the assumption that everything had been destroyed. In January 1996 the writer and Isabella Welsby Sjöström, while visiting Akasha at the upstream end of the Batn el-Hajjar near the headwaters of the reservoir, were surprised when informed by the local people of the existence of a *kenise* (a church or other ancient site) a little downstream. The site known as Ukma East or Kageras is that of a fortified church studied by Chittick in the 1950s (Chittick 1957,

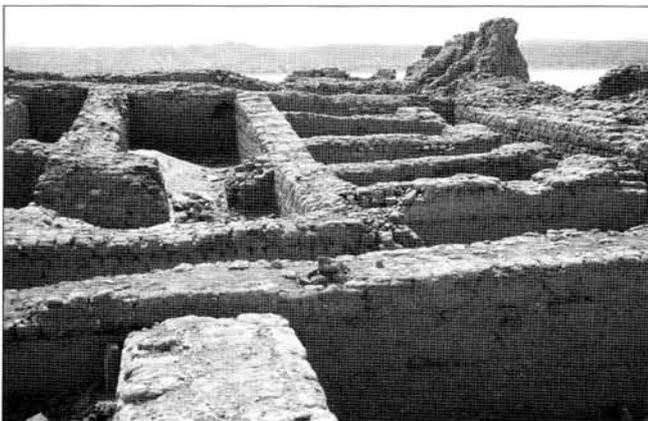


Plate 2. Uronarti: Building A and the south fortress wall looking south east.

42-44) and subsequently by Anthony Mills during the Sudan Antiquities Service survey of the region between Gemai and Dal as part of the High Dam project (Mills 1965, 10; see also Maystre 1970). In the mid 1990s this structure remained unscathed and clearly had never been inundated (Colour plate L). This suggested the possibility that other sites, thought to have been lost forever, may well still survive. However, the level of survival was totally unexpected.

In 2002, we followed the Kerma to Wadi Halfa military railway north to the point where it enters Lake Nubia. From the hilltop adjacent to that point there is a fine view across the reservoir to the imposing remains of the Middle Kingdom fortress of Shelfak (Colour plate LV). Subsequently,



Plate 1. Uronarti: general view over the fort looking north east.

following the track to Kumma we observed, from where that enters the lake, the equally imposing ruins of the contemporary fortress of Uronarti cresting the top of the island it has occupied for nearly 4000 years.

In March 2004, in the company of a film crew from the BBC, the writer had the opportunity to visit Uronarti.¹ Apart from the lowermost part of the River Stair which is now buried under a mass of alluvium (Colour plate LI) the fortress survives presumably as it did into the 1960s (Figure 1, Plates 1-3, Front Cover, Colour plates LI, LIII and LIV). A study of the contour maps published by Otto and Buschendorf-Otto (1993)² suggests that only Uronarti and Shelfak, of the great Middle Kingdom fortresses, survive (Colour plate LII). A photograph in the possession of Francis Geus does show the walls of Mirgissa lapped by the water in 1974 but he failed to find any trace of it earlier this year

¹ I would like to express my thanks to Carla and Francis Geus whose loan of an inflatable boat and outboard motor made our visit to the site possible.

² These were kindly brought to my attention by Dr David Edwards.

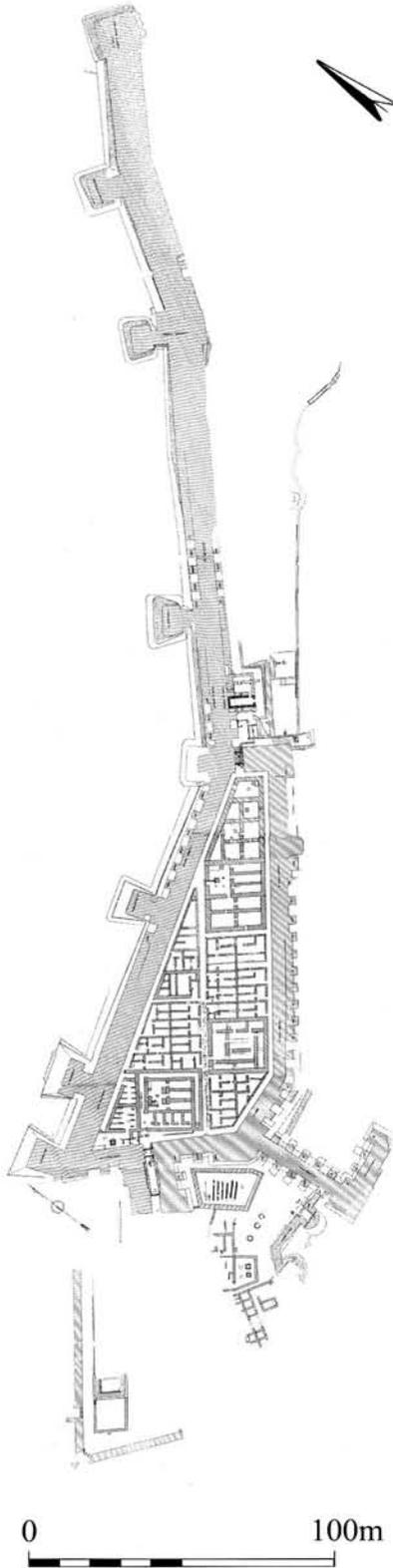


Figure 1. Plan of the Middle Kingdom fortress at Uronarti (after Reisner 1960, plan 1).



Plate 3. The north defences of Uronarti looking north east.

and the very high reservoir levels over the last decade will have destroyed it if it still survived to such a late date.^{3,4}

Uronarti and Shelfak now represent the sole survivors of one of the most impressive chain of fortifications remaining from the ancient world. Although both were excavated between 1924 and 1931 (Dunham 1967; Reisner 1931; 1960; Wheeler 1932), their survival into the 21st century provides a unique opportunity to undertake further research on these magnificent monuments.

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170m level, while on the latter at least the North Gate is at 181m. The former height is confirmed by Planche XIV in Vercoutter 1970.

⁴ According to Pamela Rose, Director of the Egypt Exploration Society excavations at Qasr Ibrim, the highest level reached by the reservoir, in 2000, was c. 181.8m asl. The High Dam Authority has confirmed a level of 181.29m in February 1998. The absolute maximum height of water which can be impounded by the dam is 182m asl (pers. comm. May 2004).

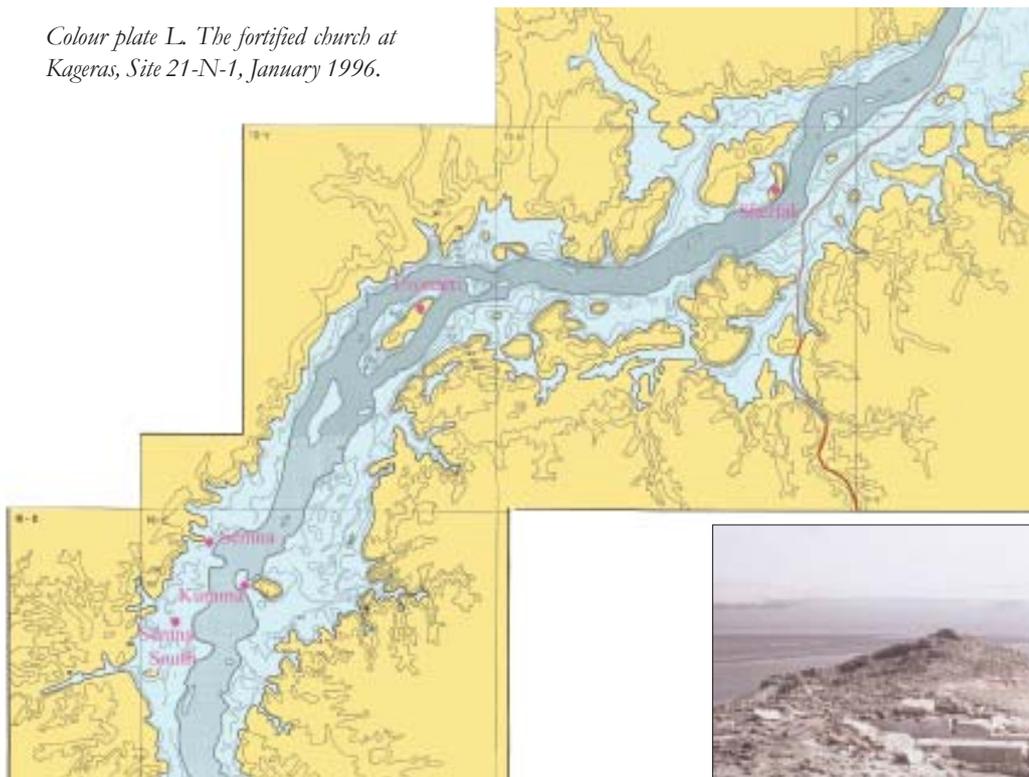
³ There is a considerable discrepancy between the contour levels as marked on the maps published by Otto and Buschendorf-Otto in 1993 to those marked on the detailed plan of Mirgissa (Vercoutter 1965, fig. 1). On the former the fortress appears to lie at around the



Colour plate L. The fortified church at Kageras, Site 21-N-1, January 1996.



Colour plate LI. Uronarti. The site of the river stair and the northern defences of the



Colour plate LII. Lake Nubia between Semna and Shelfak. (after Otto and Buschendorf-Otto 1993, Kartes 19 and 25). Reservoir level indicated to the 180m contour.

Colour plate LIII. Uronarti. The New Kingdom temple and north spur wall.



Colour plate LIV. Uronarti: the east spur wall and southern defences of the fortress.



Colour plate LV. The Middle Kingdom fortress at Shelfak looking north.