

# Kirwan Memorial Lecture

## Gebel Adda Excavations: The Unfinished Story

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Although the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) in Toronto did not send an expedition to Nubia to participate in the UNESCO Nubian Salvage Campaign, it became an unexpected beneficiary of this international operation as the result of the fieldwork of several individuals.<sup>1</sup> The museum's curator, Winifred Needler, worked with Walter Emery at Buhen, a project sponsored by the Egypt Exploration Society and this resulted in the ROM getting 16 objects from Buhen and 27 from Qasr Ibrim. The museum also benefitted from, until 1969, being part of the University of Toronto whose professor, Ronald Williams, participated in the University of Chicago excavations at Semna South. Seven objects from that site assigned to the University of Toronto enriched the ROM collection. However, the bulk of the ROM Nubian material from the UNESCO Salvage Campaign came from the site of Gebel Adda. Several thousand objects assigned to the excavator were brought to Toronto in 1973 as a result of the appointment of Nicholas B. Millet as curator-in-charge of the Egyptian Department of the Royal Ontario Museum. During the Nubian Campaign, Millet was the director of the Cairo office of the American Research Center in Egypt, and with funding provided by the National Geographic Society, he carried out several excavation seasons at Gebel Adda. After finishing his work in Egypt and completing his dissertation on Meroitic inscriptions from Gebel Adda at Yale (Millet 1968) he first taught at Harvard University and later moved to take up the position in Toronto. It is commonly assumed that the Royal Ontario Museum now possesses the full records of the objects recovered at Gebel Adda (see Huber and Edwards 2010, 87), but this is not the case.<sup>2</sup> As Millet explained in his posthumously published paper:

*The writer deeply regrets to have to confess that a great deal of the photographic record of the Expedition has been lost; in*

*the course of moving all the records from Cairo to New Haven, Connecticut, thence to Cambridge, Massachusetts, and subsequently to Toronto, several hundred negatives, including whole rolls of film, have inexplicably disappeared ....*

(Millet 2005, 2)

Apart from the photographic records many other records are also absent from the Toronto archives. In some instances the documents were never delivered to Millet by individual team members. In other cases they were either misplaced or simply taken away by various individuals, or lost in transport. It were these lacunae in the preserved documentation that probably prevented Millet, who was a perfectionist, from writing up the final report on his excavations. Thus, apart from Millet's preliminary reports (Millet 1963; 1964; 1967), his dissertation and subsequent re-analysis of the Meroitic inscriptions (Millet 1968; 2005; also Millet 1994) and a study of the decoration on an unusual Late Christian vessel (Millet 1987), the only publications are the general surveys of the Gebel Adda material in the Royal Ontario Museum (Grzymski 1987; 2010) and the material published by the expedition's architect, Reinhard Huber, in collaboration with David Edwards (Huber and Edwards 2009; 2010; 2012; 2016).<sup>3</sup> A lively account of excavations at Gebel Adda can also be found in a popular book on the Nubian Campaign written by Polish journalist Kazimierz Dziewanowski (Dziewanowski 1967, 253-266). The site of Gebel Adda comprises a townsite (also known as the Citadel), located on a high flat-topped hill (Plate 1), and a series of cemeteries and several churches, located on the surrounding gravel plain to the north, east and south of the Citadel. Gebel Adda, like many other Lower Nubian sites, was mentioned in the reports of such early travellers as Burckhardt, Linant de Bellefonds and Lepsius. Some 30 years before Millet started his excavations, the site was visited by Monneret de Villard who published plans and descriptions of several churches (Monneret de Villard 1935, 176-181). Additional studies of several Gebel Adda churches were carried out by Deichmann and Grossmann who visited the site shortly before the arrival of the American expedition. However, they published their report only at a later date (Deichmann and Grossmann 1988, 53-56). One of the Christian cemeteries and part of the townsite were excavated in 1959 by the University of Alexandria expedition directed by Mustafa el Amir.

Since the Royal Ontario Museum remains the main repository of a large part of the finds, and of the bulk of the surviving documentation, it fell to the author, who succeeded

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank the Sudan Archaeological Research Society for inviting me to present the annual Kirwan Memorial Lecture. I had the honour of meeting Sir Laurence on several occasions. I recall particularly fondly my first conversation with him at the Meroitic Conference in Toronto in September 1977 and our last meeting after the SARS lecture which I presented at the British Museum in September 1991.

<sup>2</sup> The Gebel Adda material in the Royal Ontario Museum was at first kept as a loan but in April 1991 the National Geographic Society graciously donated the entire collection to the ROM with the exception of a few objects taken to the Society's headquarters in Washington.

<sup>3</sup> I would like to thank Reinhard Huber for his generous assistance and advice as well as for his hospitality in Zurich. I am also grateful for comments, reminiscences and observations of several Gebel Adda veterans, namely the late George Scanlon, Wojciech Kolařaj, Horst Jaritz, and Kent Weeks. I would also like to thank the staff of the Nubia Museum in Aswan for answering my queries during my visit there in 2014. Apparently, Mr Martin Minns, Millet's deputy in the first season, has in his possession some documentation from Gebel Adda. Unfortunately, the author was unable to contact Mr Minns.



Plate 1. General view of Gebel Adda and the excavator's camp.

Millet as the chief curator of the Egyptian and Nubian collection, to bring to light information from this very important site. After Millet's death in 2004 work began on registering the objects from Gebel Adda kept in our museum. A report on these essential but basic activities was given at the 2006 Nubian conference in Warsaw (Grzymski 2010). During the last decade the work has progressed slowly but steadily with the help of a number of student volunteers. Moreover, various visiting scholars were offered access to the material and studied parts of the collections. This applies in particular to the amphorae, textiles and leather objects.<sup>4</sup> We were also most fortunate to enlist the assistance of Adam Łajtar, who had studied and published the Old Nubian and Greek inscriptions kept in the ROM (Łajtar 2014a; 2014b). The publication of the leather objects, especially the footwear, is being prepared by Andre Veldemijer. Although Millet kept an object register (Plate 2), the entries were limited mainly to the complete or important objects or groups of objects and contain 3,156 records.<sup>5</sup> The actual number of artefacts is higher as it contains e.g. fragments of Ba-statues, pieces of glass, iron, pottery, etc. While in the paper presented at the 2006 Nubian Congress I listed 2,889 accessioned objects, by 2015 we have been able to double the number of accessioned pieces, and the ROM data base now contains 5,854 entries from Gebel Adda. Thus, while the documentation

<sup>4</sup> The mundane and time consuming work of cataloguing and describing the objects was carried out with the assistance of many students and volunteers, particularly the late Faith Stanley, Emily Cole, Aryn Adatia, Kei Yamamoto, and Carla Mesa-Guzzo. Scholarly analysis of various finds was undertaken, among others, by Dobiesława Baginska, Andre Veldemijer, Pamela Rose, Gilian Vogelsang-Eastwood, and Elsa Yvanez.  
<sup>5</sup> This number, which is the result of recounting of all the records, differs slightly from the 3,118 entries given in my previous publication (Grzymski 2010, 26, table 1).

from the excavations is incomplete, the artefacts themselves offer an insight into the life of this important Lower Nubian site. Moreover, while the tomb cards may be missing, the records in the objects register often enable us to re-assemble the groups of grave goods from individual tombs. Even then, we cannot be sure of the completeness of the assemblage as can be illustrated by an example from Tumulus 151 in Cemetery One. This particular tomb was published by Huber and Edwards and contained 39 objects (Huber and Edwards 2010). When checking this information in the documentation kept in the ROM, the author noticed that there were no records of tombs 150, 151, and 152 in the ROM files and the search for objects from T. 151 in museum storage resulted in

identifying only 28 items from that tomb.

The attempts to reconstruct the tomb groups sometimes produced unexpected results and posed new problems. For example the amphorae found in Cemetery 3, Pyramid 3, have been identified by Bagińska as Late Roman 1 (mid-4<sup>th</sup> century) and Late Roman 3 (4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> century), thus Post-Meroitic, while the Meroitic inscriptions from the tomb suggest an earlier



Plate 2. N. B. Millet documenting the finds on site.

date. Similarly, the Meroitic *dipinti* of Wayekiye published by Millet were dated to *c.* AD 255, but one was written on a Late Roman 7 amphora (ROM 973.24.653; Plate 3) usually dated to the 4<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> century. The amphorae themselves are good indicators of international trade, but other objects such as textiles or glass also point to extensive trade connections between Gebel Adda and the Eastern Mediterranean regions. A piece of celadon ware found in Adda even suggests links to China.

Thus, even with incomplete documentation, the ma-



Plate 3. A Late Roman 7 amphora (ROM 973.24.653) bearing a Meroitic dipinto (© ROM, photo: Bill Pratt).

terial from Gebel Adda represents a true treasure trove for Nubiologists. Some of the objects are unique, like the mysterious item, perhaps a shrine, but also interpreted as a potstand and shaped like a castle with three round towers connected by a central body (field number 66:2:38 = ROM 973.24.940; see Millet 1987, pl. II; Plate 4). It was found in the Late Christian fill of House 337 during the last season together with another “castle-model” vessel (field number 66:1:71; now apparently in the Coptic Museum, Cairo). The round towers, and battlements, are shown in a similar vessel kept in the Egyptian collection of the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna (inventory number 7956) and a piece in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo (CG 7125).<sup>6</sup> The function of these objects is unclear.

Although much quiet work has been done over the last ten years on registering, conserving and assessing the Gebel Adda collection, much work remains. Some of the objects are on display in the Royal Ontario Museum’s Nubian Gallery as well as in the museums of Cairo and Aswan. Nevertheless, the story of Gebel Adda still remains unfinished.

<sup>6</sup> I would like to thank Dr Elfriede Haslauer for informing me about this piece. During my visit to Vienna Dr Regina Hölzl kindly showed me the object. Another incomplete example, supposedly from Medinet Habu, is in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo (Cat. Gen. no. 7125 = Strzygowski 1904, 241).



Plate 4. A mysterious ceramic object, perhaps a shrine, but also interpreted as a potstand shaped like a castle with three round towers connected by a central body (field number 66:2:38 = ROM 973.24.940) (© ROM, photo: Brian Boyle).

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