

**The Homescapes of the Manasir:
A Book Review of Welsby,
Derek A. (ed.), *Archaeology by
the Fourth Nile Cataract. Survey
and Excavations on the Left Bank
of the River and on the Islands
between Amri and Kirbeka*.
*Volume I: Landscape, toponyms
and oral history and the people,
their settlements, architecture
and land use before the Merowe
Dam [=Sudan Archaeological
Research Society Publication
Number 26], London 2023. Pages
248 (thereof, 3 in Arabic) + xxxii.***

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The volume at hand is, as stated in its summary (pp. xxx-xxxii), “the first of several which will present in detail the results of the research undertaken by the Sudan Archaeological Research Society (SARS) as a part of the Merowe Dam Archaeological Salvage Project (MDASP).” By this statement alone, one should welcome most warmly this publication, since it is launching a series of volumes that will make

public the immense data collected during the MDASP since the completion of the project in 2007. SARS has announced five more volumes (p. xxx), i.e. vol. II: Gazetteers of sites discovered; vol. III: The excavations; vol. IV: The artefacts; vol. V: Bioarchaeology; vol. VI: The rock art and rock gongs. The publication of the first volume encourages us to hope that MDASP will not repeat the mistakes of the Aswan High Dam Campaign in the 1960s that, despite the efforts of some missions,¹ remain largely unpublished. We await a third generation of Nubiologists to finish the task of completing those publications. And of course, trusting that SARS will complete their own mission's task, they will have set a good example for those responsible for the other concessions awarded during the salvage campaign.

This project's official birth took place in London in May 2003 during the annual SARS colloquium at the British Museum. The project aimed to salvage the cultural heritage of the lands upstream from the Fourth Cataract, an archaeologically very little-known region that would be flooded by the then largest hydroelectric project in Africa, the so-called Merowe Dam. The idea for a dam in that region was first proposed in 1943, but the plan only materialized half a century later and after a lot of dramatic political changes in Sudan, as well as technical and logistical updates to the original scheme. Appeals for salvage campaigns were first launched by the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums (NCAM) in 1988, but the first concessions were awarded only in 1996 to the Gdansk Archaeological Museum Expedition (GAME) and three years later to SARS. By 2003, twelve missions were awarded concessions and the entire area to be flooded, from the dam construction site to the island of Mograt, became the focus of archaeological work in Sudan for the rest of the first decade of the 21st century. The editor of the volume, Derek Welsby, head of the SARS mission at the MDASP, describes the history of the project in the first chapter of the volume (pp. 1–14).

Like all salvage projects, MDASP encompassed the study of the widest possible span of cultural horizons and had a multidisciplinary character. The datasets collected, analyzed, and interpreted were immense and the effort undoubtedly formidable. Led by Derek Welsby of SARS and Salaheldin Mohamed Ahmed of NCAM — who also authored the volume's preface — the MDASP team deserves high praise for successfully navigating daunting logistical and research challenges.

1 The results of the Scandinavian Joint Expedition are the only complete; Adams has done tremendous work with Ceramics, Christian Architecture, Kulubnarti, Meinarti, Qasr Ibrim, and the West Bank Survey; and finally, there are fourteen volumes published by the Oriental Institute Nubian Expedition. For the latest complete bibliography about the Aswan High Dam Campaign, see Carruthers, *Flooded Pasts*, 2022, pp. 286–310.

The present reviewer has worked with different missions in the frame of the MDASP (see, for example, Plate 1.9 in p. 11 of the volume) and knows from first-hand experience the difficulties that the missions faced. Reflecting on those years spent working against the clock, one realizes we weren't just documenting the end of traditional life at the Fourth Cataract; we were witnessing the final moments of the landscape exactly as it was when we first arrived in the early 2000s. This is particularly true for the Dar el Manasir, the territory of the tribe most affected by the dam building. Despite appeals from the Manasir authorities to oppose the Sudanese dictatorship during the MDASP period, the project's leadership refused to intervene. Instead, they accused local inhabitants of attempting to instrumentalize archaeologists as shields in their struggle to remain on their ancestral lands.² Perhaps the themes of this opening volume ("Landscape, toponyms and oral history and the people, their settlements, architecture and land use before the Merowe Dam"), focusing on the life that the international multidisciplinary expeditions encountered in the Fourth Cataract, can be seen as an expression of regret for what was irreversibly lost.

Nonetheless, thanks to the MDASP not all was lost. Testimony is born by publications like the volume under review here. The datasets collected concern fields as diverse as archaeology, architecture, geology, anthropology, zoology, botany, ethnography, linguistics, and all sister disciplines with a focus primarily on the past (for a complete overview of the contents, see the Appendix to this review). Given this breadth of research, it is difficult to review the scientific rigor of this suite of chapters in depth. It is unwise to claim expertise on all of the fields that a volume such as this one covers. There is, however, space for discussing the choices in the way that these studies are presented. Furthermore, half of *Archaeology by the Fourth Nile Cataract* focuses on "The Homescapes of the Manasir." This exploration of one of the region's most sensitive cultural losses is particularly timely for this volume of Dotawo, which is dedicated specifically to the theme of "Nubian homescapes."

But to begin with, the volume's first two chapters after Welsby's introduction deal with the natural landscape that was lost. In Chapter 2, Pawel Wolf (director of the Anglo-German expedition working in the most downstream stretches of the SARS concession), Baldur Gabriel, Robert Bussert, and Ronny Schomacker describe "The landscape of the Fourth Nile Cataract and its geomorphologic evolution" (pp. 15 — 45); while Arnaud Malterer provides a summary of the master thesis that he wrote in Chapter 3 titled "Merowe Dam Project. Land use and Vegetation in the Flooding Area of a planned

2 See Hafsaas-Tsakos, "Ethical Implications of Salvage Archaeology and Dam Building."

Hydrodam in Northern Sudan” (pp. 46 — 78). Both chapters are very rich in information and set in place the environment upon which humans developed the cultures that were hosted in the Fourth Cataract of the Nile region. The scientific accuracy of the descriptions is impressive in both chapters. There is, however, a critical point to be made about parts of Chapter 2, namely that the terminology is so dense that it becomes difficult to follow the argument. Therefore, the importance of Chapter 2 for non-specialists might be restricted to its overall descriptions and major conclusions, which are nevertheless much more accessible to such readers through the text authored by Malterer. This observation does not diminish the value of Wolf et al’s contribution, but it raises a question as to the target readership of such a publication. If this should be decided on the basis of Chapter 2, then the record is to be kept for those that in the future will need it for further studies on relevant fields; it acts as metadata to an archive. But is it necessary in the 21st century with the immensity of digital solutions to choose the vector of a printed book for such a task? One must not lose sight that a variety of readers, including (primarily?) those English-speaking deracinated locals, long for a such a “book” to remember their “paradise lost.” Conversely, the goal of such publications may simply be to make data available to the specialized public, and not to create synthetic, edited overviews of topics based on the data accumulated by the researchers and interpreted by the given author(s) and editor(s) so as to be interesting for a wider — but knowledgeable — audience. Perhaps this would be a legitimate expectation after the 15 years that it took from the end of the MDASP project to the publication of the volume. The present reviewer feels that the editor of the volume *did not have the time* to choose the second option but wanted this first volume “out.” The contributors had to submit their work within the publication’s deadlines; this time pressure is felt elsewhere in the volume too, primarily in the many typographic mistakes and some unnecessary contradictions. The most striking example of the latter is that Volume VI on “The rock art and rock gongs,” which was announced in p. xxx in the Summary of the volume, is not included in the description of the SARS’ publication of the project in p. 12.

Paradoxically, a similar feeling of wanting to publish the material as quickly as possible is visible in the presentation of images. No less than 598 Tables, Plates and Figures have been printed in color! Kudos to the typesetters, printers and funders, but the density of this material has caused the dimensions of the images to shrink and makes it impossible to see the details of half of them without a magnifying glass. This issue could have been avoided with a more thought-out selection (hence the argument above) or by the creation

of a larger volume. The price difference between the printed and PDF versions is substantial (65£ vs 16£³) and those who choose to purchase the printed version should at least be compensated by the quality of the printed texts and images.

It remains in any case a desideratum to find one day all the datasets from the MDASP available online through a central digital repository uniting the various local physical archives that the expeditions to the Fourth Cataract have created. Such repositories are always of great importance for the dissemination of the knowledge acquired, and especially now they have become critical for the achievement of this goal due to the war that devastates Sudan and its infrastructures. Finally, they are also necessary for appreciating the contribution of Chapter 5 by M. Jalal Hashim on “Toponymy in the Fourth Cataract” (pp. 89—126). The author has assembled 308 toponyms from the SARS concession area but laments the fact that similar surveys have not been conducted in other parts of the flooded region. Even if this statement is not entirely correct, (if one looks for example into the work conducted by the Humboldt University Nubian Expedition (HUNE),⁴) it is nevertheless true that it will be a tremendous task to retrieve the relevant information from the datasets of the various missions. This information is undoubtedly registered, but apparently neither systematized nor standardized according to the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names that Jalal Hashim respects (see p. 89). The author also calls for action with what remains from Manasir memory through interviews with the resettled population for as long as they remember the landscape they were forced to abandon (see p. 91). All of this data needs a digital repository that will assemble, preserve and disseminate the acquired through the MDASP knowledge. The work by Jalal Hashim may serve as a prototype for the studies to be conducted in the missions’ archives and among the Manasir.

Of equal value are his efforts to assemble “the oral history of the Manasir,” the title of his other contribution in the volume, where it is placed as chapter 4 (pp. 79—88). Against the grain of etic approaches to the past of the Fourth Cataract region, inevitably due to the focus on archaeological research conducted by foreign archaeological missions, the study by Jalal Hashim has a double advantage: first, it gives voice to the local population before their resettlement, creating a much-wanted emic perspective on the Manasir past; and it accommodates the traditional means of history-making among the peoples of the Middle Nile region, namely through oral narratives and a discourse based on genealogies. An

3 <https://www.archaeopress.com/Archaeopress/Products/9781803274959> (last accessed December 2025).

4 See for example, Haberlah, “Cultural Landscape of Dar al-Manasir.”

important aspect of this approach is that it also moves the women of the region from the backstage of research on the Sudanese past and into the forefront of life in the Dar al Manasir, recognizing their role as stakeholders of the tribal memory, as well as of traditional Islamic values in both village and family life. His concluding remarks contain the most acute political statements in the entire volume concerning the traumatic experience of resettlement — also in comparison to the earlier experience of the Nubians resettled due to the flooding of Lower Nubia in the 1960s — and cautiously praising what he calls “the Local Option” Manasir, who decided to follow the line of the artificial lake created behind the Merowe Dam, changing their subsistence from farmers and pastoralists to fishermen and traders of their catch, while remaining close to their flooded ancestral lands.

These two studies create an excellent backdrop for the three last chapters of the book, which turn the attention to the homes, both as architectural creations and landscapes where the everyday life of the Manasir evolved.

Chapter 6 is authored by Rebecca Bradley and Nuha Abdel Hafiz Abdel Aziz (pp. 127–159). Its title “Dar el-Arab Fourth Cataract: 2004 Ethnographic Studies” describes its geographical focus (the most downstream area of the SARS concession and base of the Anglo-German expedition lead by Pawel Wolf) and the purpose of fieldwork conducted in 2004, namely, to collect ethnographic information among the local people. These “ethnographic studies” open with “Household studies” where they describe the architecture and the partition of activity-areas inside the homesteads of three villages. They continue with the description of various everyday activities taking place outside the homesteads, like fishing, hunting using traps, masonry, pottery, metal-working, grass-cutting, and the agricultural practice of *sallūka* (pp. 127–154). They document folkloristic traditions (pp. 154–156), where religious beliefs are also part of the material presented. And they record some local histories about the origins of people and settlements, as well as a set of customs, particularly linked with women’s activities (pp. 156–159). These ethnographic studies situate the life of the Manasir beyond the architectural shells of the houses, offering insights into their lost homescapes and mental geographies. In this sense, Chapter 6 would have been better placed after chapters 7 and 8, which focus on the architectural creations, their relationship with the natural environment, and the social communities that they accommodate. But the placement of this chapter here is perhaps because it constitutes a fine complement to Jalal Hashim’s chapters with their equally ethnographic focus — especially if one compares the oral

histories, the origins of the Manasir, and a certain focus on women's role, that both Bradley/Abdel Aziz and Jalal Hashim preserve for posterity.

Chapter 7, authored by the architect Nadejda Reshetnikova, is titled "Modern Vernacular Architecture and Settlements Organization at the Fourth Nile Cataract between Dar el-Arab and Dar el-Waraaq" (pp. 160—189). Reshetnikova not only provides excellent architectural plans and section drawings of the households she investigates, but also presents the engineering methods and tools, discusses the design, analyzes the development of the settlements, and contextualizes her information against an understanding of socio-economic differentiation among the inhabitants of the villages she visited.

Finally, chapter 8 by Frances Welsh is about "Architecture and life in villages of the Fourth Nile Cataract in the region of al Tیرهف" (pp. 190—238). This chapter is a continuation of Reshetnikova's in terms of the geography it covers moving upstream from Dar el-Arab, while it functions in a complementary manner since Welsh also exhaustively presents the different types of buildings, their function in the settlements, and the way they are placed inside the settlements. Welsh is especially interested in the way these buildings are adapted to the natural environment and the possibilities or constraints this imposes upon the various alternatives available to the locals.

These three chapters (6, 7, and 8) are priceless records of the Manasir homescapes that are lost forever. They preserve for posterity the cultural landscape of several villages both on the mainland and on the islands through descriptive texts, good drawings, rich photographic documentation, and some valuable societal analyses. They are complemented by published studies on modern villages of the Manasir further upstream, especially those conducted in the framework of the HUNE concession.⁵ They can provide comparanda for studies of vernacular architecture in other areas of the Middle Nile region, and thus insights into the cultural particularities of the Manasir, their technical know-hows, their dependence on external impulses, and their social organization and stratification. And last but not least, they are repositories of the local memories of life in the Fourth Cataract, either for the Manasir who resettled or those who went for "the Local Option."

The volume would have profited from a more thorough copy-editing process, avoiding variations between title and sentence

5 Eigner, "Kirbekan — ein Dorf der Manasir am 4. Nilkatarakt"; idem, "Kirbekan — Ein Dorf der Manasir am 4. Nilkatarakt (Teil II)"; idem, "Kirbekân: A Village of the Manasir"; Haberlah and von dem Bussche, "Das Dorf Atoyah auf der Insel Sherari. Wandel der Siedlungsstruktur im Dar al-Manasir."

cases or orthographies of Arabic words using transliterations of different sorts. Perhaps it could also have profited from a different organization of the chapters moving from the context of the natural landscape to the settlement patterns and the toponymy, then presenting the various architectural solutions adopted by the Manasir, and having thus created the scenery for staging the Manasir people's every-day activities, genealogies, memories and beliefs. While the first volume of the SARS activities in the frame of the MDASP leaves the reader with the desire for a better editing hand, it constitutes a point of reference for the future of the studies deriving from the controversial "Archaeology by the Fourth Nile Cataract."

Appendix: The contents of the volume

- ▶ Preface. Salahedin Mohamed Ahmed
- ▶ Chapter 1: Merowe Dam Archaeological Salvage Project. The SARS Amri to Kirbekan Survey 1999-2007. Derek A. Welsby
- ▶ Chapter 2: The Landscape of the Fourth Nile Cataract and Its Geomorphologic Evolution. Pawel Wolf, Baldur Gabriel, Robert Bussert, and Ronny Schomacker
- ▶ Chapter 3: Merowe Dam Project. Land Use and Vegetation in the Flooding Area of a Planned Hydrodam in Northern Sudan. Arnaud Malterer
- ▶ Chapter 4: The Oral History of the Manasir. M. Jalal Hashim
- ▶ Chapter 5: Toponymy in the Fourth Cataract. M. Jalal Hashim
- ▶ Chapter 6: Dar el-Arab Fourth Cataract: 2004 Ethnographic Studies. Rebecca Bradley and Nuha Abdel Hafiz Abdel Aziz
- ▶ Chapter 7: Modern Vernacular Architecture and Settlements Organization at the Fourth Nile Cataract between Dar el-Arab and Dar el-Waraaq. Nadejda Reshetnikova
- ▶ Chapter 8: Architecture and Life in Villages of the Fourth Nile Cataract in the Region of al Tiref. Frances Welsh
- ▶ Chapter 9: Bibliography for Volume I

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