Nubian Homescapes: An Introduction

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This volume goes to press as a war once again threatens homelife in Sudan. This conflict, which began in April 2023, has created the largest internally displaced population in the world — well over one million at this stage, although firm numbers are difficult to come by. In addition to displacement, some communities, such as Darfur, face genocide. And yet this conflict has escaped international attention and outrage. This war is not remote to the individuals who contributed to this volume, some of whom were themselves displaced by warfare. Others search for information to support friends and colleagues who remain in Sudan. And still others give us optimism while they work with diaspora comunities to heal the trauma of war, displacement, and genocide. Themes of homescape and displacement weave through these contemporary experiences, demonstrating the continued relevance of these topics today.

This volume takes a long-term perspective on Nubian houses and households to explore the distinctive material, visual, and phenomenological worlds of Nubian homescapes. Nubia extends from the area around Aswan in Egypt to the contemporary town of Debba in Sudan, a region that roughly corresponds to the area between the First and Fourth Cataracts along the Nile. Nubians have existed as a distinct ethno-linguistic group since ancient times.[1]

Contributors to this volume of *Dotawo* explore homelife during periods when there were changes in the political and social organization in Nubia. By exploring a range of case studies that include objects, bodies, households, floral remains, workspaces, houses, and art we aim to understand how ordinary people made and continue to make their homes and livelihoods during periods of systemic change. In the process, we consider how these same

1 For a basic geographic and temporal introduction to Nubia, see Janmyr, "The Nubians of Egypt: A Displaced Population."

sources reveal the power of everyday activities to transform broad social organizations from the bottom up. We also explore how some ancient social practices in Nubia might live on and continue to structure life in the present.

Many of our contributors have explored homescapes creatively, remaining attentive to the multisensory, embodied, and intersectional ways that people experienced the home. We have encouraged these creative approaches because they capture the essence of homescapes better than academic prose alone. For this reason, this volume of *Dotawo* includes photographic essays, artwork, and fiction in addition to sociological, anthropological, archaeological, and linguistic approaches to the topic.

This introduction situates the themes that structure the volume — homescapes, resettlement, and the *longue durée*. A brief history of the Nubian diaspora provides insights into this step change in Nubian lifeways and suggests comparisons for how contemporary displaced communities can move forward. And, finally, I introduce the twelve contributions to this volume, which range from ancient to contemporary Nubian society and span a range of disciplines — archaeology, art, sociology, history, linguistics, and cultural anthropology among them.

Homescapes

People often define *home* as a place where one lives permanently, usually as a member of a family or household. But home is more than a physical place and the people contained within it. Home is also where people tend to feel most at ease because they are familiar with the sounds, smells, and patterns of life within and beyond house walls.

Meanwhile, *homescapes* may be defined as the physical or symbolic landscapes of one's home or homeland. In this way, a homescape may be as palpable as a house and its surrounding environs. Or it might be more ethereal. For example, an individual's accent might evoke feelings of home and inclusion to a native speaker who hears them speak, as Asmaa Taha describes in her contribution to this volume.

Tim Ingold invented the term *taskscape* as a play on the word *landscape*. In his words, "just as a landscape is an array of features, so — by analogy — is the taskscape an array of related activities."[2] We define our own term *homescape* in a similar manner — as an array of features related to the home. A homescape, then, is a socially constructed space of human activity, understood as having spatial, conceptual, or emotional boundaries and delimitations.

2 Ingold, "The Temporality of the Landscape."

Central to Ingold's definition is that the taskscape is a perpetual process rather than a static or immutable entity. We, too, consider the malleability of homescape to be a key component of its definition. Concepts of homescape thus contain a dichotomy within them — they rely on both deep histories of connection as well as fluid processes of formation and reformation. People actively make their homescapes as they go about their everyday lives. They forge a home from the land, imbuing it with memory, meaning, and significance.[3] This agency within everyday life, even amid circumstances of forced relocation, is at the forefront of many contributions to this volume.

Diasporas, whether voluntary or enforced, rupture concepts of *home* and *homescape*. The dispersion of a people from their original homeland creates scattered communities that combine their homeland with their new place of residence. These amalgamations between homeland and new home are complicated by the circumstances surrounding the mainspring of relocation.

People who have been forced to leave their homeland due to war, persecution, or natural disaster cannot make a new home so easily. Displaced people, and especially those who are displaced within the borders of their own country (known as Internally Displaced Persons or IDPs), are among the most vulnerable people in the world. They are often trapped in a protracted temporary housing status for years or even decades. Although they remain within the borders of their nation state, they rarely receive the assistance they require to make a new, stable home. Instead, many continue to flee from one place to another in a neverending quest for adequate shelter, water, food, and medical care. This situation describes the experiences of displaced persons who remain in Sudan at the moment this volume goes to press.

Displaced persons are usually severed from their original vocations, communities, and even families. In such precarious conditions, these individuals are left to forge new identities with each new residence — each locale they encounter offers them new opportunities to pursue while losing out others.

The hope that Khalid Shatta offers with his artwork, outreach activities, and long-term perspectives, helps assuage some of the hopelessness that may arise when considering these circumstances. His painting (Figure 12.14) depicts a crowd of people who have fled the war in Sudan for Cairo. Their minds appear to be preoccupied with their homes and the war they have left behind. This disembodied rumination on homescape captures the essence of

3 Alice Yao described this process for the people who were relocated to live along the Great Wall in Han China. See Yao, "The Great Wall as Destination? Archaeology of Migration and Settlers under the Han Empire."

forced resettlement and diaspora more succinctly than any words I can put down here.

Even those who move their home under less violent circumstances have to cope with the ruptures of making a new home in a different physical space as Amany Sadiq, Maher Habbob, Menna Agha, and Armgard Goo-Grauer describe in their articles. It also involves confronting linguistic differences and even offensive stereotypes, as Asmaa Taha explains. There is hope as well as struggle when finding a new place in the world, as Khalid Shatta recounted during the course of our interview. Although far from Sudan, Shatta explained how feelings of home have never evaporated for him. Instead, visions of homescape endure and adapt, allowing individuals to forge new senses of self and home as they remake their lives.

Nubian Homelife and the Nubian Diaspora

Concepts of home, homelife, and homescape have been present since ancient times, as Hamad Hamdeen, Kate Fulcher, Sarah Shrader, and Elsa Yvanez demonstrate in their contributions to this volume. It is challenging to identify emotional and conceptual relations to home in the material residues of past lives. These contributors tackled this challenge by using a wide range of methodological and theoretical vantages.

Meanwhile, the Nubian diaspora has complicated easy encapsulations of early modern and contemporary Nubian homescapes. The Nubian diaspora is itself complex. While many Nubians were involuntarily displaced from their homes, others dispersed of their own volition in pursuit of opportunities beyond their homeland. This is certainly true of the Nubians of southern Egypt. Many Egyptian Nubian men had sought employment outside of Nubia for centuries, returning to their homeland only periodically. In her photo essay, Anne Jennings discusses this traditional Egyptian Nubian economy prior to the erection of the first dam along the Nile in 1903 as well as the impact of this and other modifications over the years.

The raising of the High Dam in the 1960s led to significant changes in Nubian homescapes. That construction completely flooded the area between the First and Second Cataracts, and forced approximately 50,000 Nubians to resettle in the thirty-three villages built to accommodate them near the town of Kom Ombo. Several villages near the town of Aswan were not in danger of inundation and so the villagers were not removed.

The new villages near Kom Ombo were a shock and a disappointment to those who resettled there. Nevertheless, they did

their best to recreate their old environment, homes, and lifeways. Some traditions survived, while others shifted, as Menna Agha, Argard Goo-Grauer, Maher Habbob, and Amany Sadeq describe in their contributions to the volume. Anne M. Jennings also reminds us that significant changes took place even among those who were able to remain in their villages near Awan. Homescapes are always in a state of flux, even though they are deeply entangled with endurance and memory.

Many Nubians, both male and female, are now living internationally in countries such as the United States (especially in New York and Virginia), England (especially in London), France, (especially in Paris), Switzerland, and Germany, as well as in Egypt (namely, in Cairo and Alexandria in addition to the Kom Ombo region).[4] Some of these communities struggle against racism and pressures to conform to local cultures at the cost of preserving their own lifeways. Others have identified new opportunities and advantages unavailable to them in their homeland. Past homescapes continue to haunt how individuals perceive and act in their new settings.

Contributions

The contributors to this volume approach homescapes from broad temporal, geographic, and disciplinary standpoints. Despite these differences, common themes arose among the contributions, such as the value of the surrounding landscape in creating homescapes (e.g. Sadeq, Tsakos, Fulcher, Hamad) and the need to describe and interact with the home creatively in the form of words or images (Fulcher, Shatta, Jennings, Goo-Grauer). Given the rich connections between them, these papers could be grouped in any number of ways. Here, however, I decided to focus on themes of craftwork, displacement, and the *longue durée* since they repeated in so many of the contributions.

Craftwork and labor

Many contributors explored craftwork and labor, demonstrating how work helps to define and make a homescape. Hamad Hamdeen delved into the plant remains found in the mudbricks used to construct Christian sites in Nubia. Brickmakers added these plant remains and other debris — collectively known as chaff — to mudbricks to increase their strength and durability. These plant

4 For an overview of the four main waves of Nubian settlement in Cairo from 1902 until 1964, see Youssef and Madbouly, "Displaced People and Migrants in Cairo."

remains are small, sometimes invisible to the naked eye. And yet they contain within them a wealth of information about the materials people used in and around the home. These remains shed light on pharmacy, food and drink consumption, home construction, and fodder, among other aspects of everyday life. Hamdeen makes a strong argument for making mudbrick analysis a mainstay of archaeological research through his careful analysis of four significant Christian sites in the Mahas region of Sudan.

While bioarchaeology has been a mainstay of archaeological research since its inception, Sarah Schrader takes a unique vantage on human remains. Using bioarchaeological methods, Schrader demonstrates the frequency with which individuals assumed a squatting position. People squatted while working — cooking, cleaning, taking care of children — as well as when they drank tea or chatted with a neighbor. In other words, ancient Nubians spent a lot of time in a squatting position. Schrader's approach offers us a peak into the everyday postures people assumed in and around their homes in antiquity.

Elsa Yvanez delves into the world of work in her exploration of textile activities in Sudan during the Meroitic Period (*ca.* 300 BCE — 400 CE), a time when Meroë served as the capital of the Kingdom of Kush. She draws together the surviving material signatures of weaving — spindle whorls, and loom weights most particularly — to understand where and how people incorporated textile work into village and city life during the Meroitic Period. Her analysis reveals that this craftwork took place in domestic spaces as well as more formalized multi-use industrial areas. She found that textile production was ubiquitous, taking place in, around, and outside of the home. This result underscores the centrality of textiles to the social, economic and work lives of people living in Meroitic Nubia.

Finally, Kate Fulcher explores painting materials used in ancient and contemporary Nubia as a way of accessing the complex entanglements of everyday life. She explains how people see the landscapes around them as palettes for decorating their homes. She found ancient evidence of color-harvesting in the form of raw pigment lumps, the paintings themselves, and the residue found on grinding stones. Fulcher's ethnoarchaeological research compliments this material evidence since informants provide insights into the decisions and practices linked to acquiring and using pigment to decorate their homes. Fulcher gathers together this suite of evidence into a fictional narrative aimed at making past lives palpable and accessible.

Resettlement

Feelings of displacement, due to architectural, social, and linguistic differences pulse throughout the contributions that describe Nubian resettlement in the wake of the Aswan High Dam construction. Although there had been dams and diasporas before the final raising of the dam, this last raising served as a key turning point for Nubian homescapes.[5]

Menna Agha explores the deep disappointment many Nubian settlers felt when they beheld the unfamiliar houses offered to them in what they called *at-Tahjīr,* the "place of displacement." The Egyptian State refers to *at-Tahjīr* as "New Nubia," a considerably more optimistic term that evades common Nubian sentiment. Evasion can be found throughout the resettlement process, as Agha describes in her essay. The Egyptian state prized optimization and productivity in their house designs rather than understanding the home as the fulcrum of everyday Nubian life. They left the views of Nubian women, who were deeply involved in placemaking, completely out of their planning. Agha shows us how villagers refashioned these prefabricated domestic spaces in a "Nubian way" once they took over the barren houses offered to them.

Maher Habbob delves into a comparison of architectural and landscape features before and after the resettlement. He does so by looking closely at the legal, economic, social, and architectural upheavals that took place at the village of Tūmās wa ʿĀfya during the various constructions of the Low Dam and High Dam at Aswan. The resettlement of this village resulted in a radically different environment and alien houses — neither of which accounted for traditional Nubian social understandings of homescapes. It was left to the villagers to remodel their new houses to make them into homes.

Amany Abdelsadeq Sayed Hussein explores how the people of Abu Hor, a Kenuz Nubian village, remade their homes and homeland in the aftermath of their displacement in December 1964. In doing so, she also examines her grandfather's house. Sadeq's interest in her family's experience of resettlement and making a home resonates with her theoretical framework about senses of home. Her work underscores the importance of the social and emotional components of homescapes as well as the materiality of place and landscape.

Although these individuals creatively remodeled domestic space to better suit traditional Nubian ways of dwelling in their new homes, some traditions inevitably fell by the wayside. Armgard Goo-

5 The High Dam (*as-Sad al-ʿĀli*) was completed in 1970. The reservoir reached its full capacity six years later.

Grauer's photographic essay of bridal rooms explores one of these traditional practices that was lost with the resettlement. Bridal rooms had served as a form of female self-expression at a critical time in a Nubian woman's life course. Women carefully selected, created, and combined objects and images in a single room as a hypnotic symbol of their new roles as wives in a household. Considerable emotional and creative labor went into the creation of these rooms and yet the practice ended abruptly with the resettlement of Nubians into prefabricated houses. These houses had no space for such rooms and Goo-Grauer describes how female decorative ambitions refocused onto furnishings more commonplace across Egypt more broadly.

Meanwhile, the photographic essay by Anne M. Jennings reminds us that not all Egyptian Nubians were resettled. Jennings shows us the houses Nubians still occupy in the villages around Aswan. Although these houses have deep roots in the Nubian community, they too have been refashioned over the years to accommodate the changing needs and desires of their occupants. For example, in the five years between her 1981 and 1986 visits to Gubba, Jennings witnessed the transition from traditional materials such as mud brick and mud plaster, to stone and tin. This change, while less comfortable, allowed families to add a second storey to their house, which is itself another departure from traditional Nubian house design. By 2007, these Gubba houses had acquired tile floors, air conditioning, glass windows, and modern appliances in kitchens and bathrooms. These homes offer a powerful account of incremental change driven by individuals in contrast to the ruptures experienced by the uprooted Nubian communities described by other contributors in this volume.

Finally, Asmaa Taha's article examines how Egyptians characterize Nubians by the way they speak Arabic, their mannerisms, their dress, and other visual signifiers. Egyptian media, particularly in the form of accessible soap operas and songs, fuel negative stereotypes of Nubians. Taha spoke with Native Nobiin speakers to understand their perception of these visual and linguistic stereotypes. Her informants offered a diversity of views on these stereotypes — age and gender seemed to have had critical influences on how they understood these representations.

Longue durée

In his review of Derek Welsby's edited volume, *Archaeology by the Fourth Nile Cataract,* Alexandros Tsakos takes up two themes that pulse through many of the contributions to this volume — the *longue durée* of Nubian homescapes and the loss of homelands. Archaeological work in the region of the Fourth Cataract, like much

of Nubia, came into being as a salvage expedition. Such expeditions have advantages and disadvantages — they take an enviably wide-ranging cultural and disciplinary scope, but are painfully limited by time and resources. Tsakos describes how these limits are noticeable in both the scope of the research conducted and in the eventual volume. Tsakos dwells in particular on the homescapes of the Manasir, which were documented before their ancestral lands were flooded. He makes a strong argument for careful documentation and sensitive publication given the ruptures created by this indescribable loss.

Finally, in my interview with Khalid Shatta, he often took a long-term perspective on Sudan, on his artwork, and on himself. He mused on the enduring issues in Sudan that create repeated patterns of loss and resilience over the course of thousands of years. Shatta's reflection on his own life as a Sudanese expatriate illustrates the emotional complexity of homescapes and diaspora. His present home allows his mind and body the freedom to produce art in a way that was not possible for him in Sudan. Meanwhile, Sudan remains deeply embedded in his artwork — individuals from his hometown, emotions about the current war, and symbols of both ancient and contemporary life appear and reappear throughout his works. While his art does not avoid undercurrents of violence, unrest, or displacement, it is also beautiful, haunting, and even comforting. Here, Shatta shows us how one might harmonize between the before and after of the homescapes that have been ruptured by war, resettlement, and everyday change.

A Home for *Nubian Homescapes*

When approaching a topic like Nubian homescapes, it is necessary to tear down the walls between disciplines and genres. The complex emotional and material terrain of homescapes requires art, photographic essays, fiction, and a suite of academic approaches to navigate it. *Dotawo: A Journal of Nubian Studies* is an appropriate home for these intertwining perspectives. *Dotawo* has been open access since its launch in 2014. It welcomes contributions from a diverse range of disciplines, languages, and genres. I cannot imagine publishing a volume such as this one anywhere else, both because I firmly believe that accessibility is an ethical issue and because most journals remained siloed by discipline and genre. I am grateful to *Dotawo* for making this volume possible, to the contributors for pursuing unique vantages on Nubian homescapes, and to the people of Sudan who are on our minds and in our hearts now more than ever.

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