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# THE SPHERES AND CHALLENGES OF HERITAGE CONSERVATION IN THE SUDAN

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## Abstract

Current concerns that arise from the threat and risk to archaeological sites and remains are focused on the challenges presented by proposed dams, the impact of gold mining activities, the extension of agricultural schemes and the devastating effects of excessive irrigation. These phenomena brought on by political, social and economic change need to be addressed and resolved at a political level. Here, archaeologists must assume responsibility in line with Bruce Trigger's claim that 'intellectual integrity requires an awareness of the social and political conditions in which archaeology is practiced'. However, this should not prevent archaeologists from concentrating on the essential tasks of heritage conservation. This implies at the same time the preservation and conservation of archaeological sites and monuments and the permanent control and care of archaeological objects in museum and university collections. The objects held temporarily by foreign missions are not exempt from this either.

While the main emphasis of such efforts should be on the protection and restoration of archaeological heritage, a holistic conservation approach would also encompass the meticulous documentation of the archaeological heritage; i.e. the production of knowledge, as well as its dissemination and mediation. On the basis of a few selected examples, this paper investigates how the proposed holistic approach to heritage might be adapted by archaeologists working in the Sudan, but also how it might be integrated into larger social structures and ongoing social practices.

## Archaeological Remains

Archaeological remains – in Sudan as elsewhere – are steadily being destroyed by a number of mechanisms. These mechanisms include both natural forces such as wind and water erosion as well as human interference through urban development, road building and farming. In the Sudan, proposed dams, the impact of gold mining activities, the large-scale extension of agricultural schemes and the devastating effects of exces-

sive irrigation further endanger the country's archaeological heritage.

Whilst the natural threats resulting from climatic change must be addressed on a global scale, the phenomena brought on by national social and economic change need to be addressed and resolved at a political level. Here, archaeologists must assume responsibility in line with Bruce Trigger's claim that '[i]ntellectual integrity requires an awareness of the social and political conditions in which archaeology is practiced ...' (Trigger 1994, 345).

However, here, I want to focus on a different, lower – but no less important – level of agency or decision-making by setting out practical problems of heritage preservation and conservation in the field of archaeology and cultural resource management in the Sudan.

## Heritage Preservation

At this level of analysis, the emphasis is placed both on the administrative steps taken by state agencies and on the role and responsibility of the foreign archaeological missions.

In his 1979 article on the future of Sudanese archaeology, Negm-el-Din Mohammed Sherif – then *Commissioner for Archaeology* – strongly defended the idea that the entire global community has to take responsibility for the exploration and preservation of Sudan's cultural heritage and encouraged foreign expeditions to come and work in the country:

'... the Sudanese believe that the cultural heritage of any society is not only the property of that particular society but of the whole human community regardless of nationality, political creed or religious belief. Thus they hold that uncovering and preserving cultural heritage in any part of the world should be considered as the duty of all mankind. Bearing this conviction in mind the Sudanese welcome foreign archaeological expeditions to work in the Sudan' (Mohammed Sherif 1979, 25-26).

## Heritage Conceptions

Mohammed Sherif's cosmopolitan approach to heritage<sup>1</sup> has been *retained* by his successors in the *Sudan Antiquities Service* and in the *National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums*. This approach is mirrored in the inscription of Gebel Barkal and the sites of the Napatan Region and the archaeological sites of the Island of Meroe as *World Heritage Sites* (2003 and 2011), as well as by the inclusion of the sites of Kerma, Old Dongola and Suakin in the *Tentative List* (1994). Legal and institutional protection of archaeological sites is the first and most important requirement for the conservation of heritage sites.

From a global perspective, however, a gradual shift from the conservation of only tangible features (UNESCO 1972 Convention) to the promotion and safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO 2003 Convention) has been observed since the 1990s. This shift from what might be called a monumentalist approach towards a new holistic conservation approach represents a fundamental change of paradigm in the understanding of heritage. In this new understanding, the management of cultural resources is conceived as '... the processes, informed by public policy and heritage legislation that manage and protect Indigenous [sic!] cultural heritage, and in so doing, construct and define relations between archaeologists, Indigenous [sic!] interests and governments' (Smith 2004, 9).

Whilst Sudan had ratified the *2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* in 2008, the heritage legislation continues to maintain a monumentalist approach<sup>2</sup>. Although the promotion of new fields of heritage was gaining traction in the early period of the implementation of the *Comprehensive Peace Agreement* (CPA), this process is now at a standstill as can be observed in the project for the new *Wadi Halfa Museum*<sup>3</sup>: *A Protocol of Cooperation* was signed between Egypt and the Sudan in the field of cultural heritage in February 2005, and the museum has also been on the priorities list of the UNESCO mission to Nubia since the same year. But since the laying of the

foundation stone in April 2008, the project has not moved forward.

Under the requirements of Mohammed Sherif's 1979 call for a common approach to heritage, the foreign archaeological missions working at various sites in the Sudan continue to have an important role to play in the process of discovering, documenting and preserving the country's cultural heritage. This implies at once the preservation and conservation of archaeological sites and monuments and the permanent control and care of archaeological objects in museum and university collections. The objects held temporarily by foreign missions are not exempt from this either.

## Knowledge Dissemination

Along with experts from the *National Corporation of Antiquities and Museums* (NCAM) and local universities, the foreign archaeological teams are undertaking continuous and meticulous efforts to enhance and promote the knowledge of ancient Sudan. During recent years, the collaboration between these parties has been extended and interdisciplinary projects have been designed or adapted. The self-reflexivity of the parties involved is thereby enhanced and the social responsibility of science fostered. A good example of this is the raised awareness of the ethical implications of salvage or rescue archaeology and the recognition that the local population must be involved and encouraged to value their history. Indeed, the meaningful involvement of local communities in archaeological investigations is an essential requirement in order to ensure the future of the past.

In addition, in their attempt to save the past for the future, archaeologists are also responsible for the transmission of knowledge to students and trainees and for the dissemination and mediation of knowledge towards the wider public. Given the almost complete lack of specific textbooks, monographs and guides in the Arabic language, the need for action in this field is evident. Even though the publishing environment has considerably changed since the launch of the *Qatar-Sudan Archaeological Project* (QSAP), there is still a vital need for the publication of accurate research publications and textbooks on Sudanese archaeology and heritage in Arabic.

<sup>1</sup> As for the notion of 'cosmopolitan archaeologies', see Meskell 2009, 1-27.

<sup>2</sup> The *Ordinance for the Protection of Antiquities 1999* for instance has so far not been amended and supplemented in order that the significant changes to heritage values are to be reflected.

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed account on the concept of the *Nubian Museum of Wadi Halfa* and the adjacent interactive Nubian village see De Simone 2009 and 2014.

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