

# SUDAN & NUBIA

The Sudan Archaeological Research Society

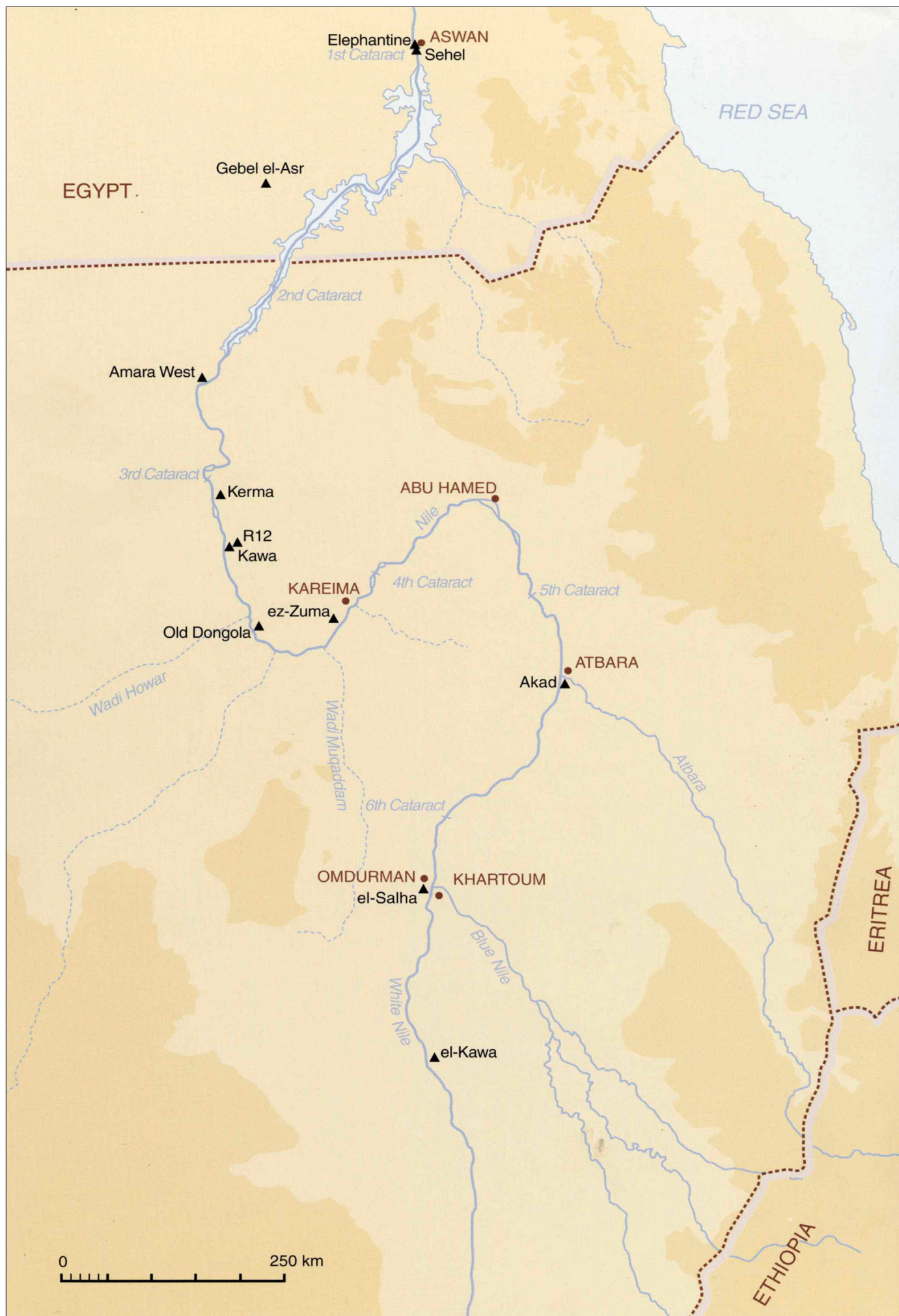


*Bulletin No. 6*

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*Front Cover:* An apostle from the mural in the chapel at Baganarti containing the king's portrait.

## Introduction

Vivian Davies

At the time of writing (mid-September 2002), the 10<sup>th</sup> International Conference for Nubian Studies has just finished, generously hosted by colleagues in the Università di Roma "La Sapienza". The large number of papers delivered shows how rapidly the subject of Middle Nile studies is growing, with significant advances in knowledge achieved since the last conference held in Boston four years ago, an encouraging state of affairs, to which the content of this present volume bears further witness. There was, however, one hugely important issue which overshadowed the event: the looming crisis of the new dam at the Fourth Cataract.

As reported by the Sudanese delegation, preparatory work for the dam has now begun and actual building will start in two years. It is expected to take a further seven years to complete. In an unwelcome echo of the Aswan High Dam scheme, the reservoir created will flood over 170km of the Nile Valley between the Fourth Cataract and Abu Hamed, enveloping, as we now know from preliminary surveys, thousands of archaeological sites - artefact scatters, settlements, cemeteries and rock-drawings dating from the Palaeolithic to the Islamic Periods. Very little is known about these sites; for the most part only that they exist. Our Sudanese colleagues are urgently appealing for assistance, so that as much as possible of the record may be investigated and documented before the area is lost to knowledge for ever. In response, SARS is this winter launching a campaign of rescue excavation in a region which we recently surveyed (see *Sudan & Nubia* 4 [2000], 51-7), but an extensive international effort will be required if any serious impact is to be made. Our next international colloquium, to be held at the British Museum on 8 May 2003, will focus on the dam emergency. All colleagues with an interest in helping are invited to attend.





# Old Nubian Houses of Sehel Island

Ossama A. W. Abdel Meguid

## Introduction

As a result of a report by the owner of two houses on Sehel Island, a remarkable site, consisting of modern and Christian-era reuse of ancient elements in domestic architecture, has been identified as a possible location for the creation of a small local museum. In terms of the materials used, the design and the combination of architectural elements, the site is unique. The design of the houses utilises the vocabulary of 4<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> century AD church architecture for domestic purposes. No two-storey dwelling with a combination of mud brick, red brick, and sandstone masonry has been

previously observed from this era. This discovery demands further investigation to determine the function and exact date of the structures, which, unfortunately, are in a state of deterioration and in danger of collapse. To illuminate their historical significance, this paper provides the history of these buildings, the background of Nubian mud-brick architecture, the description of the structural elements, and the recommendation for establishing a museum on the site.

## An archaeological site long known

Sehel is the name of a Nubian Kenzi-speaking village located on an island in the Nile known as Sehelarti (Figure 1, Plate 1), in front of the east bank village, El Mahatta, 3km south of Aswan in the area of the First Cataract.

In ancient times the island was used to store material being transported to the south (Sudan) through the Bab-el Madaïq (Sudan Island). Sehel was the last station in Egypt for shipping and, therefore, also provided living quarters for

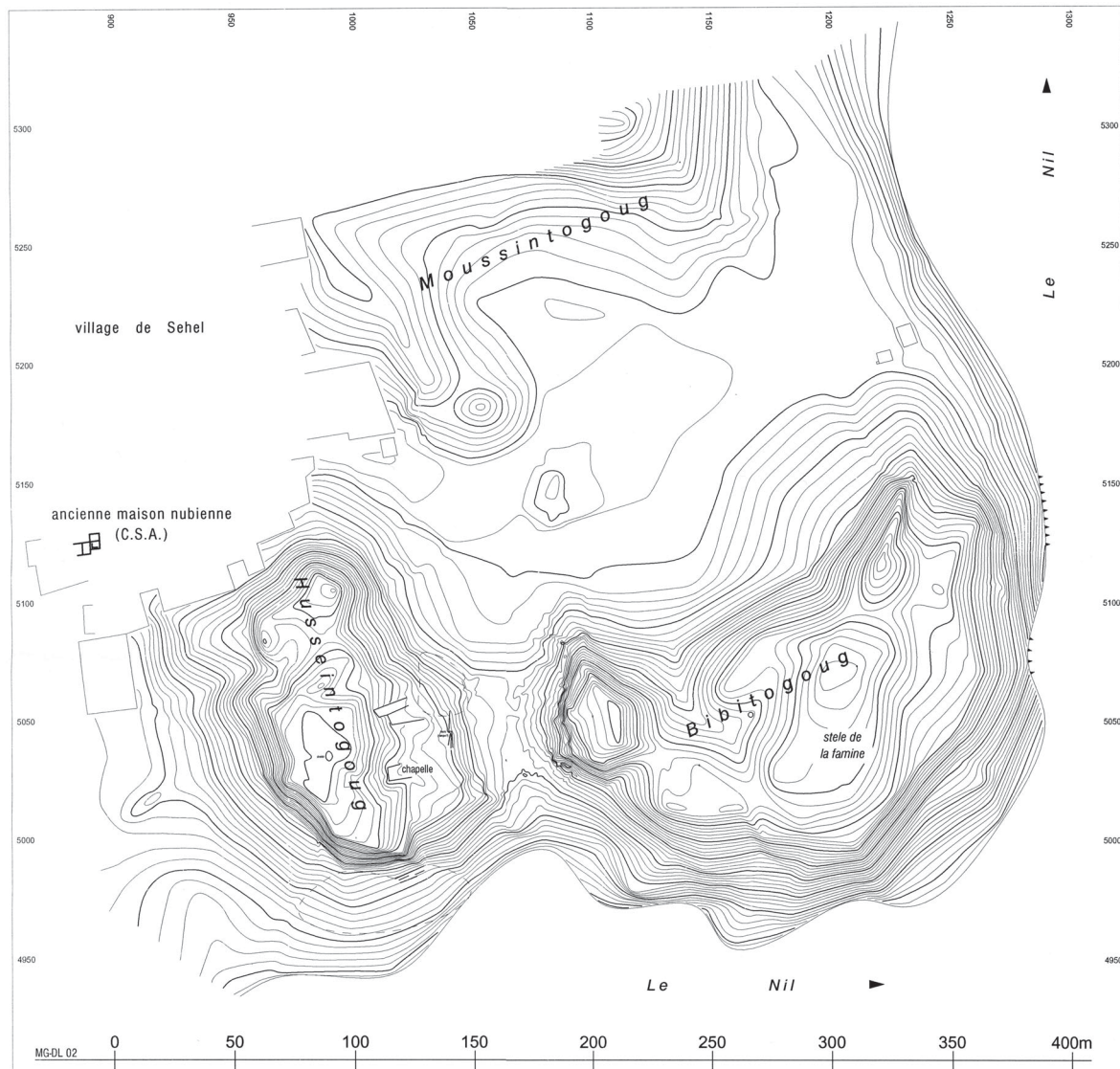


Figure 1. Sehelarti with the location of the old houses and the modern village.

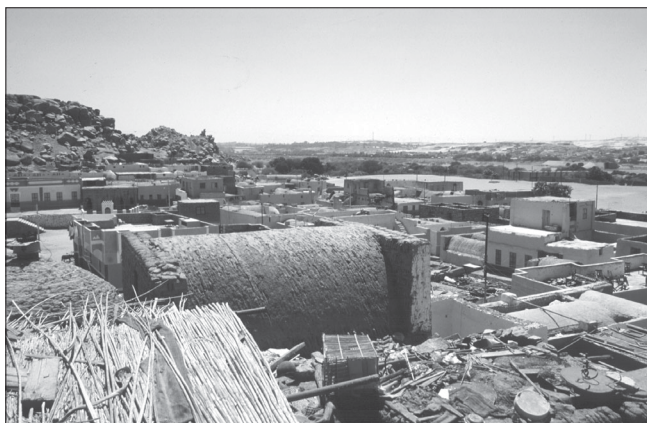


Plate 1. View across the village.

the men who were charged with the upkeep of the water channel.

Today, this island, which was the source of the stone for the Philae temple, is a witness to the quarrymen that worked there and left their inscriptions on the rocks. As well as these, there are also over 250 inscriptions left by viceroys of Kush and religious pilgrims who came to worship the local First Cataract deities, Khnum-Satis-Anukis, among other gods (Porter and Moss 1951, 249-253; Weigall 1910, 419ff.). Found among these rocks and boulders is the "Famine Stela", which details stores of goods and food supplies, which has been interpreted by some scholars as referring to contributions made to Ptolemy V after he crushed the Upper Egyptian revolt in 186 BC; a connection to the story of Joseph in Egypt and the seven years of famine has also been made.

### The Vault in Nubia

The earliest recorded evidence of Nubian mud-brick construction using a vaulted roof was excavated (1929-34) by Walter Emery at the fortress of Kuban, a little south of El-Dakka on the east bank of the Nile (Emery 1948). Here the vaulted roof covered dwellings and granaries inside an enclosure, dating from the time of King Sesostri II of the 12<sup>th</sup> Dynasty (c. 1865 BC). In 1959, Emery also began to study a place which may have been the house of the village leader at Buhen. He investigated a house consisting of two floors, built in front of the inner walls of the fortress, and connected directly by a staircase to the fortress tower. Later excavations by Cairo University at Aniba (1960-61) revealed two mud-brick buildings with vaulted rooms, dated to the Second Intermediate Period (Abu Bakr 1963).

Examples of more sophisticated architecture in mud brick, utilising the vault and dome, were excavated by an Italian archaeological expedition to Nubia between 1929 and 1934 (Monneret de Villard 1935). Most interesting are the religious buildings of the Byzantine Christian era in the vicinity of Adindan. The same team discovered vaulted Muslim mausolea dating from AD 800 on the plain of Jebel Adda in Nubia.

One of the most prominent forms of traditional archi-

tecture was the barrel-vaulted roof. Dating back to Pharaonic Egypt, when it had already been introduced into Nubia, we find such roofs in funerary architecture during Meroitic and Post-Meroitic periods. Later, barrel vaults spread throughout Christian Nubia and were used to roof both churches and houses.

In the Muslim period, barrel vaults disappeared from almost all parts of the country except the area from Daraw to Wadi el Arab – north and south of the First Cataract, where the Kenzi tribe had settled (Fernea *et al.* 1973; Omar El Hakim 1993).

### Description of the houses

The former owner, Mohamed Naggar Ahmed from Sehel, made a report to the Egyptian Antiquities Organisation, which indicated that he had inherited an old housing complex which had been used as a barn. During my visit to survey the site I observed the following:

The site consists of two contiguous structures (Figure 2) located in the middle of the urban area on Sehel Island. The first structure (House 1) is old and in good condition except that the vaults have been destroyed. The house is uninhabited; it was used as a pen, barn, and corral but is now deserted and filled with rubbish (Colour plates XXXII & XXXIII). House 2 is currently utilised by its owner as a storehouse.

House 1 consists of a ground floor and an upper floor. The ground floor has a small courtyard giving access to one vaulted room and a staircase to the upper floor just behind



Plate 2. The red-brick barrel vault supporting the stairway in the southern room of House 1.



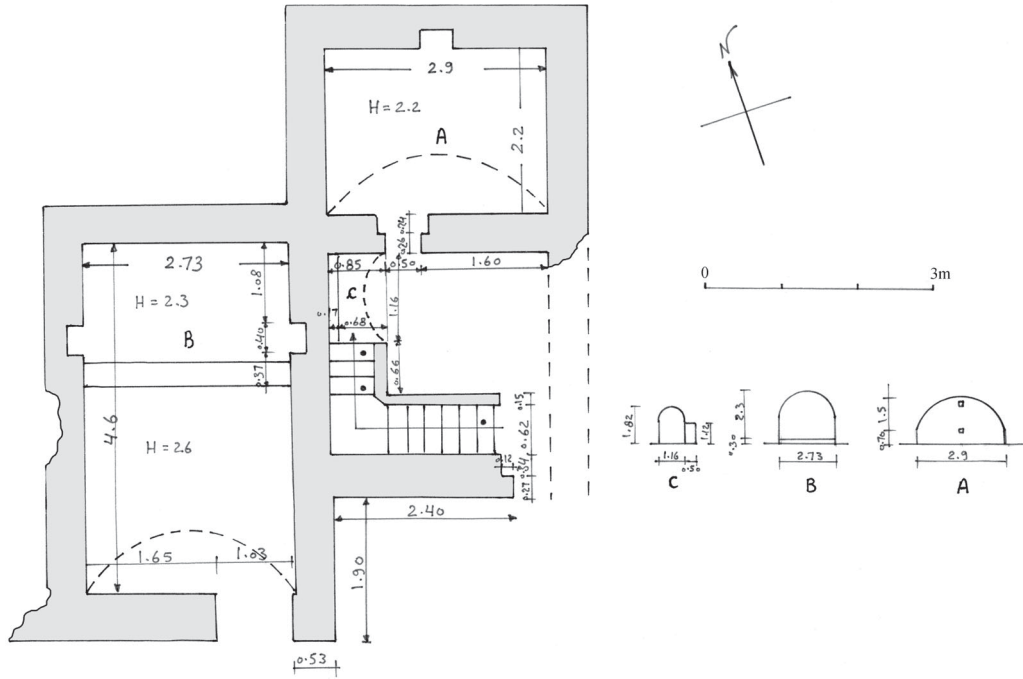


Figure 2. Plan of the houses (Right: House 1, Left: House 2).

the entrance door (Figure 2, Colour plate XXXV). The upper floor consists of one room vaulted perpendicularly to the lower room, with three windows and four niches (Colour plate XXXVI).

The walls flanking the entrance are composed of courses of different materials. The lower courses are of mud brick, the upper of red brick and sandstone, with a sandstone lintel. The entrance leads to an open-air hall  $2.10 \times 1.82\text{m}$ . In the north-west corner of the hall is a small vault built of red brick,  $1.16 \times 1.12\text{m}$  and  $1.82\text{m}$  high (Plate 2).

On the left side of the entrance, there is a staircase of sandstone blocks (Colour plate XXXV), most of them consisting of reused elements from a temple of Ptolemy IV; similar blocks are to be found scattered throughout the village of Sehel. The staircase, which is partly supported on the barrel vault noted above, leads to a room  $2.2 \times 2.9\text{m}$  on the upper floor (Colour plates XXXVI, Plates 3-4), the mud-

brick vault of which has been destroyed. Here, at a height of  $2.2\text{m}$ , are four niches, two each in the south and north walls, and a small window in the middle of the north wall.

On the left side of the main house, there is a single-storey



Plate 3. The upper storey of House 1, looking north east.



Plate 4. The upper storey of House 1 with window and niches, looking north east.



Plate 5. The doorway of House 2, looking north-north-east.

house with one large room (House 2). The façade and entrance were built with blocks of monumental masonry and red bricks, five courses of red brick and one course of sandstone, and so on (Colour plate XXXII, plate 5). A sandstone lintel spans the door which leads to a large room measuring  $4.60 \times 2.73\text{m}$  (Colour plate XXXIV).

At the end of the room, there is a mastaba and two niches in each east and west side.

### Description of the structural components

Reference to the reuse of ancient blocks at Sehel is found in De Morgan *et al.* 1894, 83, Fig. 3:

“..... several stones carrying hyroglyphics (*sic*) and pieces of sculpture are found around the village of Sehel and serve today to form some enclosures for sheep and goats. Since these fragments are of little interest, we present them below, (see drawings) and permit the date to be fixed with that of the epoch of the construction of the temple. Happily, the cartouches of Ptolomy remain intact.”

L. Habachi (1957, 13ff.) mentioned a chapel of Ptolemy IV at Sehel. Blocks of this chapel were reported to be reused in the houses of the local village. More blocks from the site are kept at the Inspectorate of the EAO of Aswan.

In House 1 the first block of the staircase ( $60 \times 25\text{cm}$ )

which leads to the upper floor has an inscription of the god Hapy sitting in front of an offering table bearing several kinds of food, followed by a vertical row of hieroglyphic text. Another row appears to read “Ptolemy IV”. On the far right there is another block ( $60 \times 25\text{cm}$ ) with an inscription from the left representing the god Hapy; part of the head is missing. In front of him are inscriptions in bad condition and difficult to read. There is a frieze of fecundity figures with inscriptions in vertical lines and the cartouche of Ptolemy IV. A block with a frieze of fecundity figures with no inscriptions is reused as part of the second to last step of the upper part of the staircase. For examples of the decorated blocks, see Figure 3.

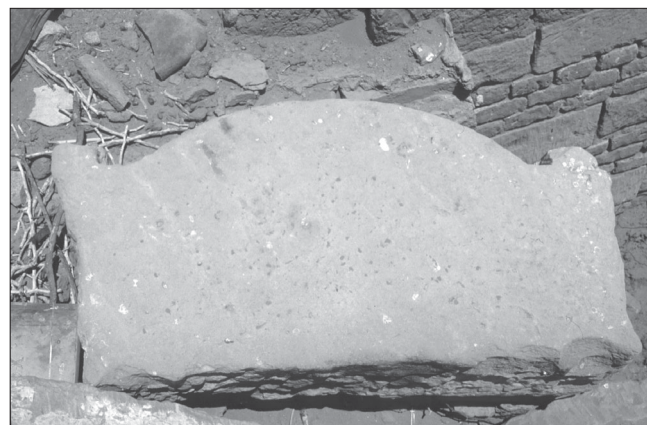


Plate 6. The half-column base reused as the uppermost step in the stairway of House 1.

A block consisting of half of a column base, shaped in a semicircle, is reused as the uppermost step (Plate 6). It bears a drawing in poor condition. In addition to the inscribed blocks there are over 20 other reused architectural elements, which may contain inscriptions on the reverse side, but these are not visible.

The wall consists of small burnt bricks with a horizontal intersection of carefully dressed sandstone, possibly derived from the same chapel of Ptolemy IV as the blocks which still bear decoration. The sandstone exhibits a few decorated surfaces, whose ancient Nubian designs are also found on other artefacts, for example, on Nubian silver jewellery. The workmanship is of exquisite quality.

House 2 is constructed to the same high standard with good brick workmanship. It is larger than House 1, and is constructed of courses of well-dressed sandstone masonry alternating with courses of brick. No inscribed blocks are visible reused in its walls. It consists of a single ground-floor room with a cooking or sleeping area elevated and separated from the rest of the room by a low wall in the rear part of the structure. There are two niches in the side walls (Colour plate XXXIV).

The houses, which are situated in a small village square, could easily be transformed into a local museum to contain contemporary ethnographic material from Sehel village,



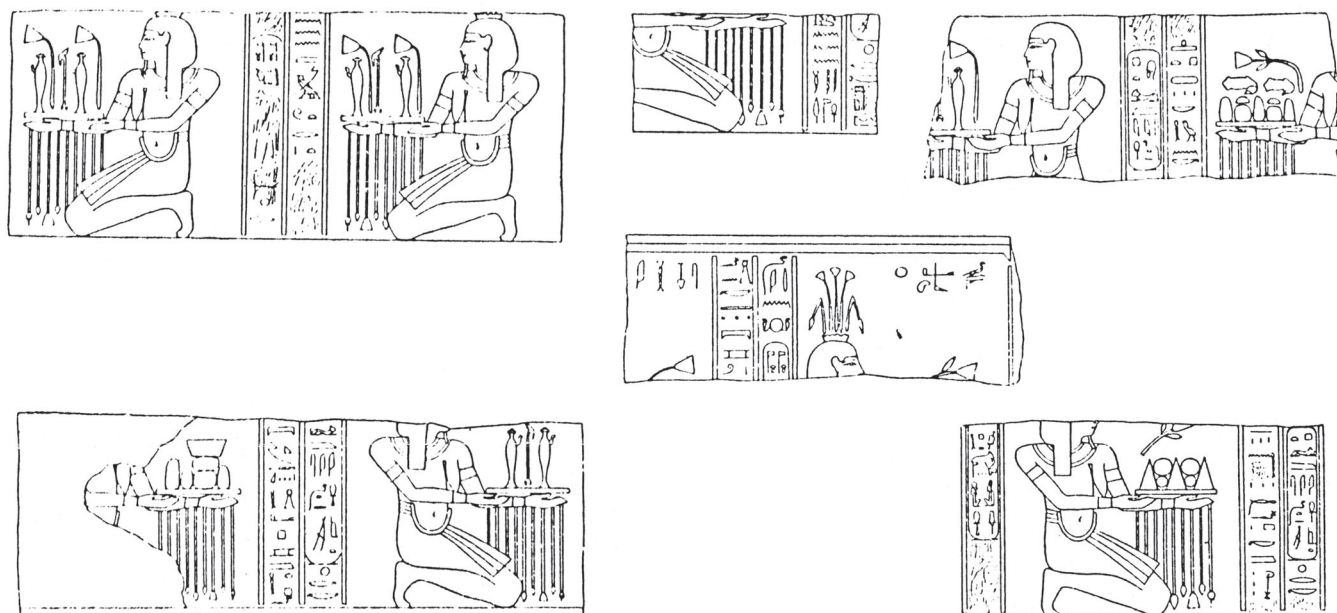


Figure 3. Relief blocks bearing the cartouches of Ptolemy IV.

which is currently in danger of disappearing. This could be accomplished at a very low cost using simple methods. The transformation would ensure that the fragments of pharaonic decoration remain in their original place without the need to dismantle and thus destroy the historically valuable context of these houses. A similar situation exists at the Gates of Nasr and Futuh in the area of Islamic Cairo, which also incorporate pharaonic elements.

### Short note on the pottery from Sehel Island

*Dr Mieczysław D. Rodziewicz*

The small archaeological finds associated with the old Nubian domestic architecture on Sehel Island have been assembled during the recent survey of the site. It is the first group of archaeological material from this excavation and the only stratified finds to be expected in the near future.

The assemblage of pottery was collected from the surface and extracted from the old architectural remains. It was expected to give us preliminary chronological informa-

tion, because the area has been continuously inhabited and extensively used up to the present. Despite the limited number of sherds collected from the site, their technical and aesthetic properties allowed us to associate them with definable cultures and historical periods on the island (Table 1).

Nearly all of the pottery sherds gathered are made of Nile silt on a wheel with several exceptions consisting of hand-made, finely red-slipped, open forms of bowls and deep plates. They belong to a particularly important group of Nubian pottery intensively investigated by W. Y. Adams (Adams 1986). They form a special assemblage of hand-made red-slipped pottery, lasting in Nubia from Meroitic till Mediaeval times. However, most of the collected sherds represent ceramics known to us from other archaeological sites along the Nile Valley in Nubia and Egypt. Among the most numerous pieces from Sehel Island made of Nile silt are the late Ptolemaic forms which are easily identifiable. In addition, the most characteristic ceramics in the area of the First Cataract, made of pink clay and known from the production centres in Aswan and Elephantine, are represented by several pieces from the early Roman period. Several sherds made

Table 1. Ceramic samples from House 1.

Samples	Late Ptolemaic	Early Roman 1 <sup>st</sup> -2 <sup>nd</sup> century AD	Late Roman 7 <sup>th</sup> century AD	"Medieval"	Uncertain	Unknown
N <sup>o</sup> 5		←→			I	II
N <sup>o</sup> 2			I			I
N <sup>o</sup> 1	I	2 <sup>nd</sup> cent AD II ←→ I				III
N <sup>o</sup> 3		III			Nubian- ? I	III
N <sup>o</sup> 4	I	II ←→ I	I → II	I		III III 1 x MK?



of reddish-yellow marl clay from larger forms, ornamented with engraved decoration, find parallels with Mediaeval ceramics. We can clearly see that the surveyed area was occupied from the Ptolemaic period onwards. Nevertheless, further research is needed to reveal the unquestionable relationship between the collected sherds and the old Nubian mud-brick structures on Sehel Island.

## Summary

Since the owner's first report, the houses reported upon here have been placed under the care of the Supreme Council of Antiquities. Given the significance and obvious deterioration of the two houses, they should officially be declared historical monuments in order to preserve and protect them.

The design of the houses may be dated back to the Christian period. We recommend that they be added to the public utilities to be preserved for their unique architectural style, dating back to the 4<sup>th</sup> - 6<sup>th</sup> century AD. Establishing the chronology of the later use of these houses poses many problems in the absence of distinctive artifacts commonly associated with domestic space. While houses dating to the Post-Meroitic period and houses with Christian characteristics can be identified with some confidence, assigning a date to other apparently later house styles remains problematic.

The workmanship shows particularities of Byzantine construction found elsewhere in Nubia during the Christian period, although this tradition continues into the Islamic period, particularly at Aswan. It cannot, however, be excluded that these houses belong to the Christian period.

It is further proposed to restore the houses to a sound condition, cleaning them inside and out, completing some necessary repairs, and transforming them into a local museum to house contemporary ethnographic material from Sehel village itself. The transformation would ensure that the fragments of pharaonic decoration remain in their original historically valuable context.

Finally, the transformation of the houses into a local museum would impart a historical identity to the inhabitants of Sehel. It offers an opportunity to create a tourist attraction within the village that would provide a new source of local income derived from offering various other services to tourists.

## Acknowledgements

My thanks to Horst Jaritz for aid in the architectural assessment, Vincent Rondot for drawing my attention to De Morgan's figure and text, Dr. Mieczysław D. Rodziewicz for the ceramic analysis, Mohammed Ali of the SCA for the survey for Figures 1 and 2, and Elizabeth Smith for editorial assistance.

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## ***Uncovering Ancient Sudan***

A Decade of Discovery by The Sudan  
Archaeological Research Society

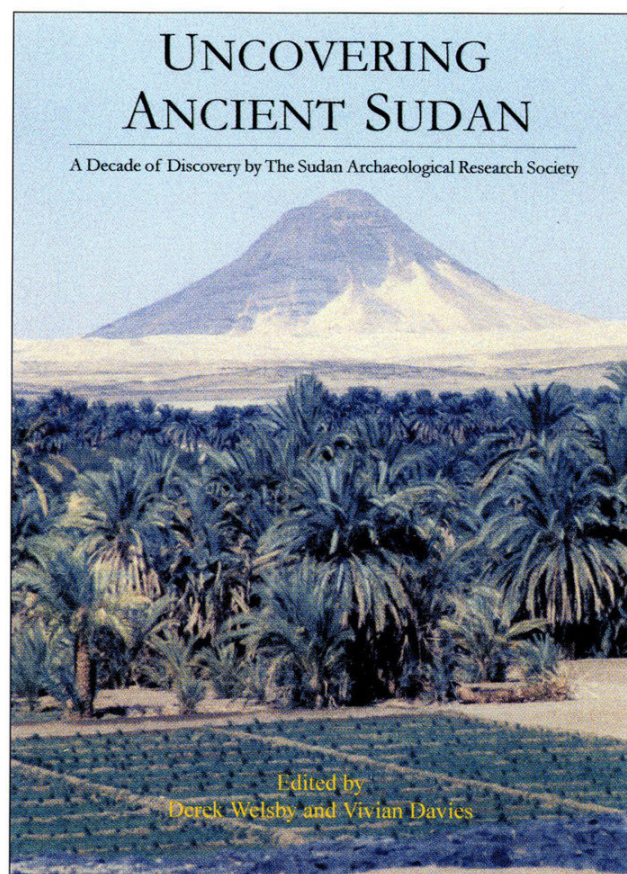
edited by Derek Welsby and Vivian Davies  
London 2002

*52 pages, 23 figures, 133 plates*

ISBN 1 901169 10 3

This book, which is profusely illustrated throughout in colour, describes the field projects sponsored and supported by the Sudan Archaeological Research Society during its first 10 years. It provides a dramatic introduction to the deserts and the River Nile in northern Sudan, and to the rich archaeological heritage of the country. Among the projects featured are major urban excavations at Soba East and Kawa, cemetery excavations at Gabati, surveys in the Bayuda Desert, the Northern Dongola Reach and above the Fourth Cataract, and epigraphic work at Kurgus.

The volume is available to members at the discount price of £7 (full retail price £10) plus £1 postage and packing.



## ***Life on the Desert Edge***

Seven Thousand Years of Settlement in the  
Northern Dongola Reach, Sudan

by Derek A. Welsby

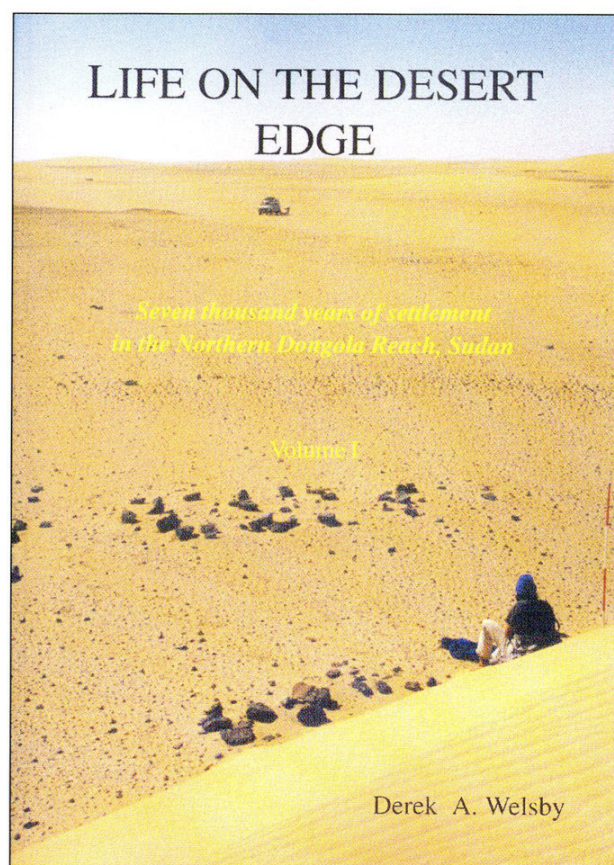
with contributions by C. Andrews, C.  
Cartwright, J. Cook, A. Grant, L. Joyner, M.  
Judd, M. Macklin, I. Welsby Sjöström, B. Wills,  
J. Woodward and Fathi Abdul Hamid  
London 2001

*2 volumes, 643 pages, 118 tables, 313 figures, 6 colour and 95  
monochrome plates*

ISBN 1 901169 05 7

*Life on the Desert Edge* publishes the results of the Society's survey in the Northern Dongola Reach between 1993 and 1996 and of the one season of excavations which followed in the winter of 1996-97.

The volume is available to members at the discount price of £85 (full retail price £100) plus £5 postage and packing.



These books may be ordered from the Honorary Secretary at the Society's address.





*Computer montage of vertical kite photographs of the medieval fortress of Bakbit (Bakbit 11).*