

Review:
**William Carruthers, *Flooded pasts: UNESCO, Nubia, and the
recolonization of archaeology*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University
Press, 2022**

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**The flooding of Nubia and its relevance for the reception of
ancient Egypt**

This book has already been reviewed three times.¹ The following should therefore be understood as a complementary perspective, focusing on aspects related to the general topic of this journal: the reception of ancient Egypt.

The term “Nubia” is a complex one, with several potential meanings. It can refer to a geographical region, to a number of languages, or to different cultural groups that have been amalgamated under a single term.² As a geographical region, Nubia encompasses northern Sudan and southern Egypt.³ The so-called Nubian campaign, the UNESCO International Campaign to Save the Monuments of Nubia, was initiated during the 1960s with the objective of preserving the monuments of Nubia, which were at risk of being submerged by the rising waters of the Aswan High Dam. Carruthers’ book is more than a straightforward historiography of the UNESCO campaign, and, in this respect, differs from a recent edited volume dedicated to the memory of the so-called Nubian campaign.⁴

For *Flooded Pasts*, Carruthers conducted a thorough review of the archival material produced during the UNESCO Nubian campaign.⁵ According to him it is evident that the archives in question are embedded within a postcolonial context, wherein modern Nubian communities and their respective sites have historically

1 See Marshall and Buzon, review of *Flooded pasts*; Shalaby, review of *Flooded pasts* and Lemos, review of *Flooded pasts*.

2 See most recently Ward et al., “Establishing a dialogue”, 4 with references.

3 For a discussion of the various models where Nubia is located see Davies, “Introduction”, xiii-xiv.

4 De Simone, *Remembering the “Nubia campaign”*. This volume was published to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the UNESCO campaign in 2009 in Aswan. It comprises a number of contributions from scholars who passed away between 2009 and the publication date.

5 Marshall and Buzon, review of *Flooded pasts*, 356 stress that Carruthers focused in an unbalanced way on material from Egypt. However, as Carruthers himself explains (15) there were many reasons for this, especially regarding the accessibility of archives in Sudan.

been disregarded.⁶ The focus of the archives, archaeological investigations and historical narratives is exclusively on the ancient past, thus giving rise to the necessity of “repeopling Nubia”, the subtitle of the conclusion of the book (274–283).

The present reviewer concurs with Nora Shalaby’s assessment of Carruthers’ book, which she contextualised within the prevailing narrative of the Nubian campaign as a period of significant accomplishments:

Flooded Pasts offers an alternative to this “momentous” historical event, creating ruptures in the conventional story, and instead presenting us with a narrative that is compelling, multi-faceted and unwavering. Engaging with diverse themes such as colonialism, nationalist aspirations, globalised heritage, and racism (scientific or otherwise), all integral to the way the campaign unfolded and was in fact constituted over two decades, the author does not shy away from asking uncomfortable questions.⁷

A central tenet of this book is the fact that Carruthers does not merely reconstruct the UNESCO campaign, but also its aftermath. We can therefore ask: Why is Nubia and the so-called Nubian campaign of relevance for the reception of ancient Egypt today? In line with recent studies of the Mnemohistory of Egypt,⁸ we should furthermore ask how, why, where and when Nubian artefacts and history were transformed and survived in other contexts. An important point to note here is that Versluys and others emphasise in their recent approaches the active role of Egyptian material and visual culture in the reception of ancient Egypt.⁹ This is especially crucial for Nubian culture which was once incorrectly declared passive and non-active.¹⁰ Examining the impact of the Nubian campaign on how ancient Egypt and Nubia are perceived empowers the respective artefacts and moves away from a narrative rooted in colonial thinking.

6 Cf. also Lemos, “Can We Decolonize the Ancient Past?”, 29 with reference to earlier articles by Carruthers.

7 Shalaby, *review of Flooded pasts*, 307.

8 See, e.g., Versluys, *Beyond Egyptomania*, passim.

9 Versluys, “Haunted by Egypt”.

10 For these stereotypes embedded in the often racist views of some archaeologists working in Sudan at the beginning of the 20th century see, e.g. Adam and Taha, “Archaeology in Sudan” and El Hadi, Elbeely, and Abdelwahab, “How Racism Leads to Epistemicide or Murder of Knowledge?”.

One of the most striking legacies of the Nubia campaign is the creation of a new “border” between Egypt and Sudan. The Egyptians call the newly formed reservoir Lake Nasser, while the Sudanese call it Lake Nubia – two names for one place (237). In Chapter 7, “Traces of Nubia” (237–273), Carruthers demonstrates how political changes in Egypt and Sudan, at national, regional, and global levels, have affected the definition and redefinition of heritage. He discusses the embeddedness of racism and colonial attitudes. Here, the social-scientific concept of coproduction, as defined by Sheila Jasanoff, could also be applied.¹¹ Knowledge production is embedded in social structures, power relations, institutions and practices, and simultaneously shapes them. Understanding Nubia and interventions in Nubian heritage can therefore be used as case studies of coproduction.

Modern imaginaries of Nubia

The UNESCO campaign produced a specific conceptualisation of the Nubian past. In this conceptualisation, ancient Nubia is detached from the region’s living population – the details of which are nicely outlined in Carruthers’ book. I will provide a few examples below that illustrate this particularly well.

One outcome of the UNESCO campaign in Sudan was the opening of the National Museum in Khartoum on 25 May 1971. Although its garden housed temples from Aksha, Buhen, Semna East and Semna West, neither the museum nor its collection received a World Heritage citation (unlike Egypt; for details see the reviewed book, 239–241). Carruthers (242) rightly contextualises this with Sudan at this time being “a state in some degree of turmoil” (242). It is ironic that, on page 241 above the heading “Forgetting Sudan?”, there is a picture of the Sudan National Museum (Carruthers’ Fig. 7.1). Like so much of cultural heritage in Sudan, the museum (Fig. 1) has suffered destruction and looting in a “forgotten” war, ongoing since 2023 (Fig. 2).

¹¹ Jasanoff, *States of Knowledge*, passim.



Fig. 1: Front of the Sudan National Museum in 2020.



Fig. 2: Destroyed front of the Sudan National Museum, 15 May 2025.

The present conflict serves to underscore the inherent link between archaeology and its social context. The archaeology of Sudan is inextricably linked to the historical phenomenon of colonialism and has been subjected to various forms of exploitation and manipulation by both states and influential actors in the pursuit of ethnonationalist agendas.¹² It is evident that this is just as much the case in the present as it was in the past.

Under the heading “Publishing time” (245–249), Carruthers discusses the time-consuming and complex processes involved in the publication of excavations of the Nubian campaign. With references to Christina Riggs, he rightly claims that the fact that “archaeological publication has always been a form of artifice” (246), also applies to the UNESCO campaign. Carruthers emphasises interesting parallels in the archives of the sites of Kulubnarti and Buhen – two sites which were excavated by archaeologists with divergent foci. Kulubnarti was excavated by Bill Adams, a pioneer in the archaeology of modern Sudan with a strong Sudan-focus.¹³ Buhen was excavated by Walter Bryan Emery, one of the more traditional Egypt-focused archaeologists.¹⁴

Kulubnarti is in many respects interesting – most of the excavation work during the UNESCO campaign focused on cemeteries and, as a settlement, the site of Kulubnarti was a rare exception (see 248). Furthermore, while most of the sites documented during the campaign are nowadays submerged by the waters of Lake Nasser/Lake Nubia, Kulubnarti survived and is still one of the most significant Medieval settlements in Lower Nubia (Fig. 3).¹⁵

While Bill Adams passed away in 2019, the 2025 publication on “Remembering the ‘Nubian Campaign’” includes one of his chapters (written in 2009).¹⁶ Under the heading “Was the Archaeological Campaign a Success?” he associates archaeology with modern imaginaries of Nubia:

For Sudan, I think I can speak with some confidence that the loss of information was not nearly as great as the loss of material. [...] My hope all along was that, at the end of the campaign, all the different parts, contributed by the many expeditions, would add to some

12 See, most recently, Vella Gregory, “The Invisibility of Sudan’s Civil War”, 8.

13 See Fitzenreiter, “William (Bill) Yewdale Adams: 1927–2019”; Welsby, “William Yewdale Adams (1927–2019)”.

14 On Emery see Carruthers, “Walter Bryan Emery”.

15 It is noteworthy that Adams used Kulubnarti as one of the examples for a methodological article on fieldwork in Sudan, see Adams, “Ends and means in large-scale excavation”.

16 Adams, “The archaeological campaign in the Sudan”.



Fig. 3: Medieval remains on the island of Kulubnarti in 2019.

kind of whole, and this I believe we achieved. One measure of it is my comprehensive survey of Nubian history (Fig. 1.10), which has now been translated into Arabic (Fig. 1.11) and has been embraced as their national epic by the Nubian people themselves. Another measure of success is the truly wonderful museum in which we are met today.¹⁷

In the quote, Adams refers to his seminal book *Nubia: Corridor to Africa*. London: Allen Lane 1977. Shortly before his death in 2019 he wrote:

The enduring popularity of my book, *Nubia, Corridor to Africa* (Adams 1977), stems not from the fact that it is more accurate than others, but from the fact that it gives so much attention to everyday life. My greatest satisfaction, arising from the Nubia experience, lies in the fact that the Nubian people have adopted my book as their national epic, and have translated it into Arabic.¹⁸

¹⁷ Adams, “The archaeological campaign in the Sudan”, 25–26.

¹⁸ Adams, “Genesis of a maverick”, 5.

Unfortunately, I was unable to find a publication date for the Arabic translation of *Nubia: Corridor to Africa*. Having had the privilege of knowing Bill Adams, I am convinced that his assertion of this as his “greatest satisfaction” is not an empty platitude. On numerous occasions, I observed him engaging with Nubian participants at conferences and events. From the perspective of this specific archaeologist, a concerted effort was made to peopling both the ancient and modern regions of Nubia, at least the Sudanese part – both during the UNESCO campaign and in its aftermath during publication and scientific outreach.

Carruthers also refers to the influence of *Nubia: Corridor to Africa* (252–253). He places particular emphasis on the efforts made by Adams to discredit the racial theorising surrounding Nubia that was so prevalent during the Nubian campaign, as well as in the writings of other scholars, such as the aforementioned Emery (especially in his book *Egypt in Nubia*, London 1965).¹⁹

The museum addressed in the quote above is of course the Nubian Museum in Aswan. This museum, its history and relevance for modern Nubians are well scrutinised in Carruthers’ book (see especially 267–269, 271 and 277).

Acknowledging Nubian presences

Examples of ancient Egyptian presences are well-known throughout the world, starting in Roman times and lasting well into the present.²⁰ Carruthers’ book posits the notion of acknowledging what he terms “Traces of Nubia” (Chapter 7, 237–273). In this regard, archaeology and archaeologists assume pivotal roles and bear reciprocal responsibilities – from the time of the Nubian campaign until the present day.

Part of Chapter 7 is devoted to the important topic of “The Peopling of Ancient Egypt” (254–258). Carruthers meticulously shows how the Nubian campaign, the events associated with it, and the Egyptologists and other scholars involved in it continued to support racial theories when discussing ancient Egypt, especially in relation to and in contrast to “black” Nubia. Carruthers underscores the significance of the theories disseminated by Cheikh Anta Diop concurrently to the campaign. In opposition to racism and Eurocentrism, Diop presented a confrontational argument to the participants of a meeting in Cairo: Egypt was

¹⁹ See most recently Smith, “Stranger in a Strange Land”, 26–27 for a general assessment and context of these racist theories by Emery and others.

²⁰ See, e.g., Versluys, *Beyond Egyptomania* and the issues of the present Journal.

African.²¹ Discussions about Egypt's place in Africa and the race of the ancient Egyptians has never stopped – as Carruthers concludes: “The Nubian campaign, rather than questioning ideas about race, had in fact propelled their traces forward” (258). This should make it clear that the ongoing debate about historical and cultural relations between Egypt and sub-Saharan Africa in antiquity would be unthinkable without the UNESCO campaign – meaning that Nubian memories have indirectly shaped the image of ancient Egypt. Moreover, a specific reception of ancient Nubia has been identified, the manifestations of which are particularly evident within the United States.

Vanessa Davies recently published an abridged introduction to ancient Nubia, which includes a sub-chapter entitled “Resonance of Nubia in African American Communities.”²² She observes that in the United States, Nubia holds particular significance within specific African American communities. The author provides a number of examples of the reception of ancient Nubia in modern African American cultures – case studies “of the rich and creative explorations around ancient African history and identity that can be found in the United States.”²³ For instance, in 1989, the hip-hop group Brand Nubian released a song bearing the same name, elucidating the multifaceted meaning of “Nubian”.

Davies also provides an example of visual art as an expression of the reception of Nubia. In 1999, John Biggers, artist and founding chair of the art department at what is now Texas Southern University, used a mural painting to interpret Nubian culture in the context of contemporary themes.²⁴ It is noteworthy that the artist wanted to convey to his audience that the Nubians were the first users of gold – a view that has recently been significantly substantiated by new archaeological finds.²⁵

Conclusion

It is hoped that this review has provided readers of Carruthers' splendid book with further evidence that “Nubia” “has never simply been a Nubian creation” (273). It is imperative to emphasise the significance of this finding which is also

²¹ See also Balz, *Afrika und Ägypten*, passim.

²² Davies, “Introduction”, xiv-xxii.

²³ Davies, “Introduction”, xxi.

²⁴ Davies, “Introduction”, xx, fig. 1.

²⁵ See, e.g., Budka, “Gold exploitation in the Middle Nile and the Eastern Desert”, with references.

in alignment with recent approaches to Sudanese archaeology. In recent times, archaeological investigations have argued for the necessity of the concept of multiple “Nubias”.²⁶ The advent of new data and novel methodologies for the analysis of existing data has resulted in a more comprehensive understanding of cultural diversity and social complexity from antiquity to the present day. This enhanced understanding has been influenced by the integration of diverse perspectives, contributing to a more nuanced interpretation of these phenomena. This in turn gives hope for more balanced creations of what was and is Nubia – in particular within views from Egypt.

At the time of writing, Carruthers said that discussing the future of the Nubians was fraught (283). With the ongoing war in Sudan since 2023, which has affected millions of people in all parts of the country, this has reached a new level.²⁷ This also highlights why the creation of Nubian histories should interest not only the institutions involved in the so-called Nubian campaign, or archaeologists working in Sudan, but also everyone on a global level. New versions about of Nubian presences in Egypt, Sudan, the United States and elsewhere have yet to be written but these are anything but marginal.

Acknowledgements

This review was written during the course of the DiverseNile project, funded by The European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No. 865463). I am very grateful to Chloë Ward for useful comments and the revision of my English. Many thanks go to Ikhlāss Abdellatif, National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums of Sudan (NCAM), for sending me the photo used here as [Figure 2](#).

Picture credits

[Fig. 1](#): Julia Budka

[Fig. 2](#): National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums of Sudan.

[Fig. 3](#): Julia Budka

²⁶ See Lemos, “Material culture and colonization in ancient Nubia”; Ward et al., “Establishing a dialogue”, 4.

²⁷ Cf. Roberts, “Tracking the toll of Sudan’s forgotten war from afar”.

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