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COMMUNITY ARCHAEOLOGY ON MOGRAT ISLAND: SHARING SPACES, UNDERSTANDING SITES

INTRODUCTION

Archaeological exploration in Sudan developed hand-in-hand with European colonial expansion into Africa in the nineteenth century.¹ As with its northern neighbour, Egypt, the combination of the country's rich history and western ideologies of evolutionary supremacy, which were prominent at the time,² have meant that Sudanese communities have rarely been included in archaeological work beyond the level of manual labours.³ Thus, while recognition of the value of community archaeology and collaborative practice within the discipline has been growing on a global scale since the 1970s,⁴ the process has been hindered by lingering colonial attitudes in many postcolonial African contexts.

This paper explores the early findings and collaborative strategy of the Mograt Island Archaeological Mission (MIAMi). Taking on board lessons from past experiences in the country and wider Africa, MIAMi's methodology is a significant step forward in terms of archaeological practice in Sudan as it acknowledges the importance of community involvement in enhancing the value of archaeological work and has built collaboration into the foundations of the project.

COMMUNITY COLLABORATION IN NORTH EAST AFRICAN ARCHAEOLOGY

To put the discussion of archaeological collaboration in Sudan into context, it is essential to first understand the situation in Egypt where the first forays into a community approach for North East African

archaeology took place. The supranational status of Ancient Egyptian history within global popular culture, alongside Egypt's expanding tourism market and continuing interest from the academic sphere, has meant that the 21st century has finally seen the birth of genuine collaboration between western and Egyptian archaeologists, local communities and other groups with a stake in Egypt's past.⁵ While uptake of the approach is by no means universal, the methodology has spread from western-initiated academic excavation projects to Egyptian-led activism post the January 25, 2011 revolution.⁶ However, the same growth in collaborative approaches to cultural resource management (CRM) is not evident in Sudan even though the country rivals Egypt's archaeological importance and has similar issues in terms of communities living on and around archaeological sites. In fact, until conflict in early 2006 over the archaeological salvage projects initiated in lieu of the construction of the Merowe dam on the Fourth Cataract,⁷ the majority of foreign excavation teams in the country were unaware and/or unprepared to acknowledge the extent to which their work alienated local people.⁸ There is little excuse for such oversight as collaborative archaeological methodologies were widely recognised and promoted by international archaeological and anthropological bodies by this time.⁹ The growing body of research clearly presents the important connections between 'dead' archaeological spaces and living stakeholders¹⁰ and a number of projects which have successfully incorpo-

1 Trigger 1984; Hall 2005.

2 Trigger 1989, 1998.

3 There are of course exceptions and examples of both anthropologists and archaeologists who have been embedded in and worked with communities, however much of this work remains unpublished. Existing examples include Cunnison and James 1972; Haberlah and von dem Bussche 2005; Haberlah 2007; Kleinitz and Näser 2011, 2012.

4 E.g. Pardoe 1992; McDavid 1997; Herle 2000; Field et al. 2000; Moser et al. 2002.

5 E.g. Moser et al. 2002; Abdel-Qadar et al. 2012; Hanna et al. 2012; Tully and Hanna 2013.

6 Tully forthcoming.

7 The first salvage work began on the Fourth Cataract in 1996. Further teams were called in to help complete the work in 2003 and the area was flooded in 2008 (Paner et al. 2010).

8 Kleinitz and Näser 2011: 261.

9 E.g. Guidance on best practice provided by the American Association of Anthropologists, Australian Association of Archaeologists and Native American Graves and Repatriation Act throughout the 1990s.

10 E.g. Moser et al. 2002; Peers and Brown 2003; Agnew and Bridgland 2006; Fairclough et al. 2007.



rated local communities into heritage planning relate specifically to dam-building in Africa.¹¹

The Humboldt University Nubian Expedition (H.U.N.E.) was one of the few project teams that acknowledged the problem of non-inclusive archaeological strategies at the Fourth Cataract. As a result, they attempted to engage local communities in dialogue regarding cultural heritage and to look for ways to share knowledge and work together.¹² This process, however, was the result of observations once salvage work was well underway and much of the social damage had already been done.¹³ Consequently, the team did not have an inclusive, community strategy or trained staff in place to work in partnership with the local Manasir from the outset. It was only in the second field season, 2005, that specific funding was gained for a social-geographic survey to be conducted regarding the living culture of the Manasir and the repercussions of dam building and its associated projects on their lives.¹⁴ While this was a good first step, unsurprisingly it was not enough to prevent growing tension. In 2006, archaeologists from numerous international teams working in the Dar al Manasir area were expelled by local communities as an act of protest against the dam building, associated international appropriation of local heritage and forthcoming flooding of their lands. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these were all issues that had been subjected little or no public consultation.

MIAMi METHODOLOGY

The MIAMi, set to run from 2013 to 2018, is a research-led project to study the archaeology of Mograt, the largest island in the river Nile. As with elsewhere in Sudan, while archaeologists have visited Mograt Island in the past,¹⁵ few have considered the impact of their work on local communities or sought to consult local residents on their interpretation and contemporary usage of archaeological sites. The island has a multi-layered history and has experienced the comings and goings of many different cultures, architectural forms and technologies from the palaeolithic to the modern day (see other contributions to this volume). It is this integrated,

palimpsest of cultures, evident to the plain eye within the landscape and understood in greater detail from preliminary fieldwork, combined with previous experience at the Fourth Cataract, that convinced the project's Claudia Näser and the MIAMi team that dialogue with communities living would be central to the project's methodology from the outset.

Complementing the excavation and survey work being carried out across the island, MIAMi recognises that research within a heritage landscape cannot be conceived simply as the deconstruction/distraction, through excavation, of static or topographic features. Instead MIAMi supports the view that archaeological 'science' is unquestionably engaged with a socially constructed environment which is viewed differently by a range of stakeholders – Individuals, groups, businesses, professional organisations, or institutions, whether local, national or international, who have a specific interest in the way the heritage resource is managed.¹⁶ Thus, the community aspect of MIAMi's first field season sought to collaborate with local communities to enhance mutual understanding of the social, cultural and historical meaning and use of the island's diverse archaeological sites for the benefit of all parties. To achieve this, a community archaeology methodology, which had been employed successfully in Egypt, was implemented.¹⁷ The methodology built on cross-disciplinary collaborative approaches drawn from archaeological ethnography¹⁸ and collaborative archaeology¹⁹ and was augmented to meet more locally specific needs through the insights from the Fourth Cataract²⁰ as well as previous experience on Mograt Island.²¹

The focus of the first field season was to build relationships with community members living in close proximity to the excavation site of the Bronze Age Kerma cemetery in Karmel. Frequent informal visits by Gemma Tully and other members of the

11 E.g. Brandt and Hassan 2000, 2006; King 2003; Arthur and Mitchell 2010.

12 Kleinitz and Näser 2011.

13 Ibid.: 260.

14 See Haberlah and von dem Bussche 2005; Haberlah 2007.

15 Prior to MIAMi, only limited archaeological survey work had taken place on Mograt Island. No full excavations had been carried out.

16 Egloff 2006: 85; Pedro et al. 2006: 137.

17 Tully 2010; Tully and Hanna 2013.

18 Also known as ethnographic archaeology (Castañeda and Matthews 2008) and ethnocritical archaeology (Zimmerman 2008), archaeological ethnography promotes anthropological techniques in archaeology to position heritage sites as transcultural, multi-temporal spaces which host multiple coexistences, encounters and dialogues (Hamilakis 2011: 401). This is distinct from ethnoarchaeology which draws parallels from ethnographic information on other cultures that might be useful for the interpretation of the archaeological record (Stiles 1977). See also Hamilakis and Anagnostopoulos 2009; Hamilakis 2011.

19 Also known as community (Marshall 2002) and public archaeology (Merriman 2004). See also Moser et al. 2002; Peers and Brown 2003; Tully 2007.

20 Kleinitz and Näser 2011.

21 Näser 2006, 2008.



archaeological team took place to numerous families within Karmel and the neighboring villages. Repeat social contact led to further exchanges regarding the aims and techniques of the archaeological work. As notebooks and recording devices are generally off-putting,²² MIAMi team members committed key points to memory to be recorded immediately after each meeting and discussed in greater detail in subsequent conversations. By adopting this approach and maintaining a position of openness, communication and involvement from the start, the team felt very quickly part of wider conversations regarding the intermingling of daily life and the island's history with a range of men, women and young people, of a variety of ages and social positions.

As understanding of the team's aims to work with communities grew, formal and informal interviews, home and site visits, visits to schools and other community fora were proposed by residents. Comparisons then started to be made between the archaeological work and local use/knowledge of the cemetery, as well as other archaeological sites on Mograt Island. This allowed the team to consider the questions, suggestions, observations and stories from the local community which were answered/discussed/disseminated with equal weight alongside traditional archaeological findings to both MIAMi members and the community. The approach, therefore, took the first step towards helping all engaged parties consider the plurality of ways of seeing and interpreting the island's heritage and generated an active environment of discussion and debate.

A series of key questions arose from the community and from the team that were answered where possible on a one-to-one basis but will be disseminated further through publications, community events, talks and online material in the coming seasons. Enquiries from local residents could be divided largely between issues relating to the work of archaeologists and more specific queries regarding the history of Mograt Island and its connections with the wider history of Sudan.

QUESTIONS ABOUT ARCHAEOLOGY

- What is archaeology?
- What do archaeologists do and why?
- What techniques and tools do archaeologists use and how do different instruments work?
- What are archaeologists looking for?
- What happens to the things archaeologists find?

- How are different types of sites excavated e.g. is the method used to excavate a graveyard different to that used for a fort?
- What do archaeologists do with the new knowledge/how do others people learn what archaeologists have found out?

These questions are no different to those posed by others who have not been trained in the discipline, from both first and developing world contexts. They reflect however, an issue that was reiterated by residents many times, the fact that no previous teams had ever taken the time to discuss their work. This has of course led to many misconceptions, again similar to those witnessed in non-inclusive archaeological projects the world over, such as the notion that archaeologists are digging for gold and that everything discovered is taken away as booty for museums or personal gain. Repercussions of such beliefs include the looting of sites once excavation teams leave, strong feelings of injustice and a sense of a loss of heritage occurring without even the exchange of information taking the place of items that are removed. While it takes time to build trust, explaining the purpose of archaeology and inviting communities to come and witness work taking place goes a long way in dispelling such myths and has the advantage of reducing the risk of potential hostilities arising.

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE HISTORY OF MOGRAT ISLAND

- What is so special about Mograt Island's history (i.e. why do archaeologists come here)?
- Is it true Mograt was once two islands?
- How many sites are on the island?
- What dates are the sites from?
- What things have been found at the different sites?
- How does the history of Mograt link to the ancient people of Meroe?
- How many people are buried in the different types of tombs on the island?
- Will important new finds go on display in Khartoum (like others have before)?
- What can be done to stop people using land that was/is an ancient cemetery for farm land?

These more historical questions reflect the lack of resources available to local people regarding the life of the island. This is due largely to the high academic, English/European language sphere in which most archaeological work is published, as well as the

²² E.g. Abu-Lughod 1986, 1991.



lack of local engagement by previous archaeological teams. This barrier is easily overcome by discussing findings and answering questions in person and through Arabic language publications targeted at local audiences. Publication can be both in print and online as many Mogrart residents now have smart phones and make regular use of Facebook and internet searches.

Experience has shown that answering local questions and providing access to archaeological data leads to greater sharing of community knowledge about elements which interest archaeological teams, such as the contemporary use of archaeological sites, local discoveries, shifting settlement patterns and family histories. Enhancing the archaeological process and increasing local goodwill, social exchange also results in other positive outcomes. For example, during the first full MIAMi field season conversations with team members led numerous community members to visit various excavation sites to observe (and in some cases try) archaeological techniques and share information about other sites and local discoveries within an archaeological context (rather than the home). The immersive experience aided the collaborative process as both archaeologists and communities developed dialogue in each other's 'domain' (i.e. the home and the archaeological site) and built greater cultural understanding. This development is important in reducing feelings of alienation for all parties by removing the traditional boundaries of archaeological versus community 'space' and helping shape an overlapping 'habitus' through shared 'use-zones' and daily practices.²³ While it is difficult to achieve full integration between archaeologists and the community, the approach is at least a step forwards in promoting a cohesive social order which supports the physical remains of Mogrart's heritage landscape.²⁴

LOOKING FORWARD

Working from the dialogue in season one, the project is developing posters and booklets (in English and Arabic) for homes, schools and public buildings, as well as a website targeted specifically for local communities and the wider Sudanese public, to take for consultation and to finalise for publication in the second field season. Alongside this, the team will continue to build relationships in other villages near excavation sites, such as Mekesir, where work will

continue on what is believed to be a post-Meroitic fort. The team will also hold site open days, public talks and social events in partnership with different communities where appropriate to facilitate further collaboration and to take on board further suggestions from the grassroots level.

CONCLUSION

Over the course of the 5-year project, the two-way exchange of data and experiences will continue to grow to incorporate more individuals, communities and ideas, thus allowing the archaeologists and local residents to work together more closely. This is essential to enhance the quality of archaeological research by broadening the voices involved and generating a positive, inclusive legacy for MIAMi. The hope is that the work will provide an example for other teams working in Sudan, challenge stereotypes and outdated practices and encourage collaboration more firmly within future archaeological methodologies in Sudan. While the limitations of fieldwork mean that not all voices can be heard, the cross-cultural partnerships between the research team and local communities are essential if a more holistic approach to cultural resource management (CRM) is to be developed on Mogrart Island that values multiple interpretations rather than prioritises western views. It is only through such steps that archaeological work in Sudan can secure its place in the socially conscious discipline that postcolonial, 21st century archaeology purports to be. Allowing different stakeholders to better understand each other's use and relationship with the landscape and its history, the approach also reduces the risk of conflict between international archaeologists and local communities recurring and shares power over the past by democratising knowledge.

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23 Bourdieu 1985; Hiller and Rooksby 2005.

24 Cromer 2006: 21.



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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Kollaborative Zugänge zu archäologischer Praxis, die sich um die Zusammenarbeit mit lokalen Gemeinschaften und anderen an Kulturerbeplätzen und -landschaften interessierten Gruppen bemühen, sind eine relativ junge Erscheinung in den archäologischen Fächern. Während die Entwicklung dieses Forschungs- und Arbeitsfelds in Nordamerika und Australien bereits in der Mitte des letzten Jahrhunderts begann, haben die internationalen archäologischen Missionen in Nordostafrika erst in den letzten zwanzig Jahren begonnen, sich mit lokalen Bevölkerungen und anderen Interessensgruppen auseinanderzusetzen und diese in die Konzipierung und Praxis ihrer Unternehmungen – jenseits der Beschäftigung als Grabungsarbeiter – einzubeziehen. Die Gründe für diese Verzögerung liegen in der spezifischen Fachgeschichte und -kultur der Archäologien in Nordostafrika. Der Beitrag beleuchtet die Entwicklung eines kollaborativen archaeology-Projekts, das als integraler Bestandteil der Mograt Island Archaeological Mission 2014 ins Leben gerufen wurde. Vorgestellt werden die theoretischen Grundlagen und die methodischen Zugänge ebenso wie potentielle Ergebnisse dieses Projekts. Die Autorin betont die Bedeutung einer partnerschaftlichen Zusammenarbeit zwischen Archäologen und lokalen Gemeinschaften, um Verständnis füreinander aufzubauen und den Wert archäologischer Forschung für alle Beteiligten zu erhöhen.