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*“Nihna nâs al-bahar –*  
**We are the people of the river.”**

Ethnographic Research in the Fourth Nile  
Cataract Region, Sudan

Edited by  
Cornelia Kleinitz and Claudia Näser

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## Introduction

*Cornelia Kleinitz and Claudia Näser*

Since 2008 the waters of the Merowe Dam reservoir have submerged the Middle Nile valley at and above the Fourth Cataract, forming a lake of c. 170 km length and a maximum width of more than 10 km. Doubling the country's energy output, this large infrastructure project can be considered an important prerequisite to economic development in Sudan. However, about 50-70,000 local inhabitants of the projected reservoir area were directly affected by the dam. Primarily members of the Shaiqiyya of Amri and Hamdab, and of the Manasir, and mainly small-scale riverine farmers, they faced an uncertain future in new settlements and agricultural schemes far from the Nile.

For several years prior to flooding more than a dozen national and international archaeological salvage missions had studied the region's past, surveying and excavating its ancient cultural landscape, hoping to save its rich heritage from irretrievable loss. More than 10,000 archaeological sites were identified, dating from the Palaeolithic through to the Medieval and post-Medieval periods. Gathered under the umbrella of the Merowe Dam Archaeological Salvage Project (MDASP), these salvage campaigns significantly enriched our knowledge of the (pre)history of this little-studied part of the Middle Nile valley.

While the region's past was given ample attention by the scientific community, the concerns and the cultural knowledge of the present-day inhabitants of the Fourth Cataract received little interest. The living culture of the local communities was as endangered, however, as the remains of the ancient past that were the focus of the salvage campaigns. Much of the knowledge of small-scale riverine farming in this highly specific cataract landscape, such as date palm cultivation, and the way of life connected to it would be lost in the new agricultural schemes. Within the salvage project, 'heritage' was defined as 'archaeological heritage', and local cultural knowledge and practices were given little value. Thus, the modern people of the region were effectively relegated to being mere bystanders of history, not much more than an afterthought to a long and interesting sequence of human settlement in this remote part of the Middle Nile valley.

Although the set-up of the salvage project privileged 'dead stones' over 'living culture', some of the archaeological missions managed to host side-projects that dealt with aspects of the present-day life of the people of the Fourth Cataract. These projects were led by anthropologists, social geographers, and architects. While generally short-term, they were dedicated to various aspects of cultural knowledge and social practices at the Fourth Cataract, including date cultivation, handicrafts, modern architecture and settlement patterns, poetry, and the various roles of women in society. These few studies appeared in conference volumes and academic journals, but some were also published online in Wikipedia articles – and thus much more accessibly to non-specialists in Sudan and

elsewhere. Architect Dieter Eigner, who had researched architecture and settlement patterns in the Fourth Cataract region, first suggested collecting these scattered studies in a single volume. Archaeologist Claudia Näser, head of the Humboldt University Nubian Expedition (H.U.N.E.) to the Fourth Cataract and executive co-editor of the *Meroitica* monograph series, took up this idea and brought Harrassowitz on board as publisher. Cornelia Kleinitz, an archaeologist who took part in the salvage campaigns at the Fourth Cataract as a rock art specialist, and who in this capacity had worked with several of the international missions, soon after became involved as co-editor of this volume.

Both editors have a deep interest in the past and the present of the Fourth Cataract region as well as having become increasingly aware of the pitfalls of conventional i.e., mainly archaeological salvage practice in contested development contexts in Sudan, such as the Merowe Dam project. The focus of this volume has thus been expanded – beyond being a collection of studies on the ways of life of the modern people of the Fourth Cataract – to include two accounts by archaeologists on the political dimension of archaeological salvage work at the Fourth Cataract and elsewhere on the Nile. As described by the editors in their paper on the politicisation of archaeology and its consequences during the salvage campaigns, the scientific community only took note of the contested nature of the Merowe Dam project and the political dimension of their involvement in the salvage campaigns, when representatives of the Manasir people, the ethnic group most drastically affected by the dam project, expelled the archaeologists from their territory. These actions, which effectively ended salvage work in Dar al-Manasir, were part of the Manasir's struggle for better terms and conditions of compensation and resettlement, including the right to settle around the new reservoir instead of having to move to far away places (Näser and Kleinitz, this volume: 269-304). Local people and their representatives appear to have assumed a close relationship between the archaeologists and the developer, the Dams Implementation Unit (DIU), who had issued the contested terms of resettlement and compensation. The archaeologists' disregard for local concerns and living culture may have been seen to mirror that of the developer, who in turn had closely associated itself with the archaeological salvage campaigns in various media. The termination of the archaeological salvage campaigns by local people, ostensibly the very people whose 'heritage' was being saved, raised a host of uncomfortable questions regarding the ethics and politics of salvage projects in Sudan and elsewhere, especially those that are associated with large development projects that lack independent Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) with a strong Cultural Resource Management (CRM) component including community consultation and participation. As numerous further dams are planned or already in construction along the Middle Nile and its tributaries, and further tens of thousands of people will be displaced, these questions urgently need to be addressed if archaeology wants to keep its relevance and legitimacy.

Khidir Abdelkarim Ahmed, in his paper "From Dam to Dam: Encounter at the Cataracts" provides a diachronic evaluation of dam building on the Nile and its effects, including the role of archaeology since the first salvage campaigns in connection with the building of the successive Aswan dams. These projects eventually resulted in the flooding of the region between the First and Second Nile Cataracts and led to the displacement of tens of thousands of Nubians (Ahmed, this volume: 253-268).

The social reality of displacement at and from the Fourth Cataract is addressed in anthropologist Valerie Hänsch's contribution, which provides a chilling account of the 'drowning' of Dar al-Manasir before its people had had the chance to move out of the reservoir area (Hänsch, this volume: 179-228). Hänsch's paper draws attention to further fundamental flaws in the setup of the Merowe Dam project, and in giving a voice to some of the affected people it sets a strong contrast to the developer's narrative claiming the success of various mitigation measures, including resettlement. Indeed, her account should serve as food for thought to all of us who were involved naively in 'saving the heritage of the Fourth Cataract' but denied responsibility towards its modern people, and who felt we could and should remain neutral while being associated with a contested development project that involved human rights violations on the part of the developer.

In acknowledgement of the people of the Fourth Cataract who are the subject of this volume, the title of this book refers to a quote in Valerie Hänsch's paper, "*Nihna nâs al-bahar* – We are the people of the river." (see Hänsch, this volume: 195 and footnote 29). The quote reflects a sentiment that arose from the political discourse among the Manasir over the dam and its effects, and specifically from the resistance against the terms imposed by the developer, which resulted in shifting perceptions of their riverine homeland and eventually in the will among many to try to retain their independence and settle around the new lake instead of moving to far away resettlement schemes. Anthropologist Sandra Calkins shifts attention away from the Fourth Cataract in discussing social tensions in Wadi Mukabrab, one of the large-scale resettlement areas for parts of the Fourth Cataract population. She highlights the often serious effects that resettlement may have on different groups of 'host populations' as well (Calkins, this volume: 229-252).

Besides Hänsch and Calkins' papers, anthropologist Kurt Beck's article on "Crisis, Innovation and the Social Domestication of the New: One Century of Manâsîr Social History" is the third contribution to this volume that is based on research undertaken outside of the salvage campaigns at the Fourth Cataract. Beck's long-term research in Dar al-Manasir has resulted in numerous publications on the economic and social history of the Manasir (see Beck, this volume: 5-48, for references). In the present contribution, he focuses on the effects of changing irrigation techniques and technologies, specifically the successful appropriation of diesel pump technology since the mid-1950s, on Manasir society and on the landscape of the Fourth Cataract. With the help of diesel-pumped Nile water, lands at higher altitude and greater distance from the river could be made arable and the 'typical' agricultural landscape of the Fourth Cataract with its extensive date palm groves and intensively worked fields was shaped, only to be submerged in 2008. David Haberlah's social-geographical study of the cultural landscape of Dar al-Manasir records land use strategies in the mid-2000s, among them date cultivation, as well as the material and non-material culture of the people living in this harsh environment (Haberlah, this volume: 49-74). Archaeologist and anthropologist Petra Weschenfelder's paper adds a female perspective on daily life at the Fourth Cataract and expectations towards resettlement, studying "Manasir Women's Contributions to Economic and Social Life" (Weschenfelder, this volume: 75-88). These studies show how the Manasir, far from being stagnant and passive bystanders of history, actively and dynamically shape their lives and their land

according to their own terms and needs – processes that are also reflected in changing settlement patterns and architectural traditions.

Four papers in this volume are dedicated to architecture at the Fourth Cataract, each with a different approach to this subject. Dieter Eigner gives a detailed synchronic overview of architecture and patterns of settlement in the Manasir village Kirbekan, including village plans (Eigner, this volume: 127-160). David Haberlah, Jutta von dem Bussche and Khidir Abdelkarim Ahmed take a diachronic social-geographical approach to study the evolution of architecture and settlement patterns in the village Atoyah on the island Sherari, also in Dar al-Manasir. These authors show how architectural conventions, including building styles, were transformed over time due to changing technological capacities, social needs, and economic factors (Haberlah, von dem Bussche and Ahmed, this volume: 161-178). Frances Welsh provides an account of building materials and styles in the et-Tereif region, an area settled by many Manasir people, even though it is located just outside the borders of Dar al-Manasir. Welsh emphasises the aesthetics of domestic architecture in her study region, and its dependencies on its natural surroundings (Welsh, this volume: 115-126). Finally, architect Nadejda Reshetnikova gives an overview of various building characteristics, such as materials, techniques, layouts, etc. closer to the dam site, deep in Shaiqiyya territory (Reshetnikova, this volume: 89-114). Her study is thus one of the few undertaken outside Dar al-Manasir in connection with the salvage project. It is also one of the few contributions that includes research on the (semi-)nomadic component of the population who lived a little further removed from the river, but were equally affected by the Merowe Dam project. Indeed, the title and content of this volume reflect the strong bias in mitigation planning and in research on the sedentary riverine population of the Fourth Cataract, leaving the (semi-)nomadic people of the region all but forgotten.

This volume cannot claim to have assembled all research that was dedicated to studying the present people of the Fourth Cataract. A few further studies remained inaccessible to us, but they will hopefully see publication in the future. The sometimes ad-hoc and far from systematic nature of research undertaken at the Fourth Cataract is reflected not only in the range of topics covered by the papers in this volume, but also in the various spelling conventions and differences in the use of terminology, which the reader will encounter across the contributions. While the editors have streamlined some terms and spellings in order to introduce consistency and facilitate reading and orientation between papers, transliterations from Arabic, especially in place names, were left as the authors supplied them. Geographer Mathias Ritter, who had also worked at the Fourth Cataract, prepared the maps at the beginning of this volume using the authors' place name information.

To close: this volume is a tribute to the people of the Fourth Cataract, past and present. By evaluating the conditions of dam construction, the salvage of 'heritage', and the fate of the affected communities from various perspectives, it aims to call into question the valuation of the past over the present, of the dead over the living, in current salvage practice in Sudan. As many more people along the Middle Nile valley face forced resettlement and the loss of their cultural identity, this volume is also a contribution to the critical discussion of the benefits and the human costs of major infrastructural development projects in Sudan and beyond.