

Salvage Operations in Egyptian Nubia

In the summer of 1962 the writer of these lines faced a new phase of the Oriental Institute program of excavation in Nubia. The first two years had been achieved largely with the financial assistance of generous friends of the Oriental Institute at home. Now, in 1962, through a grant from the state department of funds available in Egypt through Public Law 480, the challenge we faced was not that of raising money but rather of spending most wisely the ample resources with which our government had intrusted us.

The concession to excavate granted to the expedition by the Egyptian Department of Antiquities comprised a huge area: from the Sudan border to Abu Simbel on the west bank of the Nile, from the border to a point somewhat farther north on the east bank, about 28 miles in total length; in width from a few hundred yards to several miles. All this area had been covered recently by a team of archeologists sent out to investigate the region and to make a report for the guidance of prospective excavators. This report recommended that the entire area, with one or two exceptions, was *unworthy of further investigation*. However, I had visited the region in April 1960, before the report of the experts had been issued, and I had drawn my own conclusions. Thus I decided in August 1962 to begin the season of 1962/63 at Qustul, Nubia, three or four miles south of the famous Abu Simbel temple on the east bank of the Nile. It was at this very spot that Professor Walter B. Emery, now of University College, London, had made in 1931 his sensational discovery of the royal tombs of the people whom he has always persisted—though mistakenly—in identifying with the Blemmyes.

Professor Emery excavated the royal tombs of Qustul and Ballana (which face each other here on opposite banks of the Nile). I ex-

pected to find the cemeteries of the common people. We found them, and round about and between Emery's royal tombs we excavated 684 graves. But these neglected cemeteries belonged not exclusively to the Nobatae (the X-group people whose kings constructed Emery's royal tombs). For this area fell also within the limits of the somewhat earlier Meroitic Empire, which flourished for nearly a thousand years after 500 B.C. These Meroitic inhabitants of the land preceded the Nobatae, and they buried their dead at Qustul also. We excavated hundreds of their graves, and we found some of them underneath walls built by the later Nobatae, in stratification which leaves no doubt of their relative dates.

In precisely the same relative position, north of three great royal tombs, we discovered three long lines of mud-brick enclosures, some containing stone offering tables and others C-group pottery. We believe they had some important relationship to the royal burials, but they still lock up a mystery which we hope to solve before we complete our study of the vast material revealed by the excavations.

From these 684 Meroitic and X-group graves the expedition brought home to the Oriental Institute Museum hundreds of objects—many of beauty, some of historical importance, most of immense value for the study of the culture of the periods from which they come. Many of them are exhibited in the Nubian Hall of the Museum. The pottery, textiles, leather work, and jewelry are noteworthy. Fortunately for us, many of the graves were unplundered or but lightly plundered. For this reason, most of the pottery is intact, in striking contrast to our experience during the season of 1960/61, when we discovered many graves of the Blemmyes north and west of Beit el-Wali. I consider that pottery to be of



Site of High Dam at Aswan.

Dr. Seele supervising the unloading of antiquities from Egyptian Nubia.



importance scarcely unmatched in the history of Nubian archeology, yet we recovered not a single complete specimen. The plunderers evidently enjoyed smashing Blemmyes pottery.

Fearful that we should complete the Meroitic and X-group cemeteries of Qustul long before the end of the season, in February of 1963, I took several crews of our skilled Egyptian diggers and some of the Nubian laborers to an area approximately a mile and a half farther south. Here we located our first cemetery of the Egyptian New Kingdom. We believe, from the objects found, that it dates from the late Hyksos period (Seventeenth Dynasty) to the time of Ramesses II (1600-1225 B.C.). Our first New Kingdom grave had been buried under an X-group mound two thousand years later. It was an exciting discovery, but still more exciting was our discovery of the second New Kingdom grave, for that was virtual proof of the existence of a hitherto unknown New Kingdom cemetery (and, therefore, of a New Kingdom settlement) in this part of Nubia. We excavated fifty to seventy-five New Kingdom graves in this area, some of them containing as many as fifteen layers of burials in the shaft and many more in the east and west burial chambers leading off the shaft. We recovered a great deal of pottery from these graves, as well as numerous inscribed scarabs of major historical importance, several weapons and toilet articles of copper and alabaster, and sufficient decayed remains of inscribed coffins to reveal the perished splendor of the graves.

As time passed, we carried this new phase of the work farther north, in the direction of our first site. There, in the heart of the village of Qustul, on March 26, 1963, we discovered the now-famous grave V-48, with its intact west burial chamber which, with the plundered

chamber at the east end, yielded ninety-six objects, among them some of the finest ever found in Nubia. Some of the copper vessels, alabaster jars, and the wonderful copper mirror with handle in the form of a girl holding in outstretched hands the delicately curved leaves of the papyrus were undoubtedly imports from Egypt, probably directly from the imperial capital at Thebes. The inscribed coffins in the tomb contained names characteristic of the very beginning of the Eighteenth Dynasty. This discovery attracted representatives of the press and the United States government from Cairo, and it was promptly reported all over the world.

In 1963, we moved directly from Aswan to Ballana (opposite the starting place of a year ago) in early November. After two weeks of plodding in the damp, low ground among Emery's royal mounds of Ballana, we transferred our efforts to his Cemetery 221 (of the Meroitic period) about which he reported in 1935, "The graves had been badly plundered and no excavation was attempted." In less than five weeks we excavated 333 graves and recovered 700 objects. Many of the graves had been plundered, to be sure, but the ancient robbers had touched them but lightly and modern ones scarcely at all. We found in these graves a few textiles; some important glassware; a few leather quivers and iron arrowheads; splendid toilet articles, one an ointment tube of exquisitely carved ebony in perfect condition; and a vast array of pottery, including specimens which will certainly rate as the finest to have survived from the Meroitic age. Practically all this remarkable pottery (and the other objects as well) have been given to the Oriental Institute, so that our museum will have from the past two seasons alone the finest collection of Meroitic pottery in the world. One of our Meroitic graves contained



Early 18th Dynasty copper mirror from Qustul in Egyptian Nubia.

a large copper coin of King Ptolemy III (246–222 B.C.); thus we know that the cemetery flourished at that time or later, perhaps much later.

After completing the work at Cemetery 221, we spent several discouraging weeks excavating a dune-engulfed Meroitic settlement closer to the river, in which we believed, owing to the similarity of recovered pottery, that some of the very people lived who were buried in the cemetery.

Excavations in 1962/63 had mainly been devoted to cemeteries of the New Kingdom, Meroitic, X-group, and (in smaller measure) Christian periods. We had merely touched upon remains of the A-group (about 3000–2000 B.C.) and the C-group (2000–1500 B.C.). These two periods therefore represented gaps in our coverage of Nubian history by our excavation. It was most desirable that we should fill these gaps.

Actually, excavations had already begun in the previous season in Cemetery 224 in South Qustul, described by Emery much earlier as “a plundered C-group cemetery.” But we had concluded too quickly that Emery was right, and in abandoning it had made our most serious mistake of the season. Now, after first tackling another C-group cemetery nearby, likewise declared to be unworthy of further investigation, and finding it far from ruined by plunderers, we took heart and threw all our strength into the thorough investigation of Cemeteries 226 and 224, in that order. No. 226 turned out to belong to the late C-group period, with a number of graves on the south edge dating to the early New Kingdom (they were the southernmost New Kingdom graves in Egyptian Nubia). When we had completed Cemetery 226 with gratifying success, I realized that I had been overhasty in abandoning No. 224 the year before. It was virtually in

sight of Cemetery 226, and a simple matter to transfer our activities such a short distance. Because of the great circular superstructures of stone which conceal the actual graves, these tombs are exceedingly onerous to excavate, and the workers do not perform with much enthusiasm. In this case they remembered the meager results of last year. And then things began to happen. As we cleared away the deep earth and rubble which had collected between the superstructures, the workers began to find great quantities of choice C-group pottery, black-incised ware with interesting designs and occasionally exquisitely executed in their primitive style (our finest object of the year was one of these), elegant black-topped red ware, crude brown ware with fascinating incised designs, and larger white pots. Many of these were found upside down, yet they must be supposed to have been intended for providing the dead with food and water. Nearly all the pottery in this cemetery was intact. It was regularly placed outside the superstructure, while the graves of the dead were inside. In the graves, along with the bodies, we found the jewelry and other personal objects which had been useful to them in life: an occasional mirror, a palette for eye paint, bracelets, anklets, beads, and so forth.

We moved from the C-group excavations to another "plundered" cemetery, this time of the A-group. This contained vast graves of the earliest period of Nubian history. Many were unplundered and yielded fine pottery and alabaster vessels. Some of these were badly ruined by water and contained hard masses of cement-like earth which required us to chisel each object out of its position in the graves. In this cemetery we excavated also two camel graves. We shall subject the bones to scientific tests to learn whether we have discovered the earliest example of a camel yet known in the

Nile Valley. A few weeks later we moved northward and discovered an entirely new cemetery, not reported by any of the earlier travelers. This turned out to be a completely unplundered A-group site, with graves free from water spoilage. Here we recovered fine intact pottery, almost eggshell in thinness; a beautiful set of copper tools; and numerous palettes and grinding stones for eye paint, some of the former still green from the malachite used for shading the eyes. We also discovered in this cemetery the pathetic New Kingdom grave of a woman and her newborn baby. She had been given a splendid burial, accompanied with rich and beautiful jewelry, including a number of exquisite inscribed scarabs and plaques.

The final week or ten days of the season we spent in a test excavation of the lofty ridge of Qasr el-Wizz, almost on the Sudan border, on the west bank of the Nile. This had been previously reported to be a medieval "palace," but it had never actually been excavated. We discovered that the "palace" was actually a Christian monastery. We located some of the cells of the monks, with Coptic inscriptions identifying two of them by name. We discovered the rock-cut tombs of five of the chief ecclesiastics of Qasr el-Wizz, also the catacombs where the rank and file of the inhabitants were buried in large rock chambers. I felt convinced that there should be a chapel on the rocky height, probably on the axis of the principal group of rock-cut tombs. And there, indeed, it was. We cleared the south half of the chapel, discovering the apse, altar, and pulpit, the columns which supported the arch over the apse, and one of their carved and painted capitals, as well as a number of other carved and painted architectural elements. Beside the apse we opened up a small rectangular pit in the floor, two sides of which bore long in-



Excavations in Meroitic and X-group cemeteries in north Qustul, Nubia.

scriptions in Coptic and Greek. Scraps of papyrus which turned up from time to time gave us hope that there might be a library in some part of the great building, but, before we could seek farther, we had to bring our test dig to a close in order to pass the site of the new High Dam before it should forever block the passage of boats up and down the Nubian Nile.

In the season of 1962/63 the expedition brought forty-six boxes of finds to the Cairo Museum for the division. In 1963/64 we brought fifty boxes. The Department of Antiquities was even more generous than before; this year the Oriental Institute received all but twenty-seven of nearly twenty-five hundred objects found. If this material can be thoroughly and competently published, the result will be a comprehensive survey of Nubia from the earliest times to the Christian period, with the only gap being the time from the end of the New Kingdom to the Meroitic period, which appears actually to be a blank in the history of Nubia.

In the season of 1962/63 the staff of the expedition consisted of the writer; Professor Louis V. Zabkar, Egyptologist, of Loyola University; James E. Knudstad, Architect, and Alfred J. Hoerth, Archeologist, of the Oriental Institute; Otto J. Schaden, Photographer, graduate student at the Oriental Institute; Labib Habachi, Egyptian Egyptologist; and Miss Sylvia Ericson, Hostess.

In 1963 the expedition had an entirely new staff, with the exception of the director: Professor Carl E. De Vries, Egyptologist, of Trinity Divinity School, Chicago; Donald D. Bickford, Architect, of Honolulu, Hawaii; Duane Burnor, Archeologist, of Adrian, Michigan; Boleslaw Marczuk, Egyptologist, graduate student of the Oriental Institute; Miss Simone Deprez, Hostess and Archeologist, of Zurich, Switzerland. Mr. Fouad Yakoub and Mr. Farouk Guma were the Inspectors assigned to the expedition by the Department of Antiquities.

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Field Director