

## **THE ROLE OF ARCHAEOLOGY IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTESTED DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS: A CASE STUDY FROM THE AFRICAN CONTINENT [\[1\]](#)**

Archaeologists worldwide are increasingly drawn into violent conflict not only in the context of wars. Another setting is in contested development projects, in which archaeological operations are intricately linked to the large-scale destruction of cultural resources and people's livelihoods. On the African continent, a region often overlooked in discussions of "archaeology in conflict", rapid economic development has opened up several such scenes. Prominent among these is the Merowe Dam at the Fourth Nile Cataract in northern Sudan. Functional since 2008, it is the largest hydropower project recently completed in Africa. It is vital to the Sudanese economy and expected to nearly double Sudan's power capacity. The Merowe Dam was mainly built by a Chinese joint venture, but European construction companies were also involved.

From the reservoir area, now stretching over 170 km of the Nile Valley, c. 70.000 small-scale farmers were displaced. 67% of them belong to the tribe of the Manasir, the remainder coming from other ethnic groups. Terms of their resettlement and compensation were issued by the government-linked MDPIU, the Merowe Dam Project Implementation Unit. These terms were considered inadequate by affected groups, and human rights organisations pointed out human rights violations. Conflicts escalated later to armed violence when local people staged protests against the conditions of their resettlement and compensation.

After a call by the Sudanese Antiquities Service in 2003, about a dozen missions became involved in the archaeological salvage operations of the loosely knit Merowe Dam Archaeological Salvage Project. Fully engaged in their projects, the archaeologists were utterly surprised when Manasir representatives requested four missions to stop their work in early 2006. In the following winter several missions had to be aborted in mid-season, others were not permitted to work at all. In winter 2007/8 several missions attempted to resume work, but none of them succeeded.

The salvage project terminated, with large tracts of land remaining unsurveyed and excavations unfinished.

The involved Manasir parties declared that by preventing the archaeological work they hoped to delay the flooding and raise awareness of their cause. A further argument concerned the failure of the Sudanese government to enter into an agreement that would allow archaeological finds to be displayed in a local museum built in the Manasir area, and not to be removed to distant national and international museums. This "local preservation argument" was clearly secondary, arising from the confrontation with western notions of the value of cultural heritage, as evidenced by the presence of the salvage missions. It also arose from their consultations with the London-based advocacy group Corner House, which advised the Manasir - among other things - about the expulsion of the archaeologists, portraying these as profiteers of the dam and passive by-standers to human rights violations.

Indeed, the archaeologists, while coming to the Fourth Cataract with the best intentions, had widely ignored its contemporary context. They were oblivious to the fact that the MDPIU expressly associated itself with their - independently funded - work, using the salvage campaign to demonstrate its proper conduct and as cover-up for multiple other shortcomings. Claiming professional neutrality, the archaeologists saw their stance backfire badly.

What are the implications of the Merowe Dam case? First, it impressively illustrates how in a world of globalizing conflicts and globalizing strategies to cope with them, cultural heritage is increasingly instrumentalized by a wide range of stakeholders to promote very diverging interests. Archaeological sites have not only become a target: taken hostage, they are turned into weapons themselves. Obviously, a solution to the present conflict could not be achieved on the level of archaeology, as the roots of the problem lay in the general make-up of the Merowe Dam project. While archaeologists went to considerable lengths to document archaeological sites, no attention was given to the living culture of the affected people [\[2\]](#) and the entire project lacked a cultural resource management program as well as community consultation.

In the Sudan, further dams are planned for the near future. In one affected area, inhabitants have already declared their intention to deny archaeologists access to their territory from the very beginning. Based on the experience at the Fourth Cataract, we advocate an archaeology that truly and critically engages with its contemporary context, even if this means discomforts and scientific restrictions. In

order to help secure human rights and proper cultural resource management, archaeologists can and should promote the application of existing regulations, e.g. by the World Bank, and support initiatives from within the archaeological community, such as the 2007 "Call of Nouakchott for Preventive Archaeology in Africa". In the long run archaeology will only be able to justify itself and the objects of its study, when we manage to develop more integrative approaches to the definition of our profession and our scientific best practice.

[1] A more detailed presentation of this case is in preparation by the authors.

[2] An exception in that respect was a social geographical survey conducted by the Humboldt University Nubian Expedition (H.U.N.E.); see [www2.hu-berlin.de/daralmanasir/](http://www2.hu-berlin.de/daralmanasir/).

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