



REVISITING MIDDLE KINGDOM INTERACTIONS IN NUBIA: THE URONARTI REGIONAL ARCHAEOLOGICAL PROJECT

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The relationship between Egypt and Nubia in the Egyptian Middle Kingdom is one of the best known and most studied interactions between ancient Egypt and one of its neighbors. This has been possible because the Egyptians built a series of monumental mud-brick fortresses in Lower Nubia during the 12th Dynasty, when they assumed direct control of this territory. These

monuments were excavated in two great waves, the first in the early twentieth century, and the second in the 1960s ahead of the inundation of this area by the waters that rose behind the Aswan High Dam.¹ The destruction of almost all—it was long thought all—traces of the fortresses beneath the lake created a problem for scholars: while new questions and techniques for examining



Figure 1: The island of Uronarti looking approximately south. In the foreground is the fortress itself, with the granaries in the near section. (Kite aerial photograph, authors)



Figure 2: A sample of sherds of indigenous wares collected from the surface of the dumps south of the fortress, including incised cooking vessels and one fragment of a Kerma beaker (lower right). (Laurel Bestock)

colonialism were being developed in archaeology more broadly, this rich area of colonial interaction could produce no new data. This changed in 2004, when two of the fortresses were found by Derek Welsby to be above the water line.² In 2011 we formed the Uronarti Regional Archaeological Project with the specific goal of addressing Egyptian colonialism in a regional context, using modern archaeological methods and articulating research questions quite different than what earlier excavators had asked. This overview will give a brief introduction to the site itself, our research aims, and the initiatives of the first two short seasons.

Uronarti is an island in the Nile, home to one of the southernmost of the string of fortresses. The island is now much smaller than it was before the construction of the dam and is seasonally linked to the west bank of the river by new land formed by silt deposition. The fortress itself occupies the north rocky spur of the island. It is roughly trapezoidal in shape, 370 m long and 114 m wide, and contains buildings including those identified as granaries, an administrative building or commandant's house, and barracks (Figure 1). Some structures probably related to production were built exterior to the fortress on its southern side.

Our principal aim in returning to Uronarti is to investigate colonialism as a complex interplay between the aims and policies of the colonizing power and the agency of local communities. This requires that we turn from the standard focus on Egyptian bureaucracy and the reasons the fortresses were constructed in the first place to the fortresses as places of lived experience. Some keys to this local, contextual approach, will be analysis of modifications of monumental structures over time, evidence for activities outside the fortress itself, and evidence for interactions between the garrison and the indigenous population.

Two short seasons have been conducted at Uronarti, totalling five weeks on site. Access and accommodation are limiting factors, as Uronarti is currently quite remote; there is no permanent nearby population. We have begun to document and explore the site using the following methods: topographic survey;

magnetometry survey (this proved disappointing given erosion and lack of deposition at the site); photographic documentation including aerial kite photography, which is being used to produce three-dimensional models; limited excavation; surface survey with collection (areas for collection determined both randomly and purposively); and regional survey. We have also begun an oral history project, speaking to those who lived on this island before the lake changed the local landscape.

Our work thus far suggests that detailed architectural documentation of the fortress will help us illuminate a more complex building history than was previously understood. One helpful factor is that there appear to be two morphologically distinct types of mud brick, with apparent chronological differences in use. The later bricks were used to modify both large and small buildings within the fortresses. Some buildings with thin



Figure 3: The lowest course of stones in a small hut, one of approximately 25. Though the area of the huts is distant from the fortress itself, the associated ceramics demonstrate that the populations were linked. (Kite aerial photograph, authors)

walls are constructed entirely of the later bricks.

The amount and type of interaction between the garrisons and indigenous populations has been contested in previous scholarship on the fortress system. Our initial surveys indicate that, while there is no known major occupation site of the contemporary indigenous culture in the immediate vicinity, there was interaction between Nubians and the garrison at Uronarti. This is demonstrated by the constant presence of small percentages of local wares in the fortress dumps (Figure 2). These include a number of sherds of incised open vessels used in cooking, suggesting a possible Nubian element of the population within the fortress itself.

Our initial work has also demonstrated the presence of substantial remains outside the fortress, both on the island and in the greater region. Some of these were previously known but not published, such as a fortification wall that runs nearly 5 km along the west bank of the river. Others are new discoveries, such as an area of at least 25 dry-stone huts built some 250 m away from the fortress on the island. Surface survey of the area of these huts and excavation of one of them (Figure 3) demonstrate that the population here was contemporary with and dependent upon the Egyptian garrison at the fortress.

Collectively, our finds thus far show the great promise held by Uronarti and the surrounding region for approaching Egyptian colonialism as a dynamic, negotiated, long-term, set of interactions that occurred within a local context. We hope to expand this project in coming years in order to continue to bring modern archaeological methods and questions to this rediscovered outpost.

NOTES

- ¹ Uronarti fortress itself was excavated at lightning speed in the first of these waves. It was inadequately published 40 years after the excavation, by someone who was not involved in the original work. Dows Dunham, *Second Cataract Forts II: Uronarti, Shelfak, Mirgissa* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1967). Some survey work was done at the site in the second wave and has appeared in the reports of Anthony Mills, primarily in the journal *Kush*.
- ² Derek Welsby, "Hidden Treasures of Lake Nubia," *Sudan and Nubia* 8 (2004): 103–104.