

polemical positions will find their opponents, but no scholar of Greek, Balkan, or late Ottoman thought can afford to ignore *Byzantium's* propositions about how empires survive and accumulate into nations.

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Flooded Pasts: UNESCO, Nubia, and the Recolonization of Archaeology

William Carruthers (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022). Pp. 336. \$62.95 cloth. ISBN: 9781501766442

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On a recent trip within Egypt to my maternal family village in resettlement Nubia north of Aswan, we visited the Philae Temple's evening sound and light show. A UNESCO World Heritage site, Philae is a beneficiary of the organization's International Campaign to Save the Monuments of Nubia, which was launched at the request of Egypt and Sudan in 1960 on the eve of the Aswan High Dam's construction. The campaign raised funds for archaeological excavations in soon-to-be drowned Nubia as well as for "saving" spectacular monuments like Philae through relocation. Set against sonorous orchestral music, the show dramatically narrated this feat of modern salvage as we walked alongside dozens of other visitors through the artfully lit stone complex. The forty-five minute narration made no mention of the Nubians who had lived among these ancient remains, whose historic homeland was flooded by the dam waters. "In Nubia," as William Carruthers notes, "people seemed to be missing" (p. 40). Sensing the institutional disinterest in connecting the temple we were touring with the displaced relatives we had just visited, our group quickly lost personal interest in the show. As the Spanish tourists next to us paid careful attention to the recorded narration of what had become "world heritage," my mother browsed on her phone through the family photos we had taken, while my aunt played with one of the many cats living on the island complex.

Flooded Pasts: UNESCO, Nubia, and the Recolonization of Archaeology asks why an institution like UNESCO, founded in the period of widespread political decolonization across the Global South and shaped by the postwar ethos of liberal cosmopolitanism, did not take an interest in safeguarding Nubians, protecting only their monuments. For answers, Carruthers looks to the intersections of archaeology, the emergence of transnational heritage regimes, and the varied ambitions of both former colonial powers and nascent postcolonial states. He argues that understanding how the Nubian past came to be de-peopled, and how Nubians came to be a people so easily displaceable, necessitates attention to the ways in which archaeology's own colonial past continued to structure its quotidian practices even during the era of formal decolonization. This disciplinary coloniality, Carruthers maintains, is evidenced at various scales: from how field notes were recorded and photographs taken to the living arrangements on sites to which ancient remains were deemed worthy of study and preservation. More broadly, he shows how UNESCO's Nubia campaign, despite the budgetary shortfalls, bureaucratic gaffes, and power plays that bedeviled it, made possible the very category of "world heritage." Rich in detail and carefully argued, *Flooded Pasts'* multifaceted exploration of the Nubia campaign makes an important contribution to understanding the



structural imbrications of knowledge production, colonialism, and nation-building in the Middle East and North Africa.

The UNESCO campaign's erasure of Nubians was noted by scholars of the region from the start. The anthropologist Robert Fernea, who led the Ford Foundation–funded ethnographic survey of Nubia by the American University in Cairo (AUC), remembers passing the soon to be relocated Nubian monument of Abu Simbel on a boat trip up the Nile and his retort to an archaeological colleague, who questioned his lack of interest in it: "What are we coming to indeed when millions of dollars are spent to raise a monument of stone and scarcely a fraction of that is spent on the thousands of people who must go the way of the monument?"¹ The major contribution of *Flooded Pasts* is its meticulous analysis of the sociotechnical means by which this erasure was accomplished, drawing on the author's initial training in archaeology and a later doctorate in the history of science.

For example, in Chapter 2, "Documenting Nubia," Carruthers focuses on the mundane paperwork of archaeological practice, including index cards, registers, and account books, to track the various ways in which "paper made Nubia" (p. 66). Indeed, a key theme across the book's chapters is the different ways in which "Nubia has never simply been a Nubian creation" (p. 273). Of note with respect to this claim is Chapter 6 on "Nubia in the (Non-Aligned) World," which centers on the efforts of newly independent countries, like India, to become "excavating equals" of the West (p. 224). Some Indian archaeologists went so far as to stake a claim for an "Indian Nubia," positing a possible link between Nubia's ancient past and their country's Dravidians. As Carruthers shows, this ethnocentrism was not dissimilar to how many British and American archaeologists valued excavations in Egyptian Nubia for affording an opportunity to better understand the "origin" of Western civilization. Meanwhile, other nonaligned countries, such as Kuwait, contributed funds to the Nubia campaign less out of commitment to archaeological history and more to demonstrate devotion to Nasser's pan-Arabism as a protective bulwark against the territorial claims of neighboring Iraq. These examples support the book's central contention that the Nubia campaign took shape through global, often competing, constellations of interests that replayed colonialist logics even while claiming to resist and transcend them.

To chart these, *Flooded Pasts* draws principally on sources from UNESCO's voluminous archive in Paris and university museum archives related to Nubian archaeology in the United States and Europe as well as records from Egypt's National Archives and the Nubia Museum. The author expansively makes sense of agency correspondence, ministerial memos, field diaries, excavation photographs and reports, and newspaper coverage related to the Nubia campaign through the lenses of science and technology studies and critical archival theory to shed new light on an impressive range of issues, whether Cold War geopolitics, bureaucratic rationalities, or the scientific endurance of racialized typologies. In addition, Carruthers devotes considerable attention to individual scholars and their professional trajectories in Nubia. There are many names and relationships of which to keep track: those who collaborated on grant proposals, who shared an adviser, and who excavated at various sites. This approach makes clear that the de-peopling of Nubia took structural shape through the individual efforts of many people, foregrounding the human agency at the heart of abstractions like coloniality.

Flooded Pasts is a timely contribution to community-engaged archaeology as a decolonizing praxis. Responsive to the discipline's long histories of colonial extraction valuing "pots, not people" (p. 279), this mode of archaeology centers the interests and concerns of impacted communities within knowledge production. The book's concluding call to institutional gatekeepers to make their Nubia archives more accessible to Nubians is a welcome one, especially

¹ Fernea, Elizabeth, and Robert Fernea, *Nubian Ethnographies* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 1990), 35.

as there is, still, a comparatively small number of scholars of Nubian heritage in either the Western or MENA academies. As such archives become more open to Nubians “to tell other, different stories” (p. 280), perhaps, then, the de-peopled vision of the region, so deftly unpacked by Carruthers, can finally be interrogated by the people most denied this past.


At the same time, the book’s arguments could have been strengthened by examining in more depth salvage projects related to the imminent flooding of Nubia by the dam that *did* pay attention to people, not pots. Here, the ethnographic survey led by Fernea under the aegis of AUC’s Social Research Center stands out. Commenting on the importance of such an undertaking, the American anthropologist argued that it was “unthinkable that a traditional way of life should pass out of existence without an adequate record,” and expressed his hope that such a study would benefit “the Nubian people themselves.”² The documentary records produced by the survey, especially the photographs of everyday life in Nubia, have in the ensuing decades been creatively repurposed by community members as strategic resources for heritage revitalization and for the cultivation of a collective memory of a lost homeland across generations. Given Carruthers’ claim that the archaeological erasure of contemporary Nubians is an instance of “recolonization,” a critical examination of a contemporaneous salvage project that explicitly defined itself against such erasure, even as it inevitably replayed the colonial logics embedded in the very idea of salvage, surely would have yielded important comparative insight.

Nevertheless, *Flooded Pasts* stands as a landmark contribution to scholarship on modern Nubia. The nascent field of Nubian studies has been dominated by the history and archaeology of ancient and medieval Nubia, as even a cursory look at the program for the International Conference for Nubian Studies, held every four years, makes clear. By examining how the construction of knowledge about Nubia’s ancient past created the conditions for the displacement of its present-day inhabitants, this book will be of interest not only to scholars of the modern Middle East and Africa interested in questions of race and indigeneity as well as heritage and material culture, but also to community-engaged archaeologists and historians of science working across different world regions. I also might purchase copies for my Nubian family to read should we ever decide to give the Philae sound and light show a second chance.

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My Egypt Archive

**Alan Mikhail (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022). Pp. 184.
\$26.00 cloth, \$20.00 paper. ISBN 9780300260991**

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If the Greek root *arche* embodies “both a beginning and a domain for the exercise of power,” then, as Alan Mikhail deftly demonstrates, archival research in Egypt likewise functioned as a point of origin for becoming a historian and an arena in which the power of the Egyptian

² Fernea, Robert, “Ethnological Survey of Nubia: Statement of Purpose and Organization,” in *Nubian Encounters*, ed. Nicholas Hopkins and Soheir Mehanna (Cairo: American University of Cairo Press, 2010), 87.