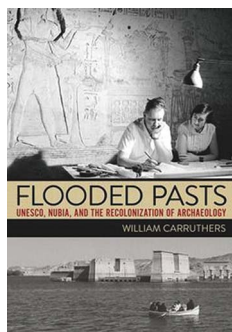


WILLIAM CARRUTHERS. 2022. *Flooded pasts: UNESCO, Nubia, and the recolonization of archaeology*. Ithaca (NY) & London: Cornell University Press; 978-1-5017-6644-2 hardback \$59.95.



The UNESCO Nubia campaign (1960–80) called on archaeologists and Egyptologists from across the globe to study and excavate sites in the Nile valley before it was flooded due to the building of the Aswan High Dam. This resulted in more than 40 projects and more than 20 dismantled and relocated monuments as well as the displacement of many people.

In his book, William Carruthers aims to deconstruct UNESCO's Nubia campaign by unveiling the colonialist and post-colonialist legacies of such 'flooded past(s)'. Carruthers' attempt removes the veil of the 'salvage' mission and elucidates how such a representation, made possible by archaeological and preservation efforts, completely obscures the displacement of Nubian people. He argues how the primary focus of the campaign was to preserve the monuments rather than the people and how the latter's relocation to Kom Ombo and Khashm el-Ghirba did not consider family relationships or the relationships of the people with their past. The focus is on the emotional trauma to families and the intellectual affective heritage loss.

The book shows clearly how the nation-states and national development policies operated, and how foreign missions did not want to work in Nubia and had "to mask their disdain for the work at hand" because it did not yield any proper antiquities for their museums (p. 119). Carruthers thoroughly discusses how fragmented the knowledge produced in terms of archives of the Nubian campaign between Aswan, Cairo and Paris was and how, at many times, the importance of the excavation and the relevant documentation exceeded that of the excavated—sometimes discarded—object(s). The retained objects and their related archives also reflected colonial racial perceptions of Egyptian populations. The archaeological interventions in Egyptian and Sudanese Nubia are compared and contrasted, the latter one colonially labelled 'terra incognita'. Such deconstruction also unmasks the UNESCO colonial agenda of 'Universalist' heritage and how it put different values on the 'Universalist' heritage of Egypt and Sudan. It was not only UNESCO but also the different institutions, such as the Egypt Exploration Society and other international missions, that went to Sudan not for the altruistic rescue missions of 'human heritage' but for a bigger share of the finds from the 'salvage' work. A more important point is that the documentation of the Nubian campaign was removed from Sudan and Egypt, stripping the indigenous populations of their agency to produce knowledge about their past. The missions in Egypt and Sudan favoured Pharaonic material over Nubian and prehistoric material culture. The excavation reports have contributed to a space in which the High Dam's social traces have

been criticised immensely. The book also discusses why UNESCO did not seek to ‘save Nubians’ in the same way it sought to save the monuments.

Carruthers touches beautifully on the historical context of post-war politics and how it affected the campaign. The discussions also make it explicit how the art scene sometimes replicated racial, colonial stereotypes of Nubia, such as in the art of Egyptian painter Adham Wanly, and contrasts it with the epic work of novelist Sonaallah Ibrahim of the *Man of the High Dam*. Carruthers moves from art and literature to analyse the notebooks of the excavating archaeologists and how Nubians and even workmen from Upper Egypt (Qufties), were referred to as nothing more than mere numbers on wage lists and how this made the Nubian campaign a “largely Western Affair”. Despite it being a Western affair, the book sheds light on disgruntled British officials refusing Egypt a grant for salvaging the temples at Abu Simbel and on the poorly managed money for the Indian archaeological mission, who could barely make ends meet. For the Indian archaeologists, the objects taken from Nubia were more important for contemporary national arguments of a Dravidian connection. Such objects coming from a far land were seen as “the spectacle of the past nation’s presumed transnational mobility” (p. 232).

Carruthers also makes a point of looking at the gender imbalance in the Western archaeological missions. Throughout the chapters, the French ‘Iron Lady’ Christiane Desroches Noblecourt, who had a substantial role in the campaign, is heavily criticised. On the other hand, the wives (Mollie and Nellie) of the major Egyptologists and archaeologists, who sometimes undertook archaeological tasks such as drawing and washing pottery, were left out of scientific publications and other outputs; their role was limited to providing food and house management for the archaeological missions. Furthermore, the book’s Introduction shows a superficial online post of an ‘orphan image’ with an equally posturing academic reaction (p. 2). The photo of the woman standing next to Abu Simbel’s Ramses II face is not of archaeologist Wafaa Refaat, as misquoted in the post of the online magazine *Cairo Scene* and by Carruthers, but rather of the late Tohfa Handoussa: a professor of Egyptian Archaeology at Cairo University, who is also called ‘the mother of Egyptian archaeologists’. Despite the demonstrated sensitivity to gender in the archaeological missions, the author has fallen into the trap of being blind as to how androcentrism went hand in hand with colonialism. The reaction to the online post as ‘clickbait’ ignores the lack of accessibility of the majority of Egyptians to the knowledge of the lack of published material. The fact that the late Handoussa took part in the salvage campaign should have been highlighted instead of only criticising Noblecourt.

The author reflects on how difficult it was for a well-trained researcher like himself to reach the archival sources yet accuses the *Cairo Scene* of using a ‘clickbait image’, disregarding the fact that Egyptians face the same challenges of accessing the archives, it is difficult but not impossible. To provide an authentic decolonised narrative a stronger engagement with the Egyptian textual sources is required, such as the National Egyptian Archive (Ministry of Public Works, Prime Minister’s Office, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and others) and the archives of the parliament and senate before and after 1952. Carruthers criticises “the view from the boat”—meaning the perspective of the foreign researchers from the focus of the River Nile

—but only delivers his own view from the boat. In disregarding the different indigenous sources that would have presented a richer narrative, he did not go beyond colonial decoloniality. One example in the Introduction is that “by the mid-1970s, it seemed that Nubia and Nubians had disappeared for good” (p. 4). Such overgeneralised statements could have been easily deconstructed with sources such as the long report on Nubians’ rights at the Egyptian parliament on 13 June 1976, giving the reader a more balanced understanding of the campaign that shaped Egyptian archaeological practice, the lives of the Nubians and UNESCO.

Carruthers’ book unmasks the Nubian campaign and opens the way for a critical debate but could have gone far deeper in illuminating the Nubian side of the story.

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