

Collaborative Archaeology and Conservation at Jebel Barkal

Protecting Heritage during the Civil War in Sudan

By Suzanne Davis and Geoff Emberling

In March 2023, we had just returned from a successful field season at Jebel Barkal, Sudan. Going in, we had an unusually ambitious work plan—in addition to advancing a wide range of archaeological research at the site, we would welcome new foreign and Sudanese team members; start *and* finish most of the conservation work for a major temple (FIG. 1); increase our community engagement efforts in and around Karima, the city adjacent to the site; begin to sift and clear large piles of backdirt left by the American archaeologist George Reisner when he excavated at the site in 1916–1920; and develop and co-teach a conservation and site-management planning workshop with key Sudanese colleagues. Check, check, check, check, check, and

check! We accomplished all that we set out to do and more.

Our time in Sudan ended with the workshop, which was held in the capital city of Khartoum and engaged high-level leaders in Sudan’s National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums (NCAM). In addition to productive discussions with this group, the workshop gave us the opportunity to hear from NCAM colleagues about exciting new work happening across Sudan and to see NCAM’s brand-new headquarters in downtown Khartoum. We were riding high, and the future looked bright.

A month later, Khartoum was under attack as rival factions of Sudan’s military fought for control of the country. The conflict developed quickly, with virtually no warning. Our colleagues

who lived in Khartoum texted us photos of the city on fire, sent audio clips of bombs being dropped, told us about the horrific things they were witnessing, and tried to figure out how to get themselves and their families to safety. NCAM headquarters was commandeered, and the National Museum was occupied by soldiers. Fighting even briefly spread as far north as Jebel Barkal—about 500 kilometers away—as the military took over a military airfield across the Nile.

Most of our colleagues are now safe, although many are refugees in Egypt or are displaced inside Sudan. None of them have a paycheck any longer, since Sudan currently has no functioning government. As it became clear that the country would remain in the midst of a civil war for some time, we began



Figure 1. From left to right, conservator Elmontaser Dafalla with an assistant, conservation builder Sefian Mutwakil, archaeologist El-Hassan Ahmed Mohammed, and conservation architect David Flory discuss resetting fallen column drums in Temple B700—a temple dedicated to the Nubian god Osiris-Dedwen—at Jebel Barkal. Photo by Suzanne Davis.



Figure 2. People touring the site of Jebel Barkal in May 2023. Photo by Sami Elamin.

to wonder what we could do to support our Sudanese colleagues and to protect and preserve the sites where we have all worked together. As it turns out, we have been able to do a lot.

We are currently receiving support through the Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation (AFCP) large grants program for our work at Jebel Barkal. Funded by the U.S. Department of State, our AFCP project aims to improve conservation, site protection, and community engagement at Jebel Barkal and to do so in a fully collaborative way, with projects led jointly by Sudanese and foreign team members. The AFCP award is extremely competitive, and our application to the program was successful in part because of the collaborative structure of the project team. We established this structure primarily so that we could work in a reparative way in Sudan, a country with a long history of exploitative, extractive archaeological research. We wanted to invest in existing

cross-cultural collaborations and develop new relationships. For us, this work builds on collaborative practices we have developed with colleagues and residents at the nearby site and village of El-Kurru, Sudan, where we have worked for a decade.

When we established the collaborative structure for the AFCP project, we were not planning for a civil war. Yet now that foreigners have no real entry path into the country—there is no civil aviation and land borders are effectively closed to nonnationals—the collaborative nature of our team has immediate, practical benefits.

All the AFCP grant projects we had planned can continue without the foreign team members on-site, since each one already has a Sudanese lead. Our colleagues who would otherwise not have any paid work in archaeology or conservation are still able to be paid with grant funds. With only slight adjustments to the project budget, we have been able to allocate even more

money for on-site work, since we are not paying for foreign team members to travel to Sudan.

At the same time that the civil war has displaced millions of people in Sudan, it has also changed the priorities and possibilities for ways we can help. Huge numbers of internally displaced people (IDPs) have traveled north, and many are seeing sites like Jebel Barkal, which is a UNESCO World Heritage site, for the first time (FIG. 2). Outreach, education, and community engagement were already high priorities for us, but we are now focusing even more effort on them, with learning activities for children, on-site walking tours, and multiple community events held each month.

Activities with children have a special place in our work right now because our colleagues are regularly welcoming children from the many IDP refugee shelters in Karima. These children explore the site museum and pyramids with archaeologists, watch a

short film about ancient Kush, spend time relaxing and drawing together, and are fed a meal (FIGS. 3–4). We plan to repeat these activities over the next six months so that all the children in the camps have a chance to visit the site.

Archaeological work also resumed in October of this year, particularly continuing to screen backdirt from the old Reisner excavations (as shown on season 11, episode 2, of the documentary *Expedition Unknown* when Josh Gates and his crew visited the site earlier this year). Archaeologists are documenting small finds discovered during this work, removal of the big piles of dirt is improving visibility and legibility of the site for visitors, and visits by schoolchildren are planned so that they can see archaeological work in action. The dramatically increased foot traffic from IDPs does pose risks to site protection and preservation, but site-protection projects have also sped up.

Our Sudanese colleagues are, of course, leading all this work, with key local archaeologist Sami Elamin at the helm. Here in Ann Arbor, we provide as much administrative and financial support as we can, assisted by multiple U-M coworkers, including Tamika Mohr, the Kelsey Museum’s chief administrator.

Jebel Barkal is only one site in Sudan, and our grant funding will not last forever. Both now and in the future, Sudan’s cultural heritage sites and the archaeologists, conservators, and curators who care for them need more support. But at this moment, we are glad that our project is able to do what it can. Fully collaborative archaeological work matters, not only because it’s the right thing to do but also because—as we so clearly see demonstrated here—without it, you might just be completely stuck. ▲

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Figure 3. Children touring the Jebel Barkal museum with archaeologist Sami Elamin (at right). Photo by Mohammed Ahmed Abbas.



Figure 4. Children holding hieroglyphics worksheets and the Sudanese flag at the Jebel Barkal pyramids. Photo by Mohammed Ahmed Abbas.

For more information and updates on the Jebel Barkal Archaeological Project, visit sites.lsa.umich.edu/jbap.