Investigating ancient Sudan

INTERVIEW WITH NEAL SPENCER

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NEAL SPENCER holds a PhD from the University of Cambridge on pharaonic temple construction, and has worked at the British Museum since 2000. Having worked at many sites in Egypt since 1997, and in Sudan since 2004 (on the Merowe Dam Archaeological Salvage Campaign), he instigated a new research project at the site of Amara West in 2008. He also set up the Museum's International Training Programme, which has created a global network of museum curators and heritage professionals, including Sudanese specialists.

Could you give an overview of the relationship between the British Museum and Sudan?

Important antiquities from Sudan have been in the collection, and on display, since 1835. Two monumental pink granite lions were brought back for Lord Prudhoe from Gebel Barkal, one of the main temple sites near the fourth cataract on the Nile in Northern Sudan. These statues originally came from Soleb, a temple built in the reign of the Egyptian pharaoh Amenhotep III around 1370BCE.

Today, our collection spans the whole of Sudanese history, amounting to around 10,000 objects from deep prehistory to the present day. The collection mostly comes from Northern Sudan, in an area that is often referred to as Nubia, along the banks of the Nile river. The other regions have either not received much archaeological attention, or have environmental conditions not conducive to preservation: less arid, more moisture and rain. This collection includes human skeletons from Jebel Sahaba, the earliest organised cemetery in the world, with evidence for inter-human violence. Alongside some of the earliest pottery in Africa, pharaonic antiquities, objects from the Monumental remains of the ancient city of Kerma kingdoms and 20th century postage stamps.

When did formal archaeological excavation begin in the region?

In Northern Sudan, scientific excavations began in the early part of the 20th Century. The British Museum began its own excavations in the early 1990s, seeking to provide context and understanding for our collection. We currently run three projects: excavating the pharaonic town of Amara West, the great urban centre of Kawa, and a joint Sudanese-British Museum mission at Dangeil, a Meroitic temple, urban and cemetery site. So we are excavating across three different millennia of Sudanese history. With modern, scientific, archaeology we can analyse plant remains, animal bones, geo-chemical residues and pigment remains to understand what life was like in these cities. The study of skeletal remains informs us about ancient disease, demographics and migration. Archaeology is no longer about finding objects, it's about reconstructing past lives.

And how did you choose your excavation location?

I chose Amara West in 2008 because I was very interested in the ancient relationship between Egypt and Nubia. One of the best-preserved ancient towns anywhere in the Nile Valley, 700km north of Khartoum on the west bank of the Nile, it is a place where you can walk down ancient streets, into houses, through doorways and up staircases. We are interested in the cultural entanglement of Egypt and Nubia: the sharing of ideas, technologies and beliefs, moving away from a simple model of conqueror and concquered. While recognising the conflicts, exploitation and violence also occurred. The town was built around 1300BC and founded in the reign of Seti I, father of Rameses the Great. It built as a new centre to control Kush, the ancient Egyptian word for southern Nubia. One of the major Egyptian interests in this region was the abundant natural resources – particularly gold. The hills in Northern Sudan have large gold deposits: gold was a very important part of the elite world of temples and royal patronage back in Egypt.

Photo: British Museum Amara West Research Project

Revealing a faience vessel in a burial chamber of tomb G244 at Amara West

Can you explain the historical context of the various cultures of Ancient Nubia?

Nubia and Northern Sudan is an area with a lot of cultural variety. In the early 20th Century, the different styles of archaeological assemblages – the different types of pottery and objects – were grouped into cultures. For example, in the third and second millennium BCE, we have the A- and C-groups. None of these cultures left behind writing – they weren't societies that had scripts – so we don't know their ancient names. But you also have other groups, related particularly to the

deserts and nomadism. The boundaries between these groups were not fixed and they may not have been states the way we think of them today. Later, we see the rise of the great kingdom centred around the city of Kerma, which reached its golden age around 1700-1500 BCE, when military raids were made into Egypt. The Kerma kingdom was finally defeated by the Egyptian armies around 1450BCE and that ushered in pharaonic rule over that part of Northern Sudan. A series of Egyptian towns and temples were built at this time. Egyptian rule over Nubia ended in 1070BCE, which was followed by the rise of the next great Nubian power, which was based at Napata. Another powerful kingdom, its kings would rule over Egypt and northern Sudan, and fight wars against Assyria in the Levant. That was followed by the Meroitic Kingdom, based at Meroe, famous for the pyramids, and thereafter Christian kingdoms and eventually political Islam.

The British Museum is also assisting in the development of Sudan's domestic archaeological capability. What are the current highlights of your projects?

We have just finished a project to build the first bioarchaeology laboratory in Sudan, which will be opening in February 2019, in collaboration with the National Corporation of Antiquities & Museums (Sudan). Bio-archaeology is the study of human, animal and plant remains to reconstruct everything from diet, to health, to demographics as well as genetic profiles and migration. In Sudan, there is a very good range of preserved ancient cemeteries and when you excavate these you find the human remains of people, mainly skeletons but sometimes mummified. Traditionally, these remains have been exported for study, to places like the British Museum. Over the last ten years, we have trained the first bioarchaeologist in Sudan and now built this facility, enabling our Sudanese colleagues to store and study excavated human remains.

Are you not also working on a project regarding the science of colour?

One of the things we found at Amara West was finds related to the making and preparing of pigments. When you visit the archaeological site today it is very brown – mud brick and sand – but many of the walls and objects must have originally have been painted. We also found raw lumps of pigment: Charcoal, Egyptian blue, red ochre, yellow ochre, gypsum, bitumen, etc. We also found broken pieces of pottery that had been used as mixing palettes by the artists and grinding stones for grinding pigment. With one of my colleagues we ran a project to analyse how the pigments were made, what binders were being used and then how it was being applied in different places. For instance, we found that bitumen, a resinous substance from the Dead Sea, was being used as a black colour for objects in the tombs, so it may have had ritual associations. That's just one example of the scientific streams of work we are undertaking.

How do archaeologists engage with local people?

We have been focusing very much, with our Sudanese colleagues, on working with the local community. Thus we have been producing books, in Arabic, for distribution to the local schools and villages and we run sessions in the schools. For example, one book is aimed at capturing knowledge about the region's traditional farming techniques that are dying out in the age of mechanised agriculture. We also produced podcasts – 70 per cent of the people in the villages near the site have phones with internet so these allow a wider audience to learn about the ancient sites and archaeological heritage. These have been produced in English, Arabic and Nubian. Nubian is the local language, which is not written anymore, so digital technology provides a great way of engaging local communities through this endangered language.

We are constantly interested in questions of cultural exchange and the movement of ideas, people, goods and religion. With the British Museum having a collection of nearly 8 million objects we can ask a lot of questions about the connections between cultures.

It seems that many museums and collections still overlook the importance of the ancient Nubian cultures – do you find that this is the case?

Museums have to reflect the contents of their collections and what the most important and famous objects are. In our case, we renamed our department from Egyptian Antiquities to the Department of Ancient Egypt and Sudan in 2001 to reflect the importance of the Sudanese collection we have here. I think our gallery on Nubia was the first dedicated Nubian gallery anywhere in the world. F

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Monumental remains of the ancient city of Kerma

Photo: Derek Welsby