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How Philae became 'Egyptian': UNESCO, Egypt and the engineering of World Heritage

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ABSTRACT

Who has heritage been for? During the 1970s, engineers cut apart the Graeco-Roman temple complex on the Egyptian island of Philae and reassembled it on the neighbouring islet of Agilkia. This work formed the final part of UNESCO's International Campaign to Save the Monuments of Nubia, launched in 1960 in the face of flooding due to be caused by Egypt's construction of the Aswan High Dam. The campaign, which constituted a major influence on the 1972 World Heritage Convention, mobilized an international group of missions to conduct preservation and archaeological work in the contiguous regions of Egyptian and Sudanese Nubia. Much of this work reified a colonial vision of Nubia's past, with Nubians themselves forced to migrate elsewhere and ancient temples preserved in place. Yet it also materialized a solution to arguments between European and Egyptian experts. This article argues that at Philae, the Egyptian government used this situation to its advantage, recreating the colonial vision of Nubia to its own satisfaction. Using the precedent of the campaign's earlier work – and utilizing irrigation and engineering expertise garnered during the High Dam's construction – Egyptian experts argued that the Philae complex should be moved rather than kept in position using a series of dikes. That argument translated an Egyptian political and financial decision into a technical one, allowing Egypt to use heritage both to incorporate a marginal population into the state and to promote tourist development.

KEYWORDS

Dams; Egypt; Heritage; Nubia; UNESCO

Introduction

Who is heritage for? This question has been a central one for the developing field of heritage studies. Yet answers to it often remain under-determined: wedded to generalized understandings of how heritage operates in the world today, rather than how it has *come to operate* across the globe. Scholars have started to move beyond the application of a blunt model like the 'Authorised Heritage Discourse' (Smith 2006, 11) to understand heritage's – and particularly UNESCO World Heritage's – workings and their relationship with expertise and technical development across the post-war world (Allais 2018;

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Huber 2021). Yet the anthropological realization that the decision-making processes of multilateral organizations like UNESCO are often dependent on the whims of their member-states (Askew 2010; Meskell 2013) is not one that has been applied to the historical development of heritage work with any real precision. Similarly, studies often assert that heritage is somehow 'colonial' or Eurocentric without addressing the specifics of what that definition has entailed as once-colonized places have grappled with – but also supported – World Heritage's rise (cf. Bloembergen and Eickhoff 2020, 5–6).

In this article, I argue that an analysis of UNESCO-backed preservation work at the late-Pharaonic and Graeco-Roman temple complex on the Egyptian island of Philae during the 1960s and 70s provides a way to move beyond these issues and understand why some newly independent nations found aiding World Heritage's rise useful despite – or perhaps even because of – the concept's colonial genealogies. That analysis anchors solutions to these issues in a case whose grounding across time – and in the politically shifting context of Egypt after the July 1952 Free Officers' Coup – furnishes the precision needed to understand heritage's knotty relationships with the end(s) of colonialism, the post-war rise of the multilateral nation-state (Muschik 2018), and the forms of development and technical expertise with which that process became entangled (Mitchell 2002). Preserving the island's structures meant making Philae 'Egyptian' in ways that strengthened the country's expert cadres and ongoing developmental priorities, even as that process reinforced colonial-era preservation work at the island and satisfied UNESCO's demands.

In some respects, the histories of heritage work in Egypt are well-trodden ground, not least in terms of that work's vexed relationship with colonialism and anti-colonial nationalism (Colla 2007; Reid 2002; 2015). As I will show, however, examining the UNESCO-backed work at Philae involves pushing the temporal frame of these histories forwards, while still grappling with the genealogies of colonial-era preservation; a temporal range that previous studies have side-stepped (although cf. Carruthers 2022; Riggs 2019). Unlike those studies, understanding what happened at Philae involves tracing the changing contours of whose expertise mattered at the site beyond Egypt's colonial era and into the second half of the twentieth century, alongside showing how those contours mapped onto the under-explored – and sometimes violent – materialities of preservation work on 'ancient Egyptian' structures more generally. It also involves understanding how those changes related to the place of Egypt's developmental priorities within shifting geopolitical contexts, highlighting how Philae became part of international arguments about who could constitute heritage embedded in the multilateralism of global decolonization and the Cold War. Across the 1960s and 70s, Philae became 'Egyptian' even as the complex's preservation became sutured to the liberal universalism of UNESCO's developing heritage programme (Allais 2018; Meskell 2018). That tension produced an island whose preservation worked for some, but certainly not for all.

Developing Philae

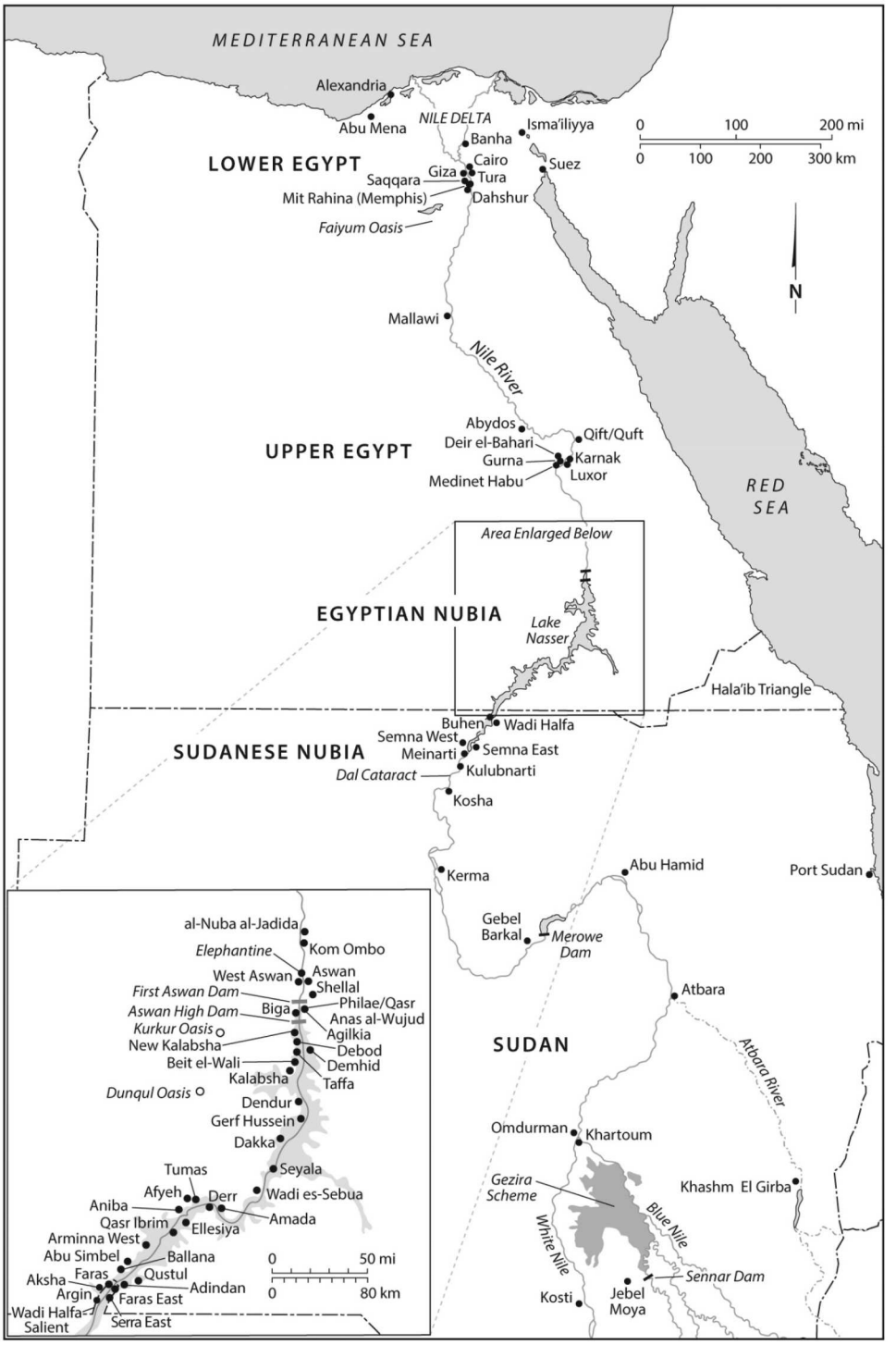
The work at Philae took place in the context of UNESCO's International Campaign to Save the Monuments of Nubia, which began in 1960. The Nubian campaign, which involved an international roster of archaeological and engineering missions, aimed to salvage and preserve ancient remains in the regions of Egyptian and Sudanese Nubia. The

preservation of Philae, which concluded in 1980, formed a major part of UNESCO's project, serving as its formal end (Allais 2012; Carruthers 2022; Säve-Söderbergh 1987). It was also key to the organization's developing work in heritage: in the wake of the 1972 ratification of UNESCO's World Heritage Convention (WHC), in 1979 the 'Nubian Monuments from Abu Simbel to Philae' was one of the second tranche of sites added to the new World Heritage List (UNESCO n.d.).

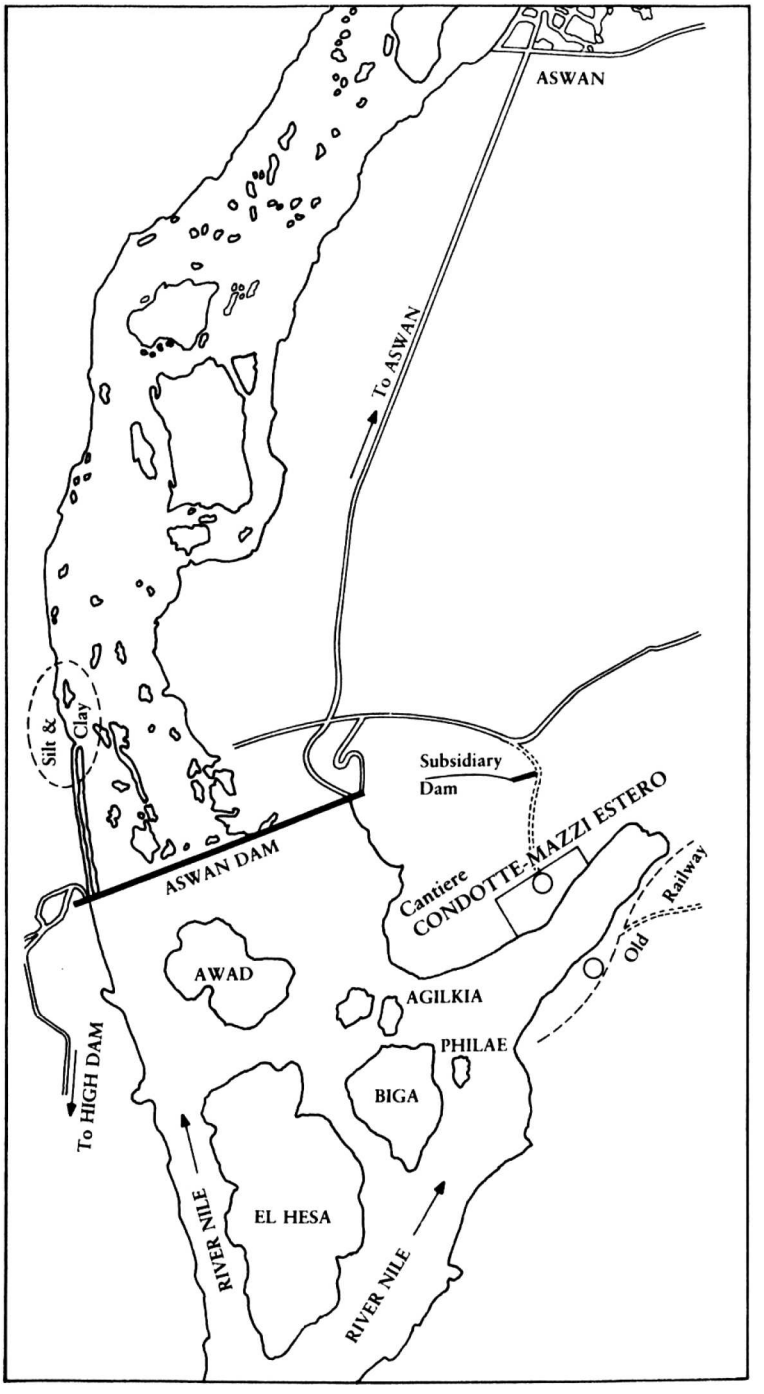
At the same time, the genealogies of that process sat in a series of events that had started many years beforehand. In 1898, just to Philae's north, British colonial engineers had begun the construction of the first Aswan Dam (the Khazan Aswan) on the river Nile; a structure that was twice heightened over the following decades (Derr 2019). Philae thus found itself semi-submerged under the dam's reservoir on a routine basis: a moment in time during which the French Orientalist Pierre Loti ([1908] 1909) dubbed the island 'the pearl of Egypt'. In 1960, however, the threat to Philae became existential due to the start of work on al-Sadd al-ʿAli – the Aswan High Dam – located on the Nile ten miles to Philae's south (Shokr 2009; Tvedt 2004). Built with the collaboration of Soviet technical experts, the structure became the centrepiece of the revolution connected to Gamal Abdel Nasser's presidency, which began in 1954 (Gordon 1992). Yet alongside becoming key to the revolutionary vision of Egypt and its policy of non-alignment, the new dam's reservoir entailed the resettlement of tens of thousands of people – Egyptian and Sudanese Nubians – living in its path, and also led to the destruction of the many archaeological sites and ancient temples located along the Nubian Nile (Map 1; Hopkins and Mehanna 2010; Säve-Söderbergh 1987). Philae, meanwhile, found itself in a 'subsidiary reservoir' created in the space between the old and new dams (Map 2; Säve-Söderbergh 1987, 163).

This strategy of river development initially condemned the island. The High Dam was originally proposed in 1947 by Adrian Daninos, an Egyptian-Greek agronomist influenced by transnational development norms. The Free Officers' 1954 decision to build the structure was thus more an expression of adherence to those norms than to any revolutionary ideology (Shokr 2009, 12). When the High Dam was ready, it would therefore generate hydroelectricity, a consequence of which was that the water around Philae would need to be kept at a level that placed most of the temple complex underwater. The High Dam would also enable the perennial irrigation of Egypt, completing a process that the first Aswan Dam had started. However, when water was released from behind the High Dam to enable this outcome, daily 'fluctuations of several metres in … [the subsidiary reservoir's] level' would begin. This action 'would within a short time inevitably result in a total collapse of … [Philae's] buildings' (Säve-Söderbergh 1987, 163).

Yet it was Egyptian adherence to the developmental strategies that led to this issue that also led to the island's preservation. Under Nasser, Egypt more widely was being remade in a revolutionary image to which development and modernization initiatives were central. As Nancy Reynolds has argued, both the country and its population were subject to 'a wider national project to ensure self-sufficiency and remake citizenship', a process which not only included the development of tourist infrastructure, but also included the attempted development of the city of Aswan in the state's image (Reynolds 2017, 213). This same process also led to the 1963–1964 resettlement of the majority of Egypt's Nubians in New Nubia, which was built by the Egyptian government just to Aswan's north in Kom Ombo. That move incorporated a previously scattered and



Map 1. Nubia in context (Carruthers 2022, 8). Map drawn by Bill Nelson.



Map 2. The relative locations of Philae, its neighbouring islands, and the two Aswan dams (Säve-Söderbergh 1987), 173.

racialized population within the state's purview, in the process solidifying a 'Nubian' identity (Fernea [1973] 1991, 140; Hopkins and Mehanna 2010, 8; Powell 2003, 70). The preservation work at Philae achieved this same process of state-making for a temple complex, ensuring that 'the pearl of Egypt' could work to attract tourists – and money – to Aswan for years to come (cf. Reynolds 2017, 225), and continuing a process of removing Nubians from its vicinity that, as we shall see, had begun in the early twentieth century and helped lend 'the pearl' its touristic identity. If colonial Europeans encountered Egypt as an exhibition (Mitchell 1991, 21), then Philae was one of the places where that exhibitionary complex became material.

In this context, the key for the Egyptian government of the 1960s was not necessarily the plan through which the preservation of Philae happened, but that Philae's preservation happened at all. For Egypt, preserving Philae enabled a set of effects familiar from development work more generally, leading to 'the expansion and entrenchment of bureaucratic state power' and creating a depoliticized 'anti-politics' in its wake (Ferguson [1990] 1994, xiv – xv). In this case, that denial of politics impacted Egypt's diverse population of Nubians, who did not choose – and who had mixed feelings about – the fact of their resettlement and in at least one case thought that the region's ancient remains 'must go when our land goes' (Fernea [1970] 1991, 107). That developmental strategy also occluded the political manoeuvring around the preservation of Philae itself, which did not involve consultation with Nubians and – when it finally happened – could be safely incorporated within UNESCO's depoliticized heritage universalism (cf. Allais 2012, 208). The important point was that enough options existed to allow that preservation to happen in an economically efficient way.

Expert committees assembled by UNESCO debated two major proposals for Philae. The first, which both UNESCO and some Egyptian officials favoured – and which Dutch engineers helped to plan – involved the construction of a permanent set of dikes around the island, saving it from flooding. The second plan involved reassembling the Philae complex on the neighbouring islet of Agilkia. From the mid-1960s onwards – after Egypt's Nubians had been resettled – leading Egyptian engineers developed cases both for the feasibility of the reassembly scheme and for the financial uncertainties of the dike project. When, in 1968, Egypt decided on Agilkia, those cases buttressed what was ultimately an Egyptian political and financial choice, rendering it technical and hence unarguable to UNESCO's international experts.

Transposing the decision to the technical domain of development expertise thus allowed its politics to be obscured. At Philae, whatever UNESCO's officials may have thought the best solution, keeping the show on the road was paramount, particularly in a context where the Nubian campaign needed a successful end and the nascent WHC needed to prove its worth (Batisse and Bolla 2005). Within that context, the quavering Egyptian government – hit, among other issues, by the *naksa* ('setback') of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War – maintained considerable authority. Perhaps, in the end, (world) heritage has always been for the state.

Preserving a colonial vision: four plans, one consultation

Before the debate was whittled down to two major plans, four proposals were made for the preservation of Philae. Yet no matter which was chosen, the decision about what to do

there would be based on a colonial vision of the island: Loti's 'pearl' had been created, not found. In the wake of the decision to build the High Dam, the first proposal for Philae's preservation was made in 1955. Yet the iteration of the temple complex being discussed had largely been created during Britain's occupation of Egypt, which started in 1882. While the Philae work bolstered Egypt's position in UNESCO's developing heritage circus, the Egyptian government's decisions about reshaping the island and the surrounding environment of Nubia for touristic purposes themselves rested on colonial ones whose social violence was clear.

Before work on the first Aswan Dam began, William Garstin, a British engineer employed as undersecretary of state in Egypt's Ministry of Public Works, sent Henry Lyons, a geologist and captain in the Royal Engineers, to assess and bolster the stability of Philae's structures. Yet that work was as much about transformation as stabilization. Working from 1895 to 1896, Lyons' workers removed 'the *débris* which covered a large portion of the island' (Garstin 1896, 5). Moving that material, they altered the historical form of Philae itself. The material's presence rested on the fact that Philae had been 'inhabited … from [ancient] Egyptian times up to the early part of this century' (Lyons 1896, 10). Lyons' work thus turned a complex historical place into a less complex one as he and his assistants restored ancient structures and removed traces of later habitation (Figure 1).

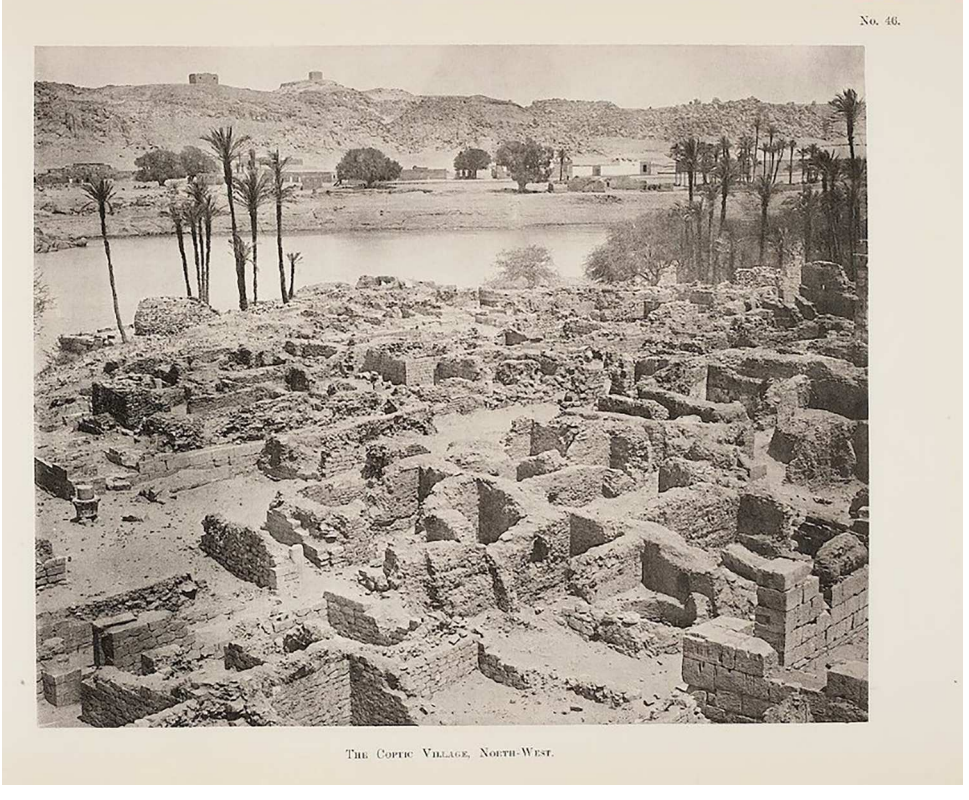


Figure 1. The 'Coptic Village' removed from Philae by Henry Lyons (1896, plate 46).



Figure 2. Philae flooded, c. 1906 (Guerville 1906, 230a).

Coupled with the action of the first Aswan Dam's reservoir in washing away any colourful paintwork remaining on the island's structures (Rostem 1955, 6), Philae's visual identity became a stereotypically 'pharaonic' place of bare stone (Figure 2), marketed as a tourist attraction alongside the dam itself (Figure 3). It also became a place removed from its position within local ecologies, making the Egyptian government's later displacement of the surrounding Nubian population easier. In a 1945 article chronicling a trip down the Nile published in the newspaper *Sawt al-Nuba* (*The Voice of Nubia*), a commentator named Shahin recalled upon arriving at Philae that archaeologists had managed to reduce the initial size of the Aswan Dam for the sake of preserving ancient remains. He also complained that 'no one softened their attitude for the sake of the people living here' (Shahin 1945), all of whom had been forced to move their homes in the face of the dam's flood.

It was in this context of an island transformed that proposals for the preservation of Philae now developed. Regardless which one gained favour, the ultimate constitution of Philae as World Heritage entailed dispossession from the start. One vision of Egyptian antiquities – and one vision of state power – trumped all else. To that end, in 1955 Egypt's Department of Antiquities published a plan for Philae authored by Osman Rostem, the institution's onetime head of engineering. In it, Rostem announced that 'the island has lost its picturesque verdure but the river has flattened all the parasitic mud buildings of later periods' (Rostem 1955, 6). Ecologies destroyed, resurrecting 'the pearl' was paramount: what was important, Rostem (1955, 13) claimed, was that 'the great achievements of Modern Egypt are growing in remarkable harmony with, and among the eternal relics of Ancient Egypt'. Rostem thus announced the plan that would become the one favoured by UNESCO's officials: an 'Egyptian' project that would later be scuppered by Egyptian officials themselves. 'The most effective solution to the question of Philae', he (1955, 6)

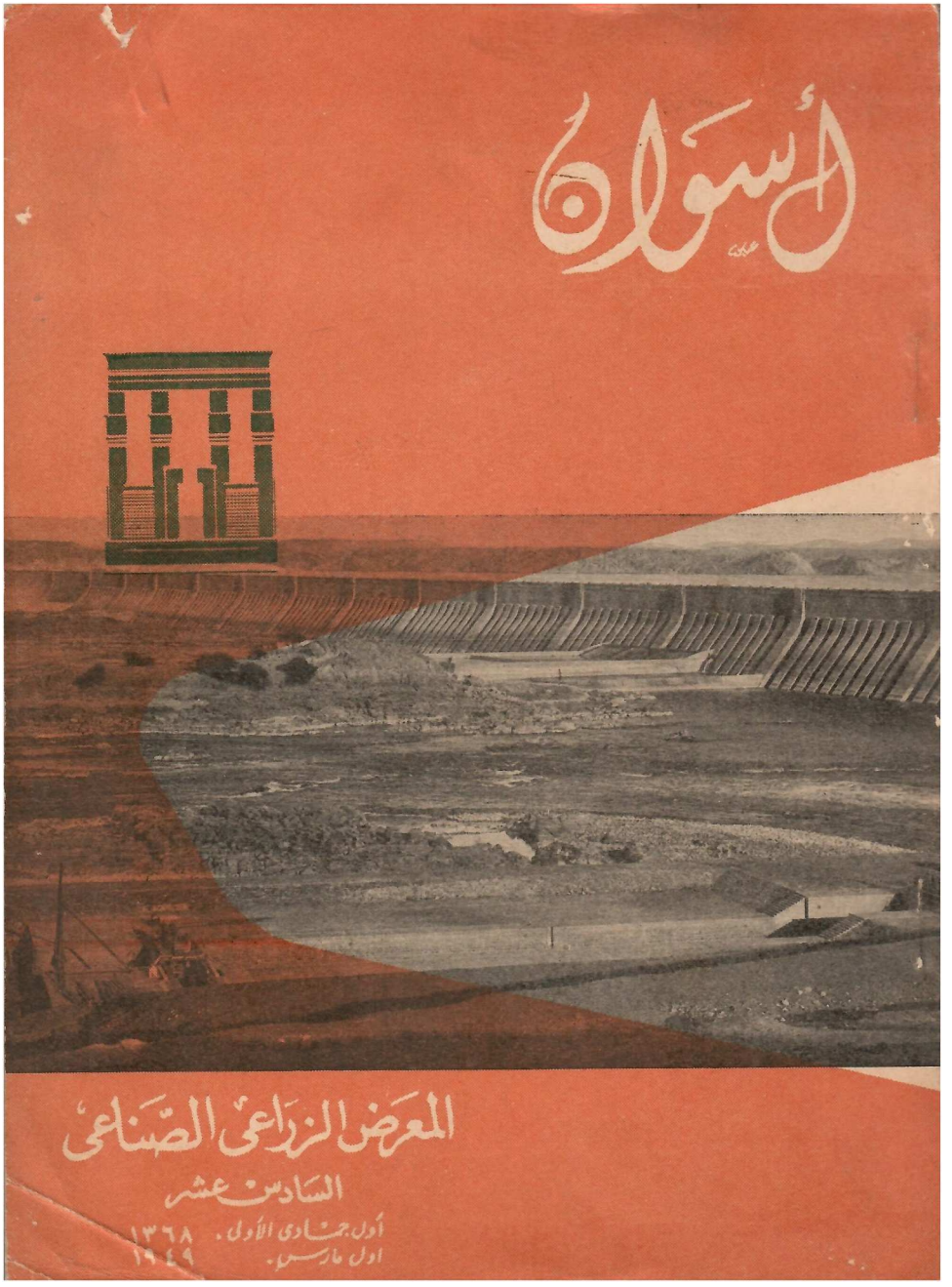


Figure 3. Philae's Kiosk of Trajan overlaid on the Aswan Dam. Front cover of Anon (1949).

wrote, 'is the *isolation* of the island from the rest of the reservoir by building a series of small dams round it'.

It would take until plans for the Nubian campaign were put into place several years later for Rostem's project to be discussed in earnest. Across the second half of the

1950s, however, concerns for Nubia's antiquities crystallized. In response, Egypt and Sudan asked UNESCO to organize an international campaign of technical assistance in the region. By launching the Nubian campaign, UNESCO saw a chance to advance its growing interest in the protection and definition of cultural property (Betts 2015, 105). In advance of the campaign's official start, in October 1959 UNESCO and the Egyptian government therefore organized a 'Meeting of International Experts on the Safeguarding of the Sites and Monuments of Ancient Nubia' to plan what to do in the region (UNESCO 1959). It was during that meeting that a project for Philae would first be agreed upon.

Like all the campaign's committees, the experts comprised a diverse group drawn from, and meant to represent the international character of, UNESCO's member-states: such groupings were meant to balance national interests in the service of the organization's universalist stylings (Allais 2018). Together, the experts spent 11 days in Egypt, including visiting Nubia. There, they planned for the archaeological, engineering and preservation work necessary during UNESCO's forthcoming project, including at Philae (UNESCO 1959). Importantly, the position of the Philae complex gave the experts more time to reflect than they enjoyed with the rest of the Nubian remains. Its place in its subsidiary reservoir would protect the island by keeping the water level around it consistent, despite that same water almost entirely submerging the temples there (Säve-Söderbergh 1987, 163). Only when the High Dam was finished later in the decade would the situation become urgent. Consequently, proposals for Philae could be considered in a relatively leisurely way, increasing the chance for Egyptian officials to develop contingency plans, and ensuring that Egypt's Nubians had already been resettled.

At first, though, there was little disagreement over what course Philae's preservation should take. Alongside Rostem's plan to protect the island by using three small dikes placed strategically within the subsidiary reservoir, UNESCO's experts considered a variety of other projects. One plan involved constructing a dam entirely around the island that would lead to Philae lying 'at a lower level than the water which would have surrounded it'. Another involved raising the island above the floodwaters on 'newly elevated foundations'. A fourth plan, meanwhile, was the one that involved dismantling Philae entirely and rebuilding it on Agilkia, an islet which had been formed after the building of the first Aswan Dam (Säve-Söderbergh 1987, 164). At this stage, UNESCO's expert committee chose to examine Rostem's plan further, basing their decision upon the vision of Philae developed over the previous decades.

That choice was buttressed by a report written by French engineer and committee member André Coyne, a former President of the International Commission on Large Dams. Coyne deemed Rostem's project 'attractive because it is the only solution which would re-establish things as they were before 1900 without spoiling the beauty of the island', presumably a reference to Lyons' consolidation work. The feasibility of the project 'would however require investigation', not least mapping and drilling in the nearby riverbed to understand its composition better (UNESCO 1959, 12–13). UNESCO's committee agreed to this investigation, noting that Rostem's project

> wholly respects the authenticity of Philor [*sic*] as a monumental whole by practically restoring it to its original condition, while the dikes being situated at more than 500 metres from the island and being only low above the water level … can in no way change its appearance (UNESCO 1959, 7).

Yet despite emphasizing 'authenticity', neither the committee nor Coyne mentioned the structures on Philae that Henry Lyons had removed, or the fact that it was Lyons' consolidation work that meant 'that the Philae temples have been able to resist the influence of the seasonal flooding during the last sixty years' (NEDECO 1960, 8). Incorporated within UNESCO's depoliticized universalism, it was the tourist-friendly Philae whose preservation was at stake. As this colonial vision of Philae stabilized within the setting of the Egyptian revolution, however, so other solutions for the island might remain latent if they could keep that vision in place. The investigation that UNESCO's committee recommended remained just that: a recommendation that might, if necessary, be superseded.

At first, though, events progressed relatively smoothly. In a move aligned with growing Dutch economic interest in African development in the years after the collapse of the Dutch East Indies (Uche 2024, 522), the government of the Netherlands contracted NEDECO (the Nederlands Adviesbureau voor Ingenieurswerken in het Buitenland, a Hague-based engineering consortium) to consult on Rostem's project as a contribution to the Nubian campaign. Dutch Minister of Education, Arts and Sciences Jo Cals wrote in his preface to NEDECO's report that the consultation followed his 'country's great tradition in the field of hydraulic engineering' (NEDECO 1960, 3). Yet this strategic valorization of Dutch business expertise would ultimately prove out of place as work on the Nubian campaign and the High Dam developed and Egypt considered its options. Not everyone could play the national card.

NEDECO at work

NEDECO worked at Philae for two weeks in summer 1960, sending a civil engineer and a geologist there to assess Rostem's plan (NEDECO 1960, 11). The consortium's expertise seemed unassailable: many of the projects on a list of its work involved irrigation or dams, including in Egypt and Sudan.[1] NEDECO's report on Philae thus dismissed any proposal that involved dismantling the temple complex ('lack of time') and was broadly positive about Rostem's project, providing a rough cost estimate (at 1960 prices) of around US $5.5 million (NEDECO 1960, 12, 39).

NEDECO's consultants also linked their work to ideas about Philae's authenticity. The consultants assessed the possibility of using locally sourced building materials for the three new dikes, recommending the use of 'coarse-grained granite, the famous ornamental and building stone, quarrying of which started more than 5000 years ago' and which famously existed in vast, easily exploitable quantities in Philae's vicinity (NEDECO 1960, 35). The dikes would thus appear to fit within a timeless environment: an invisible transition geared towards creating an authentic materiality moored in Philae's local context. As projects went, the dike scheme appeared to be seamless.

Yet even in 1960 there were reasons for concern. For one, NEDECO's consultants were dependent upon the cooperation of Egyptian officials in obtaining the sources they needed to undertake their study, 'including topographical and survey maps and results of soundings along various lines across the Aswan reservoir area' (NEDECO 1960, 14). It was clear from their report's references, too, that the work of Egyptian geologists had proven vital (NEDECO 1960, 42–45). While far from unusual, this dependence implies the existence of an international network of solidarity that needed to hold as the

Philae project was undertaken. NEDECO's consultants, after all, were not definitive in their suggestions.

The consultants admitted multiple contingencies. Construction of the dikes could start in 1968 if satisfactory progress on the High Dam was made. There needed, though, to be more soundings at Philae, alongside measurements of wind speed and direction due to potentially damaging wave action around the island. Likewise, evaporation in the subsidiary reservoir, a process which would increase that water's salt concentration, would need to be properly measured up to the time work began and an effective pumping strategy created to deal with it: the salt would otherwise damage the stone from which Philae's temples were built. Pumping would also be necessary to deal with excess water designed to filter through the three new dikes: the quantity of that water was estimated to equal more than the combined amount that would be lost both through evaporation and from the stagnant water needing to be flushed out from within Philae's new artificial lake. There was also a question, connected to work on the High Dam, about whether the Egyptian authorities would decide to irrigate the nearby Shellal plain: a process which would create 'tail water' and therefore require an expansion in pumping facilities (NEDECO 1960, 17–19, 30, 39). 'For the purpose of the present report' the consultants put the cost of dealing with these issues as 'estimated not to exceed' one hundred thousand Egyptian pounds (NEDECO 1960, 34). It was a cost that would come back to bite them as Egyptian officials sought to iron such contingencies out.

Regardless, at this point Rostem's project became the 'Netherlands plan for the protection of Philae', embedded within the same national logics of multilateralism that would ultimately help to undo it. A UNESCO press release describing 'the Dutch plan' as 'the only possible one' was written to coincide with Jo Cals handing over NEDECO's report to UNESCO's then Director General Vittorino Veronese at the organization's General Conference in November 1960. The report's wording was designed to bolster UNESCO, alongside the Netherlands' access to work aligned with the organization: Cals was paraphrased as saying that the report 'is a pledge of the faith and confidence of the Government and people of the Netherlands in UNESCO and in its action in the service of the well-being of mankind and the peace of the world'.[2] There was no mention of Rostem (or, indeed, Egypt). It was a moment of multilateral hubris that would come back to bite all involved as Egyptian technical experts intervened in the project.

Changing plans

Given the timescale of the work at Philae, that intervention only arrived in late 1965, over a year after the Egyptian government had resettled its Nubians (Hopkins and Mehanna 2010, 8). That November, Egypt's Department of Antiquities served breakfast to the international Group of Archaeologists and Landscaping Architects working at the site of Abu Simbel: the location of two pharaonic rock-cut temples that, from 1964 until 1968, were cut up and reassembled at a higher level in the face of the High Dam's flood and which, beyond Philae, provided the Nubian campaign's centrepiece. Among those present were the Egyptologist Louis Christophe, UNESCO's Special Representative for Nubian Affairs in Cairo, the Minister of Irrigation and Chairman of the High Dam Authority Hassan Zaki, and Adolf Klasens, director of the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden in Leiden. For Philae, their

conversations suggested a stark and surprising change of course. Their discussions also implied that Egyptians saw no reason why their own expertise should be discounted.

According to Christophe, during the breakfast, Zaki 'suddenly [started] to praise the advantages of the new Arab-Swedish project' for Philae. This 'Arab-Swedish project' constituted a new iteration of the dismantling and relocation scheme for the island that UNESCO's 1959 committee had passed over. It seems that the plan – which had quietly materialized in September 1965 – had been developed by Egypt and the Swedish engineering company VBB (Vattenbyggnadsbyrån) without outside knowledge. VBB was then acting as a consultant at Abu Simbel, having developed the cutting scheme there. The experience of that scheme – Hassan Zaki was Chair of UNESCO's Board of Consultants at the site – had clearly provided the opportunity to develop this new one. Trying to temper Zaki's enthusiasm for the project, Adolf Klasens broached the proposal that NEDECO – paid for by his government – had consulted on five years previously. Zaki, however, ignored diplomatic niceties and stated that he had warned NEDECO of certain difficulties, particularly the need to build a pumping station to make the dike project work.[3]

What prompted this intervention? Why would Zaki – and, by extension, the Egyptian government – promote this new plan now? Zaki spoke at a time when much of the effort involved in salvaging Egyptian Nubia's ancient structures had occurred. Many Nubian temples had been dismantled by the Egyptian Department of Antiquities in the early 1960s. Others, meanwhile, had been taken apart in projects led by foreign missions. Afterwards, the structures were either sent abroad as 'gifts-in-return' for work on the Nubian campaign or were chosen for reassembly at various, tourist-focused locations in Nubia, including at the site of 'New Kalabsha', just south of the High Dam (Säve-Söderbergh 1987, 98–186). Egypt's Nubian remains, it seems, were on their way to being 'saved'.

Yet in the process of this work, the 'authentic' condition of the Egyptian Nubian temples – and thus of what was becoming Nubian 'heritage' – had shifted. The exigencies of UNESCO's campaign had taken hold, and the advice of experts at times became highly qualified. Piero Gazzola, the Italian architect who wrote the key report 'concerning the moving of temples and other monuments' during the October 1959 expert meeting, made clear that the preservation of structural 'integrity' and 'setting' should be watchwords (UNESCO 1959, 3, 5). As Lucia Allais (2012, 204) has emphasized, however, what those words meant became subject to compromise when some on the trip voiced doubt that anyone would want to visit 'desolate Nubia' to see temples reconstituted in their place. For all the protestations about salvaging Nubia's 'past', Egyptian concerns around the touristic development of a region free of Nubians remained central.

Louvre Egyptologist Christiane Desroches Noblecourt, a prime mover in the Nubian campaign, put forward a solution to this issue, backed by Hassan Zaki. She suggested that two sets of reassembled temples should be grouped in new '"oases" along the' High Dam's future reservoir, 'reproducing both the distance of each temple to the Nile and its angle toward the sun'. Gazzola conceded this point as an 'aesthetically analogous' exception, but continued to push back against moving any temples abroad. Ultimately, Anwar Shukry of the Egyptian Department of Antiquities had to settle the matter by stating that if all the Egyptian Nubian temples were reassembled into two groups, they would be too numerous in their new settings to be displayed effectively. The transfer of some of them abroad should be allowed (Allais 2012, 217). 'Integrity', in other

words, developed so that its definition was in the eye of the beholder. Alongside the monumental project at Abu Simbel, a precedent for moving Philae had been set.

Abu Simbel was particularly important as discussions about Philae gathered pace. Alongside UNESCO, the Egyptian government had been adamant that a plan had to be found to preserve the temples at the site. Yet during the early 1960s a series of proposed projects there had failed due to their cost and UNESCO's inability to raise enough money from member states. Under Kennedy, in 1961 the US had pledged millions towards the Nubian campaign, which offered an opportunity to resolve the crisis. Yet congressional lawmakers needed to vote on how to spend the funds. Ultimately, the cutting project at Abu Simbel happened because it was the one that those lawmakers in 1963 agreed upon; Egypt had requested VBB to draw it up in desperation (Allais 2013, 19). To avoid a repeat of this crisis at Philae, Egypt used the cutting precedent – and VBB's presence at Abu Simbel – to get ahead of any concerns with NEDECO's proposals. If nothing else, setting out a cutting project for Philae when the Abu Simbel one was visibly – and accountably – progressing constituted a strong insurance policy. It also evidenced a country increasingly emboldened to make such moves through the expansion of state power that its intervention in Nubia had enabled and which UNESCO's campaign depoliticized (cf. Allais 2012, 208).

Elsewhere, representations of Egyptian expertise created the conditions in which such initiative could prosper. As discussions about the Nubian temples continued, work on the High Dam had been moving quickly. The first stage of work had ended in May 1964, with the site prepared by building the lower courses of the structure and digging tunnels to aid the Nile's diversion into the dam's reservoir (Little 1965). That month, a spectacle celebrated the power of the Egyptian-Soviet collaboration at the site. Print press and newsreels circulated images of Nasser pressing the button enabling the explosion that kickstarted the river's diversion, his fingers entwined with those of Premier Nikita Khrushchev of the Soviet Union. The spectacle made Nasser's – and Egypt's – role as non-aligned leader clear (Figure 4). It also underlined Egyptian expertise: press images featured both Egyptian experts (Figure 5) and the thousands of Egyptian labourers involved with the High Dam project (Figure 6).

It was in relation to this promotion of Egyptian success that discussion about Philae again began in earnest. Hassan Zaki's intervention is notable in this context. In terms of dams and irrigation, the Egyptian was a fêted figure. Interviewed to mark the end of the first stage of the High Dam's construction, Zaki, signifying his expertise, discussed the place of the structure amongst other dams around the world. He also stressed that the new dam was 'the greatest of its type' (al-Ahram 1964, 68). With that statement, the minister alluded to the structure's status as an embankment dam: one whose rock-fill – in common with the other examples he mentioned – was laid around an impervious core (Little 1965, 73). Louis Christophe had written to UNESCO implying that Zaki's critique of the 'Dutch' plan for Philae was attributable to Egyptian national sentiment.[4] Yet Zaki's expertise could be considered just as, if not more, reliable than anyone else's. Before work at the High Dam started, Zaki wrote a book about the first Aswan Dam that included a report on boreholes drilled through the structure designed to test its permeability; he later wrote a similarly technical pamphlet about the High Dam (Zaki 1961; Zaky 1958). The Egyptian possessed authority, more so than Christophe or anyone at UNESCO. Given his public profile and



Figure 4. Nasser and Khrushchev divert the Nile, 1964. Available at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gamal-002.jpg

support for relocating Philae, this doubled expertise was difficult for the organization to ignore.

The irony was that UNESCO might well have seen Zaki's intervention coming. In February 1965, NEDECO consultants had visited Philae 'for the updating of the original report'.[5] After returning from Egypt, one of them wrote to UNESCO. Assuming the project as planned would go ahead, C. C. Theodoor de Beaufort noted that 'from a purely technical point of view, we have no doubt that execution [of the



Figure 5. Hassan Zaki (al-Ahram 1964, 68).

project] by the Sadd-el-Aʿali [*sic*] authorities must be much cheaper than any other solution', not least because, after 1967, equipment from the High Dam would become free to use at Philae. The High Dam authorities were, moreover, 'more or less counting on executing the Philae works'. Yet the consultant reported one critical voice: that of Hassan Zaki, 'who asserted very strongly that all the available equipment coming free … will immediately be needed for new barrages between Aswan and Cairo'. Likewise, 'ownership rights to the equipment placed at the disposal of Egypt by the Soviet Union is a difficult question'.[6] The fate of Philae was not yet decided.

Tense conversations

Still, at least one UNESCO – and one Egyptian – official preferred the dike project. Preparing for a further meeting of international experts in December 1965, UNESCO's Cairo Liaison Officer Vladimir Nenadovic reported that the Under-Secretary of State Abdel Moneim El Sawi 'told me that he prefers the NEDECO project … as it is giving us the possibility to preserve the only Nubian monument in situ'.[7] More forcefully, Nenadovic later wrote that 'VBB's proposal … represents only a rough outline, not to be compared with the NEDECO Project [*sic*]'.[8] Nenadovic knew whose side he was on.

Now, though, the politicking began. The terms of the December meeting were restrained. The experts were asked to express opinions on the technical and financial aspects of NEDECO's plan and 'the general programme for the execution of the project' (UNESCO 1966). Yet immediately afterwards Nenadovic complained that 'the U.A.R. representatives tried to comment, not on the NEDECO project, but on the idea of dismantling Philae'. The saving grace was that the group's elected chairman, Egyptian engineer Professor William Selim Hanna (1896–1980), 'was a very comprehensive person', ensuring that the committee studied plans other than NEDECO's 'as annexes to the report'.[9]

Nevertheless, both Abdel Moneim El Sawi and Ali Vrioni of UNESCO's Department of Culture now agreed that the committee's report should include 'an opinion concerning

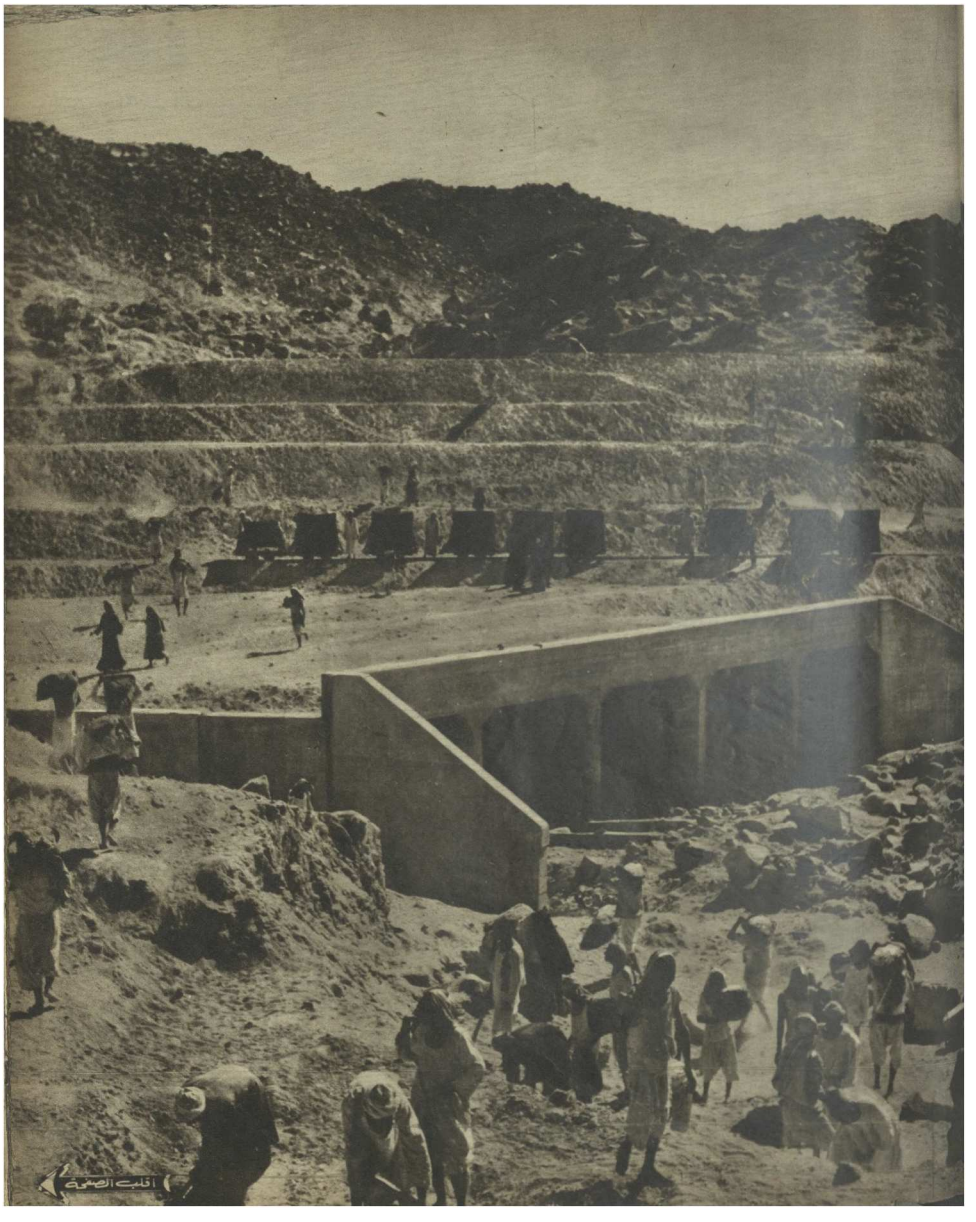


Figure 6. Workers at the High Dam site, *al-Musawwar* 1944, January 12, 1962, 27.

the dismantling of Philae'. And when the experts visited Aswan, the archaeologist Shehata Adam (1917–1986) suggested that Ibrahim Adham el-Demirdash (1906–1987), dean of Cairo University's Faculty of Engineering, 'read out to the group V.B.B.'s memo'. Nenadovic noted that 'the experts were rather surprised to being asked to give their opinions on a paper which had not been distributed'. The meeting's final report, however, constituted 'a compromise' with 'the intention to put V.B.B.'s proposal in the picture'.[10] By 1966, when de Beaufort of NEDECO was sent 'to participate with Egyptian experts in further studies', the idea of dismantling the complex was on the agenda.[11]

De Beaufort felt uneasy: concerned that the dismantling project was 'extremely risky and costly'.[12] He was so concerned, in fact, that in May he attached a 'confidential report' to his official one. In it, he enumerated the reasons for Egyptian hesitation about the NEDECO plan: ones that tally with earlier technical discussions about Philae. The technical level was the one on which the controversy could be resolved safely: it neutralized the politics of the situation. Yet it was also the level on which Egyptians now claimed some advantage. The Egyptian authorities, wrote de Beaufort, were 'especially worried about the maintenance costs for the [three] dams as well as the pumping station. They are also anxious about the growth of algae in the Philae lake'. There was another issue, too: 'they are afraid that water will rise by capillary action in the temple walls, causing even more maintenance problems' due to the salt encrustation it would cause. De Beaufort complained that 'it seems to me that neither the authorities in Cairo nor the international committee has seriously read the pages concerning this subject in the 1960 … [NEDECO] report'. Likewise, the dismantling project involved building a 20-metre-high sheet pile barrage around Philae so that water could be pumped out from inside it and dismantling work take place in the dry. Yet only now was a feasibility study being commissioned: from a Yugoslav firm, Geoistrazivanja, then working at Abu Simbel.[13]

To UNESCO, it seemed that the die was cast. Reporting a conversation with Shehata Adam, in July 1966, Louis Christophe noted that 'all the Egyptian experts' were now in favour of the relocation project: naming Hassan Zaki, William Selim Hanna and Ibrahim Adham el-Demirdash.[14] In October, meanwhile, Christophe recounted a conversation he had had with Hassan Zaki, a man with 'very great weight in the quarters responsible for the Nubian campaign'. Zaki doubted the possibility of raising the money for the Philae dikes. He also told Christophe that, on the current timetable, the turbines being installed at the High Dam would begin working in 1968. That meant that the reservoir around Philae would be fixed at a level allowing for the safe transfer of all the complex's dismantled blocks without the need for a cofferdam, rendering the dismantling scheme much cheaper.[15] If Philae's touristic preservation could be achieved at a lower economic cost, it would be. As Egyptian experts mobilized, the outlook for the dike plan looked uncertain.

Conflicted expertise

William Selim Hanna, for example, came to influence proceedings as much as Hassan Zaki. As Nenadovic had noted, Hanna was a person of stature. In 1933, he had founded Cairo University's Soil Mechanics Laboratories. From 1952 until 1954, he had also been Egypt's Minister of Municipal and Rural Affairs. Likewise, Hanna was responsible for the construction of several well-known buildings, among them the Nile Hilton in Cairo, which opened in 1958 and was a key part of the development of Egypt's tourist infrastructure (Saad 2006; Wharton 2001, 45–46). Alongside el-Demirdash – later (Al-Jaburi 2003, 18–19) a President of the Egyptian Society of Engineers – in December 1966, Hanna had been dispatched to Abu Simbel by Egypt's Ministry of Culture to check on the appearance of 'serious settlement' (*taryīḥ khaṭīr*) in the rock underneath a new concrete supporting wall.[16] The two engineers were authoritative people, knowledgeable about the project whose precedent mattered at Philae.

Any decision, moreover, was now meant to come at a further March 1967 committee meeting, which would reflect on a report on the Geoistrazivanja work prepared by el-Demirdash himself. During preparations, Hanna told Nenadovic that 'it is very important [for the committee] to inspect the site once more'. He also stated that 'the experts should … have the opportunity to visit the High Dam Laboratory where the samples taken by boring are tested'. Perhaps surprisingly, Hanna also told Nenadovic that 'from the technical point of view, any solution could be accepted, but it is up to the archaeologists to decide the destiny of the temples'.[17] One thing was certain, however: in Hanna's view, informed technical discussion, bolstered by a site visit, constituted the only possibility for a decision on Philae. What was in reality a political and financial choice had to be transposed to the 'neutral' technical domain of international development, and Hanna made certain that it would be.

It is notable, then, that el-Demirdash's report – written before the Geoistrazivanja work was completed – contained alarm bells. The engineer was concerned that islands between the first two proposed Philae dikes might yet 'prove to be permeable', meaning that 'the whole project may well be revised' due to the amount of pumping that would become necessary. Worse still – and like Zaki before him – he emphasized that 'the size of the required pumps and their running costs and maintenance are deciding factors'.[18] In a 'Supplementary Report' written the day before the Philae committee met, el-Demirdash only became firmer, suggesting that 'it might be necessary to ask the opinion of a landscaping committee as to the general view of the temple inside the future lake bounded by the dams. The temple would naturally be more conspicuous … if dismantled and reerected [*sic*] on the top of, say, [the adjacent] Biga Island'.[19] Concern for the tourist gaze remained ever-present.

Given these comments, the committee members recommended further precautionary investigation of schemes for Philae (UNESCO 1967). Other matters further complicated events, not least a significant conflict of interest. In April 1967, VBB's Cairo representative told Nenadovic how they had 'received the order to prepare the required avant-projet of the removal scheme – in collaboration with the private bureau of Dr. Selim Hanna!'[20] Yet beyond even that issue, the cataclysmic Six-Day War of June 1967 delayed a decision on Philae further; it would also, as we shall see, make the financial issue more pressing. It was only in September that Nenadovic could report that Abdel Moeti Amer, the President of the Abu Simbel Engineering Office, 'told me that VBB refused (??) to sign the contract for the elaboration of the Philae dismantling project'. Indeed, Abdel Moneim El Sawi had told him 'that only Dr. Selim Hanna is now dealing with' it, VBB apparently recusing itself from the work.[21] Accordingly, in October, when Nenadovic began preparing another expert committee on Philae, he had to note that 'Dr. Selim Hanna, the previous elected Chairman, will probably resign'.[22] It was hardly an auspicious set of circumstances.

The final compromise?

The final Philae committee met in April 1968. Alongside multiple engineers, the international group now included archaeologists, landscapers and financial experts, whose attendance was meant to ensure a balanced decision. Louis Christophe of UNESCO worried about the continued presence of Hanna; Swedish civil engineer Väinö Wanhainen's shared nationality with VBB also prompted concerns.[23] When the committee met

in Aswan, Hanna was therefore no longer part of it, although Wanhainen somehow remained. Hassan Zaki was elected Chair.[24]

Ironically, the committee itself was something of a damp squib: comparing the dike and dismantling schemes, the engineers stated that 'both are technically feasible' and that 'the costs are essentially the same'. That said, there was some financial uncertainty: while reassembling Philae on a new site meant implementing a simultaneous restoration, the conservation costs of the dike scheme were contingent upon the effects of 'the alternate wetting and drying for the 65 years the structures have been submerged'. Even there, however, 'there is reassuring evidence it is not immediate' as a problem. Using this information, the archaeologists – ignoring Lyon's reshaping of the site, and aside from one unnamed among their number – recommended that the complex be kept in place to ensure 'the maintenance of the integrity of the great archaeological Monument of Philae'. There was one sticking point: foreign exchange. The report estimated that building dikes around Philae would cost US$3.3 million more than dismantling the complex. That figure was based on 'the assumption', echoing Hassan Zaki's earlier concern, 'that substantial imports of equipment may be required'. Yet surprisingly, the committee still recommended the dike scheme unless 'the financial problem can not be overcome', a significant anti-climax after several years of uncertainty.[25]

Two weeks after the meeting, however, came a bombshell. Egyptian Minister of Culture Sarwat Okasha wrote to René Maheu, UNESCO's director general since 1962, to tell him that the Egyptian government had chosen the removal project.[26] A few days later, the Nubian campaign's Executive Committee noted that the decision had been taken 'more especially for financial reasons' (UNESCO 1968, 1). Egypt's 'severe hard currency crisis', exacerbated by the 1967 war, likely provides one reason for the decision (Kent [1967] 2004, 502). Yet it is equally important that Egyptian experts had themselves built technical cases both for the feasibility of the removal scheme in the context of the similar work at Abu Simbel and for the uncertain costs of the dike project: a plan whose financial unpredictability itself echoed the failure of the other Abu Simbel schemes. Technical expertise had removed the politics from what was not only an Egyptian political and financial decision, but also a decision taken in a moment of geopolitical catastrophe for the country. Transposing Egyptian state action into the realm of depoliticized cultural development represented by UNESCO's campaign helped that same state save face.

Funding Philae

Importantly, too – and unlike at Abu Simbel – at Philae fundraising would begin at what was thought to be the lowest cost possible. That baseline was useful because, when Okasha communicated Egypt's decision, much of the funding for Philae was yet to be obtained. UNESCO and Egypt now started finding money, needing 40% of an estimated LE5.35 million (around US$12.3 million) in hard currency: if US$6 million was donated from abroad, Egypt pledged to provide the remainder (Säve-Söderbergh 1987, 167). On 6 November 1968, less than two months after Abu Simbel's inauguration, an appeal for donations was launched at UNESCO House in Paris. Maheu and Okasha spoke, as did Willy Brandt, then foreign minister of West Germany, whose country was a key contributor to the Nubian campaign.[27] All involved hoped that one – highly visible – success would

beget another in a context where preparations for what became the WHC were developing: if Abu Simbel could be cut into pieces and reassembled elsewhere, so could Philae.

Like the path to the dismantling project, however, fundraising was halting. An early backer was the UN's World Food Programme (WFP). The organization gave Egypt assistance-in-kind: food for the three thousand workers whom it estimated would labour at Philae.[28] Yet even that request was complicated. Cash-strapped Egypt asked for US$2.2 million from the WFP that it could discount from the amount of money the country owed for Philae, yet UNESCO countered that any WFP donation should be part of the international aid portion of the project.[29] Continued uncertainty surrounded the work, not least regarding who would undertake it. Now working with a consortium of consulting engineers, William Selim Hanna submitted proposals for steering the project: any conflict of interest seemed long forgotten. Yet a further expert committee, chaired by Hassan Zaki, took until April 1969 to approve those proposals with modifications (UNESCO 1969). A tender was issued by Egypt in mid-July or early August, but even then the deadline for bids was extended by a month.[30]

It was only in June 1970 that another UNESCO committee recommended that Egypt choose the High Dam Authority to be the project's contractor. As with the eventual plan at Abu Simbel, the Authority's bid offered both 'the lowest total price and lowest foreign currency requirement' of any of those submitted. The organization also enjoyed the advantage of having 'on the site the equipment and personnel available to do this work', despite Zaki's earlier warnings. The one proviso was that the Egyptians might 'want, for the sake of the international character of this project, to cooperate with certain of the international contractors who have submitted tenders'.[31] Egypt had won out, but the committee attempted to save UNESCO's universalist face.

An agreement on who the other contractor would be was not, however, made until June 1971 (Säve-Söderbergh 1987, 170). In November 1970, a statement issued by Sarwat Okasha implied that the High Dam Authority was having trouble finding a partner.[32] Nasser had died that September. But new president Anwar al-Sadat, whose presidency saw the continued development – and increasing liberalization of – Egypt's tourism industry (and who understood the value of Philae in terms of attracting international visitors) intervened to help (Richter and Steiner 2008, 946; Säve-Söderbergh 1987, 170). A consortium was ultimately formed between the High Dam Company for Civil Works (a reconstituted High Dam Authority) and two Italian engineering concerns working in partnership: at Philae, the Società Italiana per Condotte d'Acqua SpA and Mazzi Estero became Condotte Mazzi Estero (Vittozzi 2021, 181). The progress of that consortium over the next few years was, however, halting.

Philae concluded?

Today – in a context where the WHC appears to be UNESCO's most visible and successful initiative – the work at Philae is promoted as both a triumph of international collaboration and constituent of national pride. That Um Kulthum sang at the Sphinx to raise money for the project is well remembered in Egypt (Amin 2021, 114–118). A recent Italian volume, meanwhile – alongside claiming 'an atmosphere of extraordinary and peaceful collaboration' ascribed to 'typical Mediterranean friendliness' – highlights Italian forms of exactitude at Philae: apparently 'the Florentine school of topography delivered the best results' (Vittozzi 2021, 193, 198). Yet

exigencies and delays – exacerbated by the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, the oil crisis of the same year, and global inflation throughout the 1970s – meant that costs at Philae spiralled. The project consortium was ultimately forced to enter discussions about who bore financial responsibility (Säve-Söderbergh 1987, 169). As the 'universal' WHC came into being, so its relationship with 'national' logics was never far from the surface, even as UNESCO's 'anti-politics' (Ferguson [1990] 1994, xv) helped all involved to save political face.

As funding was scraped together, from 1972 until 1974, the High Dam Company built a cofferdam around Philae. The complex was then – in the main – taken apart: from 1975 until 1977, Condotte Mazzi Estero directed the lifting of Philae's blocks to a storage enclosure at nearby Shellal, a village on the banks of the Nile. From 1977 until 1979, the Italians then put those blocks back together again on an Agilkia dynamited and sculpted into shape. This course of events was not the one planned, however: disassembly and reconstruction were meant to have overlapped. Moreover, some northern parts of the Philae complex, where the water was deeper, had to be left outside the cofferdam: a gateway of Diocletian, a small temple of Augustus, and a ruined temple of Harendotes. Egyptian and British naval divers worked from 1976 until 1978 to take the first two apart; the third was left to be recovered later. Coupled with inflation, such contingencies cost money: the final cost of rebuilding Philae was around US$30 million, over double the original estimate (Säve-Söderbergh 1987, 169, 171–172).

Some of this work could be sold triumphantly. After the cofferdam around Philae was built, the drained site emerged embedded within massive accretions of silt. Structures on the island being dug from it accordingly seemed reborn from the 'primeval mound' of ancient Egyptian beliefs (Säve-Söderbergh 1987, 172; Wilkinson 2000, 76). Yet not all issues at Philae could be spun positively. Despite the concern that the dike scheme required importing machinery, it transpired that the High Dam Company did not necessarily have the correct equipment to undertake the removal scheme either. Likewise, there was a problem with the power supply to the site and difficulties erecting the cofferdam itself due to the condition of the riverbed.[33] By 1975, the *Sunday Times* reported how 'inflation hits the temple of Isis' (Tingay 1975). Both sides of the consortium working there now entered financial claims.

In 1976, a series of meetings between the consortium members took place, with UNESCO – looking to save face – acting as a depoliticized intermediary. The organization took pains to establish its own lack of liability: consistent with the rest of the Nubian campaign, contracts had been made between the Egyptian government and the contractors only. The Egyptian government, too, in fact settled the claim made by the High Dam Company by early August. What remained were Condotte Mazzi Estero's claims accusing the Egyptians of causing delays that hampered the 'Italian' part of the work. Yet no one involved seemed persuaded. UNESCO's Chief Accountant, D. C. Daly, noted that he was neither 'convinced on the legal merit of their case' or on the new figures the Italians had worked out.[34] With matters unresolved, in October 1976 only an emergency interim payment from Egypt saved work at Philae from stopping entirely.[35]

In retrospect, it seems astonishing that work at Philae finished at all. Inflation continued to increase, and in January 1979 the Egyptian government raised the salaries of private sector labourers by ten per cent, further impacting a project whose local labour force

[35]G. Bolla to UNESCO Director General, 19 October 1976, 'Safeguarding Philae—Review Committee for Philae', UNESCO.

was substantial. Likewise, the water level around Philae dropped, making it difficult to transport parts of the complex from Shellal that were still awaiting reassembly.[36] And ultimately, it was only four days before Philae's inauguration that the Egyptian government and Condotte Mazzi Estero reached an agreement (Säve-Söderbergh 1987, 169).

Philae had been moved and all involved could claim a 'success'. Yet not only was it clearly an 'Egyptian' development scheme that had won out there: achieving that success had meant removing politics from that process in a way familiar from development work more generally. If the making of World Heritage was 'for' anyone, it was for the states and officials who learned how to negotiate this most political process of 'anti-politics' to their advantage. When, on 10 March 1980, guests gathered at Philae to mark the reconstructed temple complex's inauguration, they listened to speeches and performances projecting the notion of heritage in which UNESCO and its member-states had become invested. Sadat – not present, but in a speech read by the country's Minister of Information and Culture, Mansour Mahmoud Hassan – stated that 'we have joined hands in saving an ancient civilization, so let us join hands to save the future of all peoples by strengthening peace' (Säve-Söderbergh 1987, 186).

Coming two years after Sadat had won the Nobel Peace Prize, the words did not simply reference that event. Instead, they were telling in what – and who – they chose to forget in the cause of such banal liberal universalism: arguments over the engineering of water and the preservation of monuments, but also Nubians themselves. Nearby, three islands formed in the subsidiary reservoir – Hesa, Awad and Biga – in fact retained small Nubian villages. Yet in the years after Philae's reinauguration, Biga began to be abandoned, further decreasing the remaining Nubian presence in Philae's vicinity (Schäfer 2016, 23). Philae itself has become emblematic of World Heritage's early 'success'. Yet the level of state violence that that success entailed remains visible and troubling. Heritage has long been for the powerful, wherever they are.

Notes

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15. Christophe to Service des Monuments de Nubie, UNESCO, 23 October 1966, 'MUS-Nubia-Philae (Part III)', UNESCO.
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