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INTRODUCTION

Rich in history and located in what is now northern Sudan and Upper Egypt, Nubia is among the most excavated corners of the world (Fig. 1). The archeological interest responsible for this intensive activity is the outcome of the construction of the two dams in Aswan in the twentieth century. The most spectacular salvage rescue operation occurred during the sixties when the international community was mobilized through the efforts of UNESCO and at the request of Egypt and Sudan. The birth of Nubiology, as a field of study separate from Egyptology, can be traced back to this rescue operation that began a shift in the cultural perception of Nubia.

This archeological interest in the area has not yet spilled over to the representation of Nubia in museums. The waters of dams have submerged large parts of Nubia, burying much of its history and stories in the sandy shoals beneath. This dramatic chapter in the history of Nubia is not yet finished. The loss of valuable knowledge of Nubia's place in the archeological record, the displacement of local populations and the subsequent changes in their traditions, is continuing. The Merowe Dam has been built in the last decade at the Fourth Cataract and some other dams are planned throughout the whole area (Fig. 2).

The present developments ask again for an international reaction and for new research on the idea, history, heritage and present life of Nubia and its representation in museums. If the trend is not reversed, museums will become 'the only and sole alternative' venues where Nubian culture can still be admired and understood. The responsibility of museums has, therefore, never been greater. In forgotten nooks and crannies and in dark basements throughout the museum world, the artifacts of Nubia need to be freed from the dust of the time and properly displayed in exhibitions that reveal the wealth of history and culture inherent in each.

Whenever it is possible, museums need to act not only as an erudite display of objects, but also as a conduit between the past and the present through the re-creation of new spaces for learning and engaging more effectively what heritages have left to us. In a nutshell, museums should serve in the context of ancient civilizations as a vehicle for rescuing marginalized cultures from obscurity.

From the perspective of archeology and museum studies, the purpose of my research is to contribute to the integrated knowledge of past and present Nubia. It aims to present and analyze when and how the complex concepts of Nubia and Nubians have been and are being displayed in museum contexts worldwide. Interwoven into this discussion are the related historical, sociopolitical, economic, curatorial and museum systems' problematic of displaying or not displaying Nubian collections. Such an investigation is both highly necessary and timely because not enough scholarly study has been carried out to address the historiography of collections and exhibition of the Nubian heritage properly.

I have always been interested in Nubia, and over the years my appreciation and understanding of Nubia and Nubians have increased. As a young scholar with a background in Egyptology, I focused on archeology and academic issues, as did most of my colleagues. The establishment of the chair of Nubian Antiquities at the University of Rome 'La Sapienza' caught my attention.¹ Considered until then, at the university level, just an appendix to Egyptology, Nubia was little pursued as an academic field in its own right. Gradually my approach to the study of Nubian culture and history has changed, enriched by my permanent residence in the Nile Valley as

¹ I was one of the first students of the University of Rome 'La Sapienza' to write a thesis and specialize in the newly established Chair of Nubian Antiquities. The life of this chair was brief. It was indeed suppressed when Nubia reverted to being again one of the programs of the Chair of Egyptology.

well as by my work first as a scholar and later as a UNESCO expert. I spent one year at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo² and I implemented several activities in the Nubia Museum of Aswan, indubitably the most important are the Permanent Photographic Gallery *Nubia Submerged* and the creation of the Library and the Documentation Center on Nubia.³ In Sudan I also implemented several activities including the contribution to the rehabilitation of the Sudan National Museum in Khartoum and the preparation, in cooperation with the local authorities and the Nubian community, of the concept of the Nubia Museum of Wadi Halfa.

My years of research in museums in the Nubian area and around the globe have made it emphatically clear that much of Nubian history still withers in the backrooms, storage areas and basements of museums. Extracting these objects, though they might no longer be *in situ*, has proven to be a fascinating, sometimes quite surprising and fruitful enterprise: one that has surpassed my earlier penchant for excavation in the field. I realized how important and vital it was to involve local communities not only in the preservation of this heritage but also to help these communities to gain a better understanding of and recognize the significance of the history of the land they lost and of the land in which they are located today. Such efforts elicit a sense of shared history and communal pride, not only within communities, but as part of human civilization as a whole.

The Nubia Museum of Aswan was the first to be conceived as a Museum of the Nubian Civilization in its holistic vision. The museum's concept has played a major role in emancipating my conceptual vision of the idea of 'Nubia'.

Nubia is a contested field in etymological, geographical, linguistic and historical terms and approaches, but, as indicated above, it is also one of the world's best-known areas from an archeological viewpoint. The emphasis on the archeology of Nubia has dominated and hence obscured scholarly research into other aspects of Nubian life and culture. Oceans of ink have been spilled in describing the great wealth of monuments that were once spread through the region (although, fortunately, in some areas these structural documents of history survive even today). More disturbingly, little research exists about the rather more severe loss: that of the living cultures. Too often, we fail to understand that Nubia and Nubian culture, although disappearing, still exist today in the people in and from this area. Within this contemporary context, full of devastating socioeconomic stress, research and museum exhibitions should include the world of Nubians today.⁴ At the end of the twentieth and early into this twenty-first century, strongly characterized by conflicts of identity, matters dealing with people and their cultures have become very sensitive issues. This sensitivity also extends to museums. More and more museums have developed into mass-media communication tools, reshaping their traditional role. Rather than focusing on preserving, studying and presenting their collections, museums might now be required to perform a variety of social functions, as among them social inclusion, lifelong learning and recognizing group identities. One of the main tasks which any study of Nubia requires is, therefore, to gain a better understanding of what is meant by the term 'Nubia'. The various etymological, geographical, linguistic and historical paradigms that have been constructed for the history of Nubia have still left the term somewhat undefined, vaguely referring to both the ancient

² At the time, I was granted a scholarship from the Egyptian Ministry of Higher Education. The scope of this research was to compile a sort of inventory of Nubian artifacts kept at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. The search for these documents was difficult, since a database of the museum objects had not yet been established and information in the 'journal d'entrée' was very vague and poor.

³ I have also organized several activities in capacity building in the field of conservation and education for the museum staff.

⁴ Cf. Chapters 1 and 2.

civilization and that of present-day displaced peoples. As increasing numbers of museums become interested in exhibitions highlighting the history and culture of this civilization and area, there is a real danger that individualized narratives and paradigmatic constructions will once again unbalance and will thwart a thorough understanding of the history/story of Nubia.

This research seeks to target the problem of defining Nubia in modern contexts, both through a journey into historiographic literature and by examining how the views of the past have influenced the documentation and presentation of Nubia in popular and in scholarly interpretations.

Chapter 1 provides a summary of the history of Nubia which highlights the original elements of what we call ‘Nubian culture’ and their continuity over time. It is on this continuity that a Nubian identity is based. Chapter 2 explores the various perceptions and constructions of Nubian history and culture generated in particular by the fact that Nubia does not exist as a political entity, as it is located in Egypt and the Republic of the Sudan. These first two chapters are an essential introduction and form the basis for discussing the impact of what I have termed the ‘museumization of Nubia’, a concept I loosely define as covering the widespread tendency of museums around the globe to include exhibitions of Nubian artifacts. The choice of this term is part of a trend in Nubian studies initiated at the beginning of the last century by the American archeologist George A. Reisner⁵ and continued also by modern researchers who create other terminologies to name materials they consider to be ‘new’ or different.

Before discussing the worldwide ‘museumization of Nubia’,⁶ I pay attention, in Chapter 3, to the role of museums in general, to the changes which they have undergone over time and how they work in the present world. This overview will help us to understand how a complex entity such as Nubia can be presented in harmony with the current realities of its modern context in Egypt and Sudan.

Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7 are the core of the research and in them I present and discuss how Nubia is displayed in museums today. In Chapter 4 I examine the dynamics of dispersion of such collections in museums worldwide, the methodology and set of criteria I used to track them and make my assessment as well as the logical presentation of the collections. In Chapter 5 I offer an analysis of the display or ‘not display’ policies of Nubian collections worldwide. Evidences to support the analysis are presented in Chapters 6 and 7, that offer a ‘virtual tour’ around Nubian collections in the world. The ‘tour’ examines these collections in the light of their display policies; the history of their formation; identification of those instances when Nubia is presented as the subject of an independent academic discipline or, conversely, as an appendage to something else, or just simply a random choice. The tour assists in fostering a better understanding of these collections. It raises the question of whether such collections and exhibitions have a role in defining or creating Nubian heritage, independently of or at variance with the Nubians’ concept of their own past. Furthermore this ‘tour’ helps us to reflect on the influence that the various types of collections on display have on the local and worldwide perception of Nubian heritage.

The result of this research is also intended as my own contribution to the recovery of Nubian artifacts scattered around the world and often hidden in the context of Egyptian material with which they are, in most cases, mixed. I want to mention in this respect what the French archaeologist Michel Dewachter recommends:

L’importance des moyens et des concours mis en oeuvre lors de la Sauvegarde des monuments de Nubie autorisait croire qu’un soin particulier, à défaut de l’établissement

⁵ Cf. Chapter 1.

⁶ Cf. Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7.

d'un corpus systématique, serait accordé en priorité à l'édition des plus intéressants monuments nubien qui, depuis le siècle dernier, se trouvent dispersés à travers plusieurs musées: il n'en fut malheureusement rien et la tâche demeure. Aussi, la Nubie ne bénéficiant plus aujourd'hui du même souci, appartient-il désormais à chacun d'entre nous de signaler de façon appropriée tous ces éléments d'un même puzzle.⁷

I have made rather extensive use of quotations in the text. Two main factors have prompted this choice: the first is that when we speak about the history of Nubia, we are speaking about a period stretching from prehistory to the modern time. Since my background is Egyptology in general and more specifically its contemporary Middle Nubian Period (c. 2494 -1230 BC), I have had to rely on the work of colleagues, specialists in the other periods of Nubian history. I preferred in some cases to quote rather than to paraphrase their work in order to avoid misinterpretation. The second and more sensitive reason is linked to the nature of my research that is not only based on my own perception but also relies on other scholars' perceptions that have characterized the idea of Nubia from the past to the present time. The use of quotations rather than paraphrasing other colleagues' feelings and perceptions documents the state of the debates in contemporary studies and offers the reader the possibility to evaluate my own interpretation of the quoted statements.

This work does not claim to be exhaustive neither in the number of the located collections, which require further research, nor in the suggestions for the improvement of their displays and their link with the world of the contemporary Nubians. This last point certainly needs much more discussion and debate. It is very much hoped that the research can provide a solid base from which to raise awareness on the existing problems and can represent an inspirational tool that will give rise to new ideas and projects.

⁷ Dewachter, 1979.