



Fall 1979

The "Library" of Qasr Ibrim

William Y. Adams
University of Kentucky

Follow this and additional works at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/kentucky-review>

 Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#)

Right click to open a feedback form in a new tab to let us know how this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Adams, William Y. (1979) "The "Library" of Qasr Ibrim," *The Kentucky Review*: Vol. 1 : No. 1 , Article 2.
Available at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/kentucky-review/vol1/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University of Kentucky Libraries at UKnowledge. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Kentucky Review by an authorized editor of UKnowledge. For more information, please contact UKnowledge@lsv.uky.edu.

The "Library" of Qasr Ibrim

By William Y. Adams

In the south of Egypt, far up the Nile from the storied cities of antiquity, the visitor may see a twentieth century monument as impressive in its way as anything built by the Pharaohs. It is the recently completed Aswan High Dam, two hundred feet high, three miles long, and nearly a mile thick at its base. Behind it the impounded waters of Lake Nasser stretch away for more than three hundred miles across the very heart of the Sahara.

Lake Nasser is not only the largest but surely the most desolate body of water created by man. Except for a few fishermen's shanties, its thousand-mile shoreline is broken nowhere by trees, by houses, or by any sign of life at all. Though the lake is seldom over a few miles wide, the farther shore often appears remote and indistinct, so imperceptibly does the desolate surface of water blend into the desolate surface of desert sand. Yet far beneath the waters, along the now drowned floor of the Nile valley, are the remains of a once thriving land. It has been known at various times in history as the Land of Kush, as Aethiopia, and most recently as Nubia.

THE EARLY HISTORY OF NUBIA

Nubia, before its destruction, occupied an anomalous place in history. Its people were African blacks and they spoke an African language. Yet they were not, and for thousands of years had not been, primitives or tribesmen. Their close proximity with Egypt brought them into contact, almost from the beginning, with the civilizing traditions of the Mediterranean lands, and for more than four thousand years the Nubians and their predecessors were participants in and contributors to the successive civilizations that arose in Egypt. For a time, in the last millennium B.C., they even ruled Egypt itself, as the Pharaohs of the Twenty-fifth Dynasty. Their land was poor in comparison to Egypt, but it could supply

the critical luxuries that the Egyptians always coveted, especially gold, ivory, and dark-skinned slaves. By providing these and other exotic goods from the African interior the Nubians built a prosperous and enduring civilization of their own, in spite of the limited agrarian resources of their country. At first civilized as the colonial subjects of the Pharaoh, they at length achieved political independence and founded the Empire of Kush. Later, they underwent the same processes of Hellenization, of Christianization, and finally of Islamization as did their Egyptian neighbors, but they never lost their distinctive African identity or speech.

Nubia's strategic and economic importance rested on a simple fact of geography. For centuries on end this narrow stretch of the Nile Valley, traversing the otherwise lifeless Sahara, was the one reliable avenue of communication between the Mediterranean world and the interior of Africa. Nubia therefore sat astride one of the world's oldest and most profitable trade routes, and enjoyed a near monopoly in the provision of African exotica to the Mediterranean lands. That monopoly was in time threatened by the introduction of camels and the rise of trans-Saharan caravan trade in the early centuries A.D., but it was not finally destroyed until the establishment of maritime trade with Africa's west coast in the fifteenth century. Nubia, by then annexed to the stagnant and anti-mercantile Ottoman Empire, at last subsided into an impoverished and barbarized backwater nation. Thus it was that modern engineers, looking for a place to dam the Nile for the lowest human and economic cost, chose this once-prosperous land as the place to create a vast and lifeless lake. Its 200,000 native inhabitants are today resettled in distant parts of Egypt and the Sudan.

About 150 miles upstream from the Aswan High Dam, the surface of Lake Nasser is broken by an island about four acres in extent. There are many islands in the lake—remnants of former hills and mountaintops—but this one is distinctive, for it is largely man-made. It is all that remains of the once powerful fortified city of Qasr Ibrim. The fortress was originally constructed atop a nearly vertical bluff, two hundred feet high, from whence it overlooked a considerable stretch of the Nile floodplain. It is this elevated situation which has saved Qasr Ibrim from the destruction that has been visited on all other archaeological sites in Lower (i.e. northern) Nubia by the filling of Lake Nasser. It is, in fact, the last surviving vestige of Lower Nubian civilization, apart from the thirty Egyptian-built temples which, thanks to the intervention of

UNESCO, were dismantled and reconstructed on higher ground or in other parts of Egypt and the Sudan.

Qasr Ibrim was a naturally defensible hilltop fortress whose strategic advantages were enhanced by the building of a massive surrounding wall, thirty feet in height in places, penetrated only by a single fortified gateway. Although excavation has not yet reached the lowermost levels of deposit, it now seems apparent that the place was first occupied a little over three thousand years ago, at a time when Lower Nubia was under direct Egyptian control. The earliest remains that we can identify are those left by Egyptian colonial overseers, and it may be that Qasr Ibrim was one of their chief administrative centers in lower Nubia. Once founded, however, the site long outlived the colonial regime that gave it birth. It became successively a local administrative center for the independent Nubian Empire of Kush, a major religious and pilgrimage center in the latter years of the empire, and a Roman garrison point. Following the dissolution of the Kushite Empire, it became the residence of a petty kinglet, then an episcopal seat and the locus of a great cathedral after the conversion of Nubia to Christianity in 542 A.D., and after the eleventh century, the residence of a Viceroy (called by the Greek name Eparch) for Lower Nubia. When Nubia's medieval Christian civilization finally came to an end, Qasr Ibrim was seized by an Ottoman military force in the middle of the sixteenth century. Descendants of this group remained in possession as a garrison force until they were finally driven out by artillery fire from Egyptian gunboats in the year 1813. At that point the three-thousand-year history of Qasr Ibrim came officially to an end, although travelers continued to report squatters living in the ruins of the city down to the beginning of the twentieth century.

Within the four or five acres enclosed by the citadel wall at Qasr Ibrim is a nearly solid cluster of stone buildings, ranged along somewhat irregular intersecting streets. Those at the surface date from the period between 1550 and 1800 A.D., but they are underlain by layers of earlier remains. Uses of the site varied to some extent from period to period, but at nearly every level one can find remains of religious buildings, of commercial and manufacturing shops, and of ordinary houses. These, together with the ever-present fortification walls, suggest that throughout its history Qasr Ibrim was usually, at one and the same time, an important religious, commercial, administrative, and military center.

HISTORY OF THE EXCAVATION

Archaeological excavations at Qasr Ibrim were begun in 1963 as part of the general, region-wide program to salvage archaeological information from Nubia before its final inundation by the Aswan project. Because the elevated situation has preserved the site's upper sections from total inundation, it has been possible to continue the work intermittently down to the present day. Since 1972 there has been a season of excavations in every second year, usually lasting from eight to twelve weeks and involving a labor force of about sixty men. Working conditions are of course complicated by the now isolated situation of Qasr Ibrim, more than 150 miles from the nearest human settlement of any consequence. All supplies must be procured in advance from Aswan, and the expedition is housed throughout the season on a flotilla of boats and barges which are towed up the lake by tugs, and moored just under the battlements on the lee side of the island.

The excavations at Qasr Ibrim are officially sponsored by the Egypt Exploration Society, a British organization whose members include museums, professional Egyptologists, and interested amateurs. Excavation funds are provided mostly by a few large museums, the British Museum being by far the largest single contributor. Since 1972 the University of Kentucky has also been a contributor to the project, partly by making possible my own participation and partly by providing access to Smithsonian Foreign Currency research funds, which are only available to American institutions. In recent seasons Smithsonian funds have covered a major share of the excavation costs at Qasr Ibrim.

I joined the Qasr Ibrim excavations as a consulting archaeologist in 1972, and became Field Director in 1976. For many years before that I was director of salvage excavations in the Sudanese portion of Nubia for the Sudan Government Antiquities Service, and I also led a University of Kentucky expedition to the Sudan in 1969. Over the years I have carried out excavations in more than one hundred Nubian archaeological sites, of all types and all ages. Yet I have never previously encountered anything remotely comparable to Qasr Ibrim, either in Nubia or in my previous archaeological work in the southwestern U. S.

For one thing, Qasr Ibrim is not properly either an Egyptian or a Nubian site; it is a center of Egyptian influence within Nubia. Some of its inhabitants were undoubtedly pure Nubians; others were Nubians who had become completely Egyptianized in speech and

customs, and a few were Egyptian overseers, merchants, or religious officials. (During later centuries a few Greek, Roman, and Arab officials also found their way to Qasr Ibrim.) Then again, few if any of the dwellers on the site were ordinary *fellaheen* peasants, like their neighbors up and down the Nile. They were the elite of Nubian society, and they were better housed, better dressed, and possessed of far more luxury goods than were most Nubians. This is quite conspicuously reflected in the archaeological record; the material finds at Qasr Ibrim are richer and more abundant than at other sites of the same ages.

What really makes Qasr Ibrim almost unique in the annals of archaeology, however, is the extraordinary preservation of everything on the site. Throughout its three-thousand-year history the place has been subjected to none of the usual destructive forces of nature—neither to rain nor flood nor fire nor earthquake nor volcanic disturbance. To a large extent these conditions are common throughout Nubia, but the elevated situation at Qasr Ibrim provided special advantages. The site lay beyond the reach of periodic high floods which have attacked most of the settlements on the Nile floodplain (where of course the great majority of Nubians lived), and the total absence of moisture in the deposits has denied any livelihood to termites, which in other sites have largely eaten away the wood, basketry, textiles, and other perishable artifacts.

At Qasr Ibrim as elsewhere, man has of course been his predatory self. The fortress was probably attacked and captured many times. Yet most of the attackers wanted to seize the place and its resources for their own use, and so in general they tended to spare buildings and installations. Man-made destruction is exhibited rather in the periodic dismantling of older buildings (particularly religious buildings) to provide stone for new ones, and in the digging of deep storage pits down into earlier deposits in order to provide secure underground storage for grain and for various precious goods. There was also continual dismantling of old houses when they became too dilapidated or vermin-infested for further occupation, but fortunately by the time this happened they were usually buried from one to three feet deep in the refuse which their own inhabitants had piled up both within the buildings and outside the walls. Thus, only the upper parts of the walls were usually carried away, while the lower parts were left buried in the accumulated rubbish.

It is the archaeologist's good fortune that the inhabitants at Qasr

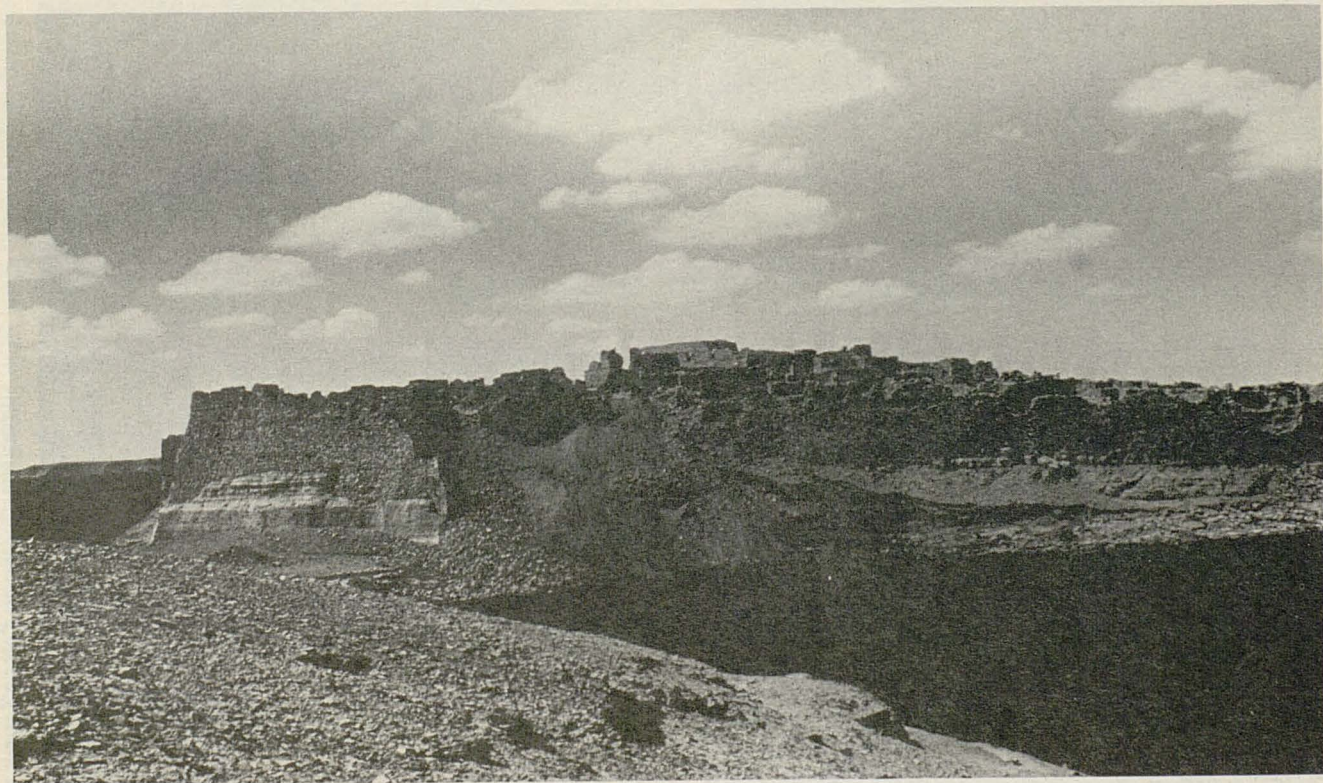
Ibrim were among the "trashiest" people in history. They dumped great quantities of rubbish over the fortification walls, but they dumped just about as much in the streets and even within their houses. There are places on the site where the total depth of the deposit exceeds twenty feet, and it consists from top to bottom entirely of man-made refuse, for there is no process of natural deposition on this windswept mountaintop. Preserved within the accumulated rubbish are the stumps of layer after layer of building remains, and the broken (and, frequently, unbroken) remnants of furniture, utensils, and household vessels used by the inhabitants.

Subject to a few limitations as above noted, one can say with only a minimum of hyperbole that everything that was ever built at Qasr Ibrim during its three-thousand-year history is still there—at least the foundations are—and everything that was ever used and discarded is still to be found somewhere in the accumulated refuse. This applies not only to the usual imperishables of archaeology but to textiles, basketry, leather, food remains, and written documents.

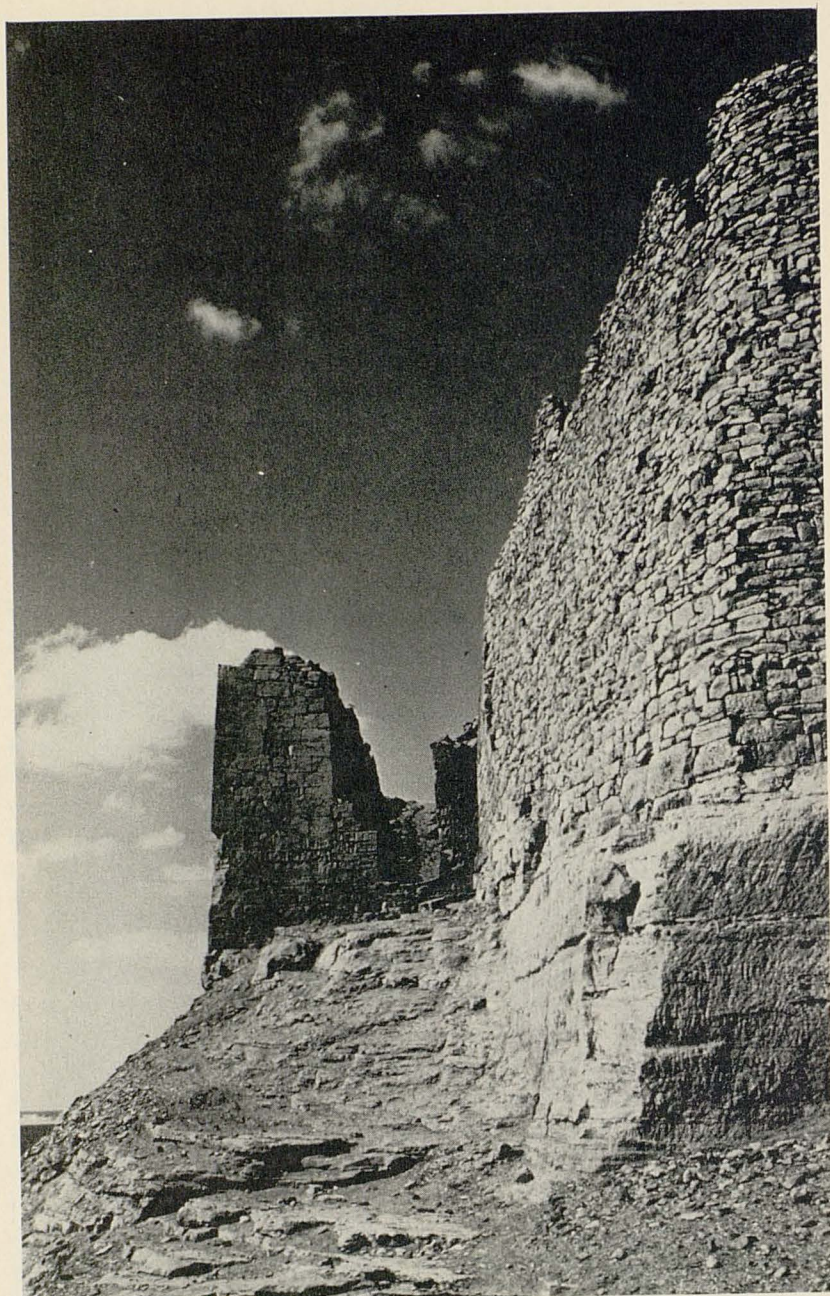
The volume of the material recovered from each season's excavation is staggering. For example, in 1978 we registered over 2,500 individual items which we considered to be of sufficient informational and/or display value to be collected and shipped out of the country. Considerably larger is the total of relatively mundane objects which were recorded and then left on the site, and larger still the totals of textile and pottery fragments which must be studied and recorded in "job lots" rather than individually. Over 20,000 textile fragments and over 200,000 pottery fragments were recorded in this fashion during the 1978 season.

THE EXTRAORDINARY "LIBRARY"

The above described conditions are extraordinary but are not without precedent in archaeology. What makes Qasr Ibrim absolutely unique, at least in my experience, is the volume and variety of its textual remains. Unlike the great majority of Nubians, the elite inhabitants of Qasr Ibrim were literate. Merchants needed bills and receipts; landowners kept deeds and charters; administrative officials engaged in extensive political and diplomatic correspondence; priests, both pagan and Christian, wrote out sacred texts and ritual formulae; pilgrims left their "Kilroy was here" inscriptions; some of the most educated colonial officials even collected and read verse to while away the monotonous hours at this provincial outpost. Occasionally, valuable documents were



The fortress as it appears today, surrounded by the waters of Lake Nasser.



The main gateway in the fortress walls.

buried in sealed jars or tucked away in subfloor crypts; much more commonly missals were simply thrown away after they had been received and read. Papyrus and paper were often "re-cycled"; the back sides and even the margins of earlier documents were used to record a second message, sometimes in a different language from the original. Whether deliberately cached or heedlessly discarded, however, the whole written record of life and commerce at Qasr Ibrim is still there, somewhere on the site, for the archaeologist to find and study. The fortress is, with only slight exaggeration, an unparalleled "library" of history and ethnology.

I cannot provide an actual count of the volume of textual material recovered from each season's excavations. A great deal of the material is highly fragmentary, and we often register under a single number a good many separate pieces if they all appear to belong to one document, or if they were all buried together at one time. Over four hundred separate lots were registered in 1978, but the number of individual pieces of textual material this includes is surely in the thousands. It will be many years before we really know how many different documents we collected, or what they have to say—a point to which I shall return a little later.

The finding of large masses of textual material in archaeological sites is not unprecedented. Over 20,000 Assyrian clay tablets were found at Nineveh in 1849, and an almost equal number has recently come to light at the ancient Syrian city of Ebla. The Qumran caves have yielded up their treasure of Dead Sea Scrolls, and Oxyrhynchus and Nag Hammadi their hoards of late Egyptian and early Christian papyri. In each of these cases, however, the writing is nearly all in a single medium, in not more than two or three languages, and does not cover a wide range of subjects. At Qasr Ibrim, by contrast, we have texts in at least nine languages, and they employ nearly every medium of writing we know from the ancient world. They are carved into stone, wood, or the natural face of the mountain; impressed into wet clay; stamped into metal; written in ink on wood, potsherds, papyrus, leather, parchment, textiles, and paper. Quite apart from their extraordinarily diverse content, the textual finds from Qasr Ibrim furnish a capsule history of writing methods themselves.

THE NINE LANGUAGES OF QASR IBRIM

Like many other peoples on the fringe of civilization, the Nubians usually did not write their own language. When they needed to

communicate in written form they borrowed the characters employed by their more fully civilized neighbors, and frequently also the language of their neighbors. Thus the earliest inscriptions found at Qasr Ibrim and throughout Nubia are in Egyptian hieroglyphics. They were introduced during the days of Egyptian colonial rule, but continued in use as the official language of inscriptions in the independent Empire of Kush. In later years, however, the Kushites abandoned the use of hieroglyphics in favor of a written language of their own, called Meroitic. This was an alphabetic script derived from the Demotic writing of late Egypt. We know the sound values of the Meroitic characters and can pronounce them, but we have no idea what they say, for the language has thus far resisted the most assiduous efforts of scholars to decipher it. It looks vaguely African in structure, but is not recognizably akin to any of the spoken languages of today.

Greek was introduced as a commercial and administrative language in Egypt after the conquest of Alexander, and it began appearing in Nubia as well in the last years of the Kushite Empire, and even more after the breakup of the Empire in the fourth century A.D. After the Christianization of Nubia in 542, Greek also became the liturgical language of the Nubian Church, although the Coptic language preferred by Egyptian Christians was employed to some extent in religious texts. Then, concurrently with the use of Greek and Coptic, the Nubians began once again to write their own language. Called Old Nubian, it is written (like Coptic) in a modified version of the Greek alphabet. Old Nubian shows no demonstrable relationship to Meroitic, so we assume that a major internal migration, or population shift, occurred in this part of the Nile Valley following the breakup of the Empire of Kush. On the other hand, Old Nubian is quite obviously ancestral to the language still spoken today by the recently dispossessed inhabitants of Nubia.

Although Christianity was supplanted by Islam in Egypt following the Arab conquest of 642, in Nubia it persisted eight hundred years longer. When it finally died out, more from isolation and neglect than from any overt pressures, all three of the medieval languages (Greek, Coptic, and Old Nubian) died with it. The Nubians gradually converted to Islam and thereafter Arabic became their only written language even though for a long time hardly anyone spoke it. However, the northern part of Nubia became an Ottoman dominion after 1550, and Turkish rather than Arabic was

employed as the official language of communication with the Ottoman garrisons.

Part of the name Qasr Ibrim, by the way, has itself been handed down from language to language since remote antiquity. We encounter it first in Meroitic funerary inscriptions as *Pedeme* or *Pereme*, but it is not impossible that this in turn represents a corruption of a still older ancient Egyptian name, *Mi'am*, which we know was applied to the nearby site of Aniba. *Pedeme* successively became *Primis* in Latin texts, *Phrim* in Coptic, and finally *Ibrim* in Arabic. The prefix *Qasr*, added in the Middle Ages, is simply the Arabic for castle (appearing in Spanish as *alcazar*).

In the next paragraphs I shall describe briefly some of the different kinds of texts which we find in the nine languages employed during the three-thousand-year history of Qasr Ibrim.

Hieroglyphics. Hieroglyphics were the elaborate form of writing used by the ancient Egyptians for monumental inscriptions, usually cut into stone or painted on tomb and coffin walls. A simpler form of writing, called hieratic, was used for everyday correspondence on papyrus.

Our excavations at Qasr Ibrim have not yet penetrated down to the earliest and lowest levels, where we expect to find ancient Egyptian materials. We have, therefore, not yet encountered any amount of hieroglyphic writing in an original context. We have, however, found a considerable number of stone blocks, having fragmentary hieroglyphic inscriptions, re-used in the construction of later buildings. From the inscriptions themselves it appears that most of these were originally parts of the door jambs of private tombs; others are parts of funerary stelae rather like our tombstones. We also have some fragments of small statues of royal personages, who are identified by names and titles carved into the statue bases. Nearly all of this material dates from the latter part of what is called the Egyptian New Kingdom, between about 1300 and 1000 B.C. It is precisely because of these isolated finds that we are pretty sure we will discover Egyptian New Kingdom material at the bottom of the heap at Qasr Ibrim, so to speak. There, also, we expect to find ordinary hieratic inscriptions which up to now are missing from the textual record.

In only one place have we found hieroglyphic inscriptions *in situ*. They date not from the ancient Egyptian period but from the ensuing Empire of Kush. The Kushite ruler Taharqa (who was also

Pharaoh of Egypt from 690 to 664 B.C., and is mentioned in the Bible) built a small mud brick temple at Qasr Ibrim, with four stone columns to support the roof. Each column was adorned with the names and titles of Taharqa arranged in a vertical text. A thousand years later the temple was converted into a church and most of its original decoration was obliterated, but the columns and their texts were left undisturbed. Only the bases are still in their original places, but the upper sections ("drums," as they are called), which complete the text, are scattered here and there among the later buildings on the site.

Demotic. It has been said that every Greek is a born merchant, and certainly the coming of Greek rule in Egypt, following its conquest by Alexander, brought a great upsurge of commercial activity. To facilitate this development, the old hieratic system of writing Egyptian was replaced by a simpler and more easily learned script, called Demotic.

Another significant innovation of the Greeks, in Egypt and wherever they went throughout the Mediterranean world, was the introduction of viticulture and of wine drinking on a very large scale. Before long both the Egyptians and the Nubians were converted from a nation of beer drinkers into a nation of wine drinkers, and it was in this connection that Demotic writing came to Nubia. Despite their newly acquired taste the Nubians were unable to produce wine in their rainless environment, and they consequently became heavily dependent on imports from Egypt. In archaeological deposits dating between the first century B.C. and the third century A.D., fragments of wine amphorae (the tall, cylindrical pottery vessels used for shipping) number in the hundreds of thousands. They probably constitute more than three-quarters of all the pottery in use at this time. Many of the earliest amphorae which were imported into Nubia had Demotic graffiti in ink on the shoulders, identifying the vintage or the place of origin. These are, up to now, the only instances of Demotic writing that we have encountered at Qasr Ibrim.

Meroitic. As I mentioned earlier, the Meroitic system of alphabetic writing came into use in the latter years of the Empire of Kush, between about the fourth century B.C. and the fourth century A.D. One reason that the language has resisted decipherment up to now is that it is preserved mainly in the form of mortuary texts,

inscribed on tombstones and libation tablets. These appear for the most part to recite a list of names and titles of the deceased according to some kind of standard formula. They simply do not afford enough scope to work out the grammatical details or a very extensive vocabulary of the Meroitic language.

At Qasr Ibrim we have found a few pieces of Meroitic tombstones, re-used in the construction of later buildings. Much more important, however, are the several hundred inscriptions in ink, both on papyrus and wooden tablets, some of which are fully intact. It seems unlikely indeed that they are mortuary texts; probably they are administrative or commercial documents, or private correspondence. They should, therefore, substantially enlarge the corpus and the scope of Meroitic linguistic material available for study; perhaps we may now begin to hope for its ultimate decipherment. Considering the fact that Qasr Ibrim usually had a population including both Nubians and Egyptians, and that there were also Greeks and Romans on the site during the Meroitic-speaking period, there is at least a remote hope that we may one day find a bilingual inscription written both in Meroitic and in another, known language—in effect, a “Rosetta Stone” of Meroitic.

During the latter years of Kushite rule, possibly in the first or second century A.D., a large (by Nubian standards) stone temple was built at Qasr Ibrim, and it soon became a major pilgrimage center. Pilgrims recorded their visits by carving stylized human footprints in the temple floor and the surrounding outdoor pavements, and usually they carved their names within the footprints. The great majority of these are in Greek, but a few are in Meroitic.

There appears also to be at least one historical inscription in Meroitic at Qasr Ibrim. It is a lengthy graffito carved into the right-hand jamb of the main citadel gateway. Although we cannot, of course, make out the content, we think we can recognize the name of the historically attested Kushite ruler Amanislo, from the third century B.C. He is immortalized in Verdi's *Aida* as Amonasro.

Greek. The conquest of Egypt by Alexander the Great in 332 B.C., led shortly afterward to the founding of the Graeco-Egyptian Ptolemaic dynasty. Greek then became not only the court language but an important language of administration and commerce, although it did not replace Egyptian as the language of the masses. Soon after the Alexandrian conquest we find that Greek papyri

parts of the former Kushite dominions, and for a time various petty chieftains contended for supremacy in Lower Nubia. From this period there are almost no surviving documents from the region itself, but classical writers in Egypt tell us that peoples called the Nobatae and the Blemmyes were in the vicinity of Qasr Ibrim. These records leave us to guess whether either of the two peoples were the descendants of the earlier Kushite inhabitants.

A group of letters found at Qasr Ibrim in 1976 constitute almost the only known documents from the post-Kushite dark age. They were found together on a house floor, and can be dated on stratigraphic grounds to around 500 A.D. One of the letters in what appears to be rough Greek is addressed by certain King Phonen of the Blemmyes to King Abournai of the Nobatae. It speaks of the alliance between the two peoples, and exhorts them to make common cause against another of the Nobatae, Silko, who was ravaging the Blemmye territories. It also contains the single tantalizing phrase, "I shall say no more about the slave girl." The Greek grammar and spellings are so barbarized as to leave many passages of the letter obscure, but it nevertheless sheds a quite unexpected light on the nature of inter-tribal relationships at this time. It also shows that Greek, however inexpertly mastered by native scribes, had by now supplanted Meroitic as the language of diplomacy in the Nile Valley.

With the coming of Christianity Greek became the official liturgical language of the Nubian Church, as it was originally in the Egyptian Church also. The Egyptian and Nubian churches were organizationally one body, headed by the Patriarch of Alexandria. They both adhered to the heretical Monophysite doctrine, proscribed by the Council of Chalcedon in 451 A.D. As a result of this break with the Orthodox hierarchy of Constantinople, the Egyptian church became not only non-Greek but anti-Greek, and the native Coptic language replaced Greek in the liturgy. In this latter move, however, the Nubians never followed suit. Coptic was used to some extent by Egyptian priests and bishops resident in Nubia (see below), but the native clergy and the laity continued to recite the mass in Greek.

From the Middle Ages we have, therefore, quite a variety of religious literature in Greek. It includes portions of the Gospels, lives of the saints, homilies, and sermons. For the most part these were written on parchment and were bound into books or codices, but the 1978 season also yielded a remarkable collection of religious

texts lettered on wooden boards, evidently for recitation in church.

Religious books were perhaps worn out and discarded from time to time, but the great bulk of our Christian textual material at Qasr Ibrim comes from a single episode of deposition, which can be dated by associated pottery to the twelfth century A.D. From this one deposit, which is spread over a considerable area of the site, we have not only hundreds of partially burned and torn up manuscript fragments, but the building debris from a church that was evidently destroyed at the same time. Since it is historically attested that the Moslem General Shams ed-Dawla, brother of the famous Sultan Saladin, raided Qasr Ibrim in 1172-73, we assume that it was he who pillaged the church and vandalized its sacred archive. After his departure the Nubians levelled what remained of the building, left the pathetic remnants of the library where they lay, and built a new church on top of the debris.

Apart from its other religious uses, Greek was also commonly employed by the medieval Nubians for tombstone inscriptions. We have a few fragments of these from Qasr Ibrim, but they are not in their original contexts. Individuals were occasionally buried within the citadel walls, but there was never a true cemetery within their crowded confines. The cemeteries were mainly down below, close to the floodplain, and they have long since disappeared under the lake. When we find tombstones within the fortress, it is because they were carried up for use as building material by later inhabitants.

Latin. Egypt passed from Ptolemaic into Roman hands with the death of Cleopatra in 30 B.C. This development was not received favorably by the Nubians, who had been on friendly terms with the last Ptolemies, and they signalled their displeasure a few years later by attacking the Egyptian frontier settlement at Aswan. In retaliation the Roman Prefect Petronious led a punitive expedition into Nubia, and an occupation force was left at Qasr Ibrim for two years. All this is recorded in the classical annals of Strabo and Pliny. We began finding our first archaeological confirmation of their accounts in 1978, when we uncovered a deep refuse deposit containing Roman military boots and sandals, lamps, coins, and articles of clothing. The volume of this material suggests a Roman presence for much longer than the two-year period indicated by Strabo and Pliny, and we have therefore concluded that some kind of Roman diplomatic and perhaps commercial mission was

maintained at Qasr Ibrim long after it was returned to the political control of the Nubians.

Only a few fragmentary inscriptions in Latin have come to light, for the language of administration in Egypt, even under Roman rule, continued to be Greek. We have however a few bits of private letters in Latin, and also what appears to be an ode in praise of Augustus. Also worth mentioning are more than 250 coins bearing the likenesses and names of Roman emperors.

Coptic. Coptic is specifically the Christian language of Egypt. It survives today only in the liturgy and holy books of the Egyptian Orthodox (Coptic) Church, but it was also the spoken language of Christian Egyptians down to the fifteenth century. It is not so very different from Demotic, and derives ultimately from the ancient Egyptian language of the hieroglyphs, but unlike any of its predecessors it is written in Greek alphabetic characters. (There are also five additional characters, representing sounds not found in Greek.)

Interestingly enough, the earliest Coptic texts found at Qasr Ibrim antedate the official introduction of Christianity by about half a century. I mentioned earlier a group of letters found on a pre-Christian house floor, one of which is addressed in barbarized Greek from a king of the Blemmyes to a king of the Nobatae. The other three letters found in association with this document are all in Coptic, and they contain Christian salutations and invocations. They were addressed by a Christian official in Egypt to someone named Moses, presumably resident at Qasr Ibrim, who must also have been a Christian. These documents refer to administrative affairs, and imply that Qasr Ibrim at the time of their writing was under some sort of loose Egyptian hegemony. Nothing of the kind is suggested by the fourth letter, in Greek, and the reason why these four missals came to be preserved in a single archive remains a mystery. The Coptic letters are, however, one of a number of indications that there were Christians at Qasr Ibrim well before the official conversion of Nubia in 542 A.D.

The Nubian Church did not follow the Egyptian Church in adopting Coptic as its official language. However, the bishops and higher clergy of Nubia were appointed by the Coptic Patriarch of Alexandria, and many of them were of Egyptian origin. They brought with them Coptic religious texts and sermons, and when they died their tombstones were usually inscribed in Coptic. Since

Qasr Ibrim was, after the seventh century, the site of Nubia's largest cathedral and most important bishopric, the number of Egyptian clergy here must have been especially high. Thus, the mass of partially destroyed religious literature, already referred to in the discussion of Greek, also includes Gospels, homilies, and martyrologies in Coptic. We also find, from the early Middle Ages, a good deal of private and commercial correspondence in Coptic; presumably these were letters sent back and forth between Egyptians in Egypt and Egyptians at Qasr Ibrim.

The largest and also the latest of all our Coptic textual finds is the consecration document of a certain Bishop Timotheos, who was appointed to the see of Qasr Ibrim in 1372. The bishop evidently died not very long after his arrival at Ibrim and was buried in the cathedral crypt with his scrolls of office beside him. There are two of these, one in Coptic and one in Arabic; each is a little over a foot wide and more than fifteen feet long. They announce to the Nubian people the appointment of the bishop, add some details of his ecclesiastical biography, and invoke God's blessing on his work. The text in Coptic and in Arabic is essentially the same, and both scrolls are subscribed by the same four witnesses.

The advent of Christianity did not end Qasr Ibrim's role as a major pilgrimage center. In the Middle Ages the prescribed tour evidently included not only a visit to the cathedral, but the ascent of a nearby mountaintop about two miles to the south. In this latter locality we have found and copied over 125 pilgrims' inscriptions, of which the great majority are either in Coptic or in a mixture of Coptic and Old Nubian.

Old Nubian. Although both Greek and Coptic were in use as written languages in Nubia by the year 700, within a century thereafter the Nubians also began writing their own language, using a modified version of the Greek alphabet. The early literature in Old Nubian is indistinguishable from that in Greek and Coptic, and consists entirely of religious texts. After the eleventh century, however, we begin to find commercial and legal documents in Old Nubian.

During most of the Middle Ages the whole of Nubia was united under a single kingdom called Makouria. Its capital was at Dongola, a large city over three hundred miles to the south of Qasr Ibrim. There was, however, a special deputy called the Eparch, who was responsible for the administration of affairs in Lower

Nubia, between the First and Second Cataracts of the Nile. This was the only part of Nubia in which free trade with Egyptian merchants was permitted, and it was a part of the Eparch's responsibility to oversee that trade and to levy a tax on it. We do not know where the Eparch's residence was originally located, but after the eleventh century it was certainly at Qasr Ibrim, for we find enormous quantities of correspondence addressed to him both in Old Nubian and in Arabic.

Some time in the fourteenth century the Kingdom of Makouria broke up into smaller principalities, many of which fell under the hegemony of newly arrived Arab nomads. In the far north of Nubia, however, a splinter kingdom called Dotawo continued to maintain the Christian faith and the use of the Old Nubian language until the end of the fifteenth century. Its existence went unnoticed by chroniclers in neighboring lands, and virtually our sole knowledge of it comes from Old Nubian documents found at Qasr Ibrim and at the nearby (now inundated) site of Gebel Adda. A sealed jar found at Qasr Ibrim in 1974 contained ten land charters of the Dotawo period, written in ink on leather scrolls. In the same jar were twenty-seven letters on paper, of which twenty-five were in Old Nubian, one was in Coptic, and one in Arabic. These and other documents give us the names of at least eight kings of Dotawo, as well as a host of lesser officials and their titles. We get the impression that, in the last days of Nubian Christianity, many functions of the Church were absorbed into the royal court of Dotawo, so that the same persons served both in secular and in ecclesiastical capacities.

Arabic. Arabic became the language of government in Egypt from the time when the country fell to Moslem armies in 642 A.D. The mass of the population remained Christian and continued to speak Coptic for two or three centuries afterward, but gradually both the Islamic faith and the Arabic language gained headway, and after the fourteenth century even the Christians ceased to use Coptic in everyday discourse.

The Arab conquerors of Egypt attempted at once to add Nubia to their dominions, but they were driven back by the fierce resistance of the Nubians. A more concerted invasion ten years later was equally unsuccessful; a major pitched battle before Dongola ended in a standoff between the two armies. The erstwhile adversaries then sat down and negotiated the Baqt Treaty which in effect

guaranteed the sovereignty and integrity of Nubia, including its Christian faith, for the next eight hundred years. This document is unique in the history of Islam because it formally acknowledged the sovereignty of a non-Islamic nation. For this reason its status and implications were much debated by Moslem jurists in the early Middle Ages, and it is primarily from their writings that we know of the existence and of the provisions of the Baqt Treaty.

Thanks to the guarantees of the Baqt Treaty, Islam did not become the faith of Nubia until long after its ascendancy in Egypt. On the other hand the Arabic language began to appear in diplomacy and international commerce fairly soon after the Arab conquest of Egypt.

Our oldest Arabic find from Qasr Ibrim is a dramatic one from several points of view. Uncovered in 1972 in a crypt beneath a house floor, it is a papyrus scroll twenty-one inches wide and eight feet long. Only a small portion at the top, containing the protocols of address, is missing. The scroll, written in a beautiful early Arabic hand, is a letter from the Emir (governor) of Egypt to the Nubian King of Makouria, complaining of a long list of Nubian violations of the Baqt Treaty. It is dated in the year 758 A.D., just over a century after the treaty itself had been signed. The letter offers dramatic confirmation not only for the existence of the Treaty but for many of its specific provisions; it shows that the information provided by medieval Arab jurists is essentially correct. The letter is, incidentally, the world's oldest most complete specimen of written Arabic, and it is of enormous interest on paleographic grounds alone. It was found together with three more fragmentary Coptic scrolls which are still under study. One of them may be the draft of a reply to the Emir's letter.

Among its other conditions, the Baqt Treaty permitted the free movement and settlement of Egyptian merchants in Lower Nubia, although they were forbidden to ascend beyond the Second Cataract into Upper Nubia. Qasr Ibrim evidently became the focal point for a good deal of Egyptian-Nubian commerce, and the residence of Egyptian merchants, for in the later Middle Ages we find a good deal of commercial correspondence in the Arabic language. Much of it was addressed to the Eparch, who was a pivotal figure in the Egyptian-Nubian trade. Several letters from the twelfth century show that the Eparch was conducting business with an Egyptian palace official, who apparently acted as agent for the Nubian rulers, sending them various goods on order and selling

slaves on their behalf.

Another remarkable Arabic textual find, already mentioned, is the consecration scroll found buried with Bishop Timotheos in the Qasr Ibrim cathedral.

After the demise of Nubian Christianity in the fifteenth century, all of the medieval written languages died out even though Nubian continued to be spoken. Qasr Ibrim also ceased at last to be a major religious center, though a part of its cathedral was converted into a mosque by the Ottoman garrison which took possession of the citadel some time around 1550. The original garrison troops were neither Egyptians nor Nubians; according to local tradition they were Bosnians. They were, however, required to maintain their numbers through intermarriage with the local populace, so that after a century or two their descendants were Nubianized in speech and to a large extent in appearance. In so far as they engaged in written correspondence, however, they used primarily Arabic. We have a substantial volume of textual material, mostly on paper, from the uppermost ("Bosnian") levels of the site. Most of it is still awaiting study, but preliminary examination suggests that it consists mainly of private letters and of commercial memoranda and receipts.

Turkish. Egypt became an Ottoman dependency in 1517, and the northern part of Nubia was added about a generation later. Under the Ottomans, Turkish became the official language of government and of command in the Egyptian army, even though it was little understood by the masses. The large corpus of textual material from the "Bosnian" levels at Qasr Ibrim, although mostly in Arabic, appears to include a few specimens of Turkish. They may perhaps represent official correspondence between the Ottoman Pashas and the commanders of the Ibrim garrison.

If, in the foregoing paragraphs, I have been less than explicit in describing the content of many of the Qasr Ibrim documents, it is because the study of this material is barely in its infancy. During each field season on the site we have at least two philologists at work, whose sole job is to make hand copies and photographs of the textual finds as they turn up. Yet their combined efforts are hardly sufficient to keep abreast of the copying and recording; only rarely have they time to contemplate the meaning of the texts under

their hands, or to work out translations and interpretations.

Our problem in dealing with texts, as with all other materials, is complicated by the fact that at the end of each season we must divide our accumulated finds with the Egyptian Government. While they may or may not allow us a generous share of the pottery, utensils, and non-textual remains, it has been their policy for a number of years to reserve all inscriptional material for themselves. This policy represents a very literal interpretation of the Egyptian antiquities law, which stipulates that unique archaeological finds of whatever sort may not be allowed to leave the country. The consequence is that we are able to carry away with us, for later study, only such copies and records as we can make on the site during the excavation season. Photography is of course a godsend in these circumstances, yet many of our textual finds are so faded, discolored, and fragmentary that important details are not disclosed in photographs. Minute examination, often with a hand lens, and facsimile copying are our only recourse to insure maximum recovery of information from the Qasr Ibrim texts.

It must be remembered too that the vast majority of our finds are fragmentary. This is particularly true in the case of papyrus, which is brittle by nature, but we also find that messages on paper have often been deliberately torn up before discarding, just as we ourselves are wont to do. By trial and error we can sometimes reconstruct large documents from disconnected fragments, but it requires hours of patient comparison by experienced paleographers of materials, hands, and other characteristics.

Follow-up study of the Qasr Ibrim texts is undertaken by members of the archaeological team, when and as they can take time away from regular academic and museum duties. It is a slow job in the best of circumstances, and it may therefore be years before we know for certain what is in the "library" of texts that have been recovered up to now. For many, of course, we never will; they are either too fragmentary or are in undecipherable languages.

Meanwhile the field excavations continue apace; plans are already well advanced for 1980 and beyond. In the ten seasons up to now we have worked in only about a quarter of the total area of the site, and we have nowhere penetrated deeper than the Roman or late Ptolemaic levels. Nearly half the total history of Qasr Ibrim still lies uninvestigated beneath our feet. I have no clear idea what to expect among the thousands of textual finds that will come to

light in future seasons, but every season since I first joined the expedition in 1972 has produced at least one discovery so dramatic and unexpected that it has necessitated rewriting a page, or sometimes even a whole chapter, of Nubian history. I have therefore learned above all to expect the unexpected—in fact I am counting on it.