

The "Good Shepherd" from Masida. An image in the context of the changing cultural landscape of the Third Cataract of the Nile.

Near the modern village of Masida, at the Third Cataract in Sudanese Nubia, remains survive of an isolated church that hides in itself a rock-drawing that probably dates back to the late Meroitic period (3rd century AD?), three centuries before this region was converted to Christianity.

The rock-drawing shows a male person in what seems royal attire, who holds two rams and a spear or staff. The interesting point is that the building was constructed in such a way that this representation became the main focus of attention, in the sanctuary of the church. A certain similarity with the well-known representation of the 'Good Shepherd' in early Christian art became a starting point for the whole project.

This is an intriguing situation that asks for an explanation. No similar constructions are known from Nubia so far. If scholars want to solve the questions concerning this monument, action has to be taken soon, because the remains of the church are deteriorating very fast.

In order to understand the reasons for the building of this church and the circumstances in which it took place, the wider context has to be investigated and understood.

First there is the spatial context: the region of the Third Cataract has numerous graffiti and rock-drawings. The Third Cataract is natural barrier, that was also on a provincial border in Meroitic times. Then, for at least three centuries it was on the border between the kingdoms of Makuria (south) and Nobadia (north), and even after these kingdoms merged into one, it remained on a cultural borderline between North and South. Until the present day this border is present, since north and south different dialects are spoken. The demarcation of this border and the traffic (trade routes?) passing this point may be a reason for the location of both the rock-drawing and the church.

The second context is the time-span in which the drawing was made, viewed, respected and possibly venerated. Its meaning must have undergone a transformation between the late Meroitic period and the time when it became a focus of attention for Christian inhabitants of the region and travellers. So far it is unknown whether this was a gradual process of transformation, or whether the drawing was forgotten and 'rediscovered' in the 9th or 10th century, when the church was probably built.

The drawing and the church stand on a geographical border and they abridge a border in time, linking the pre-Christian period to the Christian era. Modern scholars often try to draw sharp division lines in order to mark periods, categories and cultures. It is known that borders in antiquity had different meanings and especially in Africa anthropologists have noticed completely different approaches to the concept of 'border'. A proper understanding of the rock-drawing and church of Masida requires a deeper study of the borders in time and space that mark this small, but remarkable monument.

The project investigates the changing meaning of a landmark by surveying the wider context of the Third Cataract and the stretch of time in which the drawing has undergone a change in meaning and function. This period lasts until the present day. The local population attaches meaning to remains of the past and the activity of the research team will be the last phase in this process. A multi-disciplinary team of archaeologists, an art-historian, an epigraphist, and an ethnologist will investigate the questions surrounding a relatively small monument, but the outcomes will have significance for the study of Nubian culture in a wider sense: the period between the collapse of Meroë and the heyday of Christian culture and the continuity and transformation of culture. In fact such processes have always taken place everywhere and at any time.