

# DROWNED GIFTS OF THE NILE

## Archaeological Research in Lower Nubia beneath the Aswan High Dam

Excavations in Lower Nubia have most frequently been conceived in the framework of salvage archaeology, due to the periodical threat of flooding the region underwent since the Aswan Dam was built between 1898 and 1902.

It has surely led to consistent results and to quantum increases in our knowledge of cultural history of the region; meanwhile, enormous lacunae remain, due to the difficulties encountered by archaeologists in struggling with water rising, lack of time and the urgency to develop a wholly new scientific method.



f. Grave 7:104, accidental disturbance.



### The First Archaeological Survey of Lower Nubia (1907-1911)

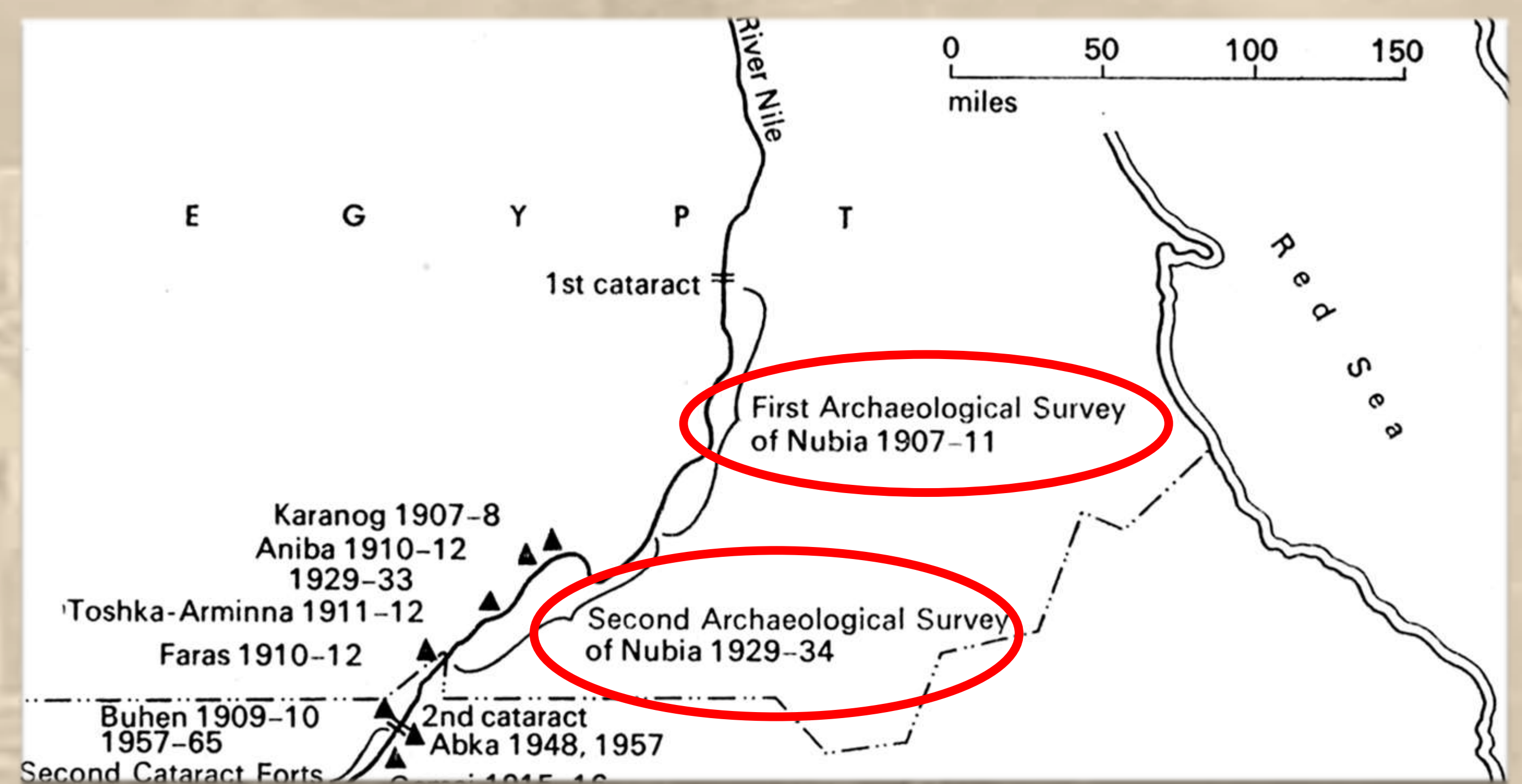
Four campaigns directed by George A. Reisner and Cecil M. Firth between Shellal and Wadi es-Sebua'. It was a monumental operation of salvage archaeology, due to the raising of the Old Aswan Dam, with a twofold purpose: the assessment of both the extent and scientific value of the findings and the reconstruction of Nubian history, mainly focusing on necropolises and protohistoric evidencies. Reisner systematically investigated all the sites in the threatened region, developing his own scientific method during the operations.

The result was the excavation of 151 cemeteries, for over 8,000 burials, plus half a dozen settlements; on the basis of the huge amount of collected data, Reisner defined four population waves from Protodynastic to post-Meroitic: A-Group, B-Group, C-Group and X-Group.

### The Second Archaeological Survey of Lower Nubia (1929-1934)

A further rising of the Old Dam would flood the region between Wadi es-Sebua' and Addindan, hence a new salvage archaeology operation was planned and directed by William B. Emery and Lawrence P. Kirwan, similar both in approach and methodology to the previous one: after a preliminary investigation of each site, systematic cleaning would follow. Then, each tomb was assigned a progressive number and classified; each file would be provided with photographs and drawings of the structures on a 1:25 scale. The anatomist would then diagnose sex, age and pathologies of the human remains, following which the archaeologist each piece of the funerary equipment on a 1:5 scale. Finally, after having filed the orientation of the burial, grave goods and human remains would be removed. Only at the end of the excavations the supervisor would draw the complete plan of the necropolis.

76 cemeteries were investigated, for a total of 2400 individual burials dating from 3500 BC to 500 AD; however, the main achievement lies in the discovery of the post-Meroitic royal burials of Ballana and Qustul during the 1931 campaign.



### The UNESCO Campaign (1929-1934)

When President Nasser promoted the building of the Aswan Great Dam (Sadd el-'Ali), the entire region between Aswan and Wadi Halfa would be permanently submerged by a new artificial lake.

The costs to rescue Nubian monuments exceeded the resources of Egypt and Sudan: UNESCO issued an appeal to the whole world to provide economic resources, scientific advice and manpower for salvage and documentation of Lower Nubia sites.

The main purpose consisted of the dismantling, transport and reconstruction of thirty-five temples.

Over forty archaeological missions from all over the world took part into the rescue campaign; each one was assigned a specific area of Lower Nubia. Due to the destruction of numerous sites during the seasonal flooding of previous years, the purpose was no longer an archaeological investigation in extension, but a detailed focus on a smaller number of significant centres.

### Hypothesis and future perspectives

The increase in knowledge of Nubian history had always depended, ever since the inauguration of the Old Dam in 1902, on the need to rescue the monuments from destruction, therefore surveys were motivated by the threat of a "now or never" rather than by systematic study purposes.

Nowadays, the struggle Egyptologists working in Lower Nubia must face is the impossibility to carry out fieldwork due to the presence of Lake Nasser.

Furthermore, the data published during the three main Archaeological Surveys of Nubia are incomplete and have not been subjected yet to systematic analysis.

First, it is necessary to re-examine the existing documentation, to revise the excavation reports and to develop a comparative study of the findings.

Another necessity is setting a radiocarbon date for most of Lower Nubia sites, especially those belonging to the Early A-Horizon.

Likewise, archeozoological and archaeobotanical analysis of faunal and vegetal remains should be done, to understand their distribution and clarify the process of domestication.

In the third instance, a quantitative study of pottery and its associations is advisable, since there is a general lack of typological seriations.

Finally, the writer deems necessary a complete survey of the archaeological findings of Reisner-Firth's, Emery-Kirwan's and UNESCO campaigns, to determine the actual location of most artefacts and osteological remains, which are scattered around museums (if not lost) and collections around the world, in order to produce a detailed corpus which would constitute itself as the founding basis of future research.