

The Warden of World Heritage: UNESCO and the Rescue of the Nubian Monuments

Paul Betts

On 10 March 1980 the long-awaited consecration of two dozen of the most famous Nubian monuments rescued from the waters of Lake Nasser took place with solemn pomp and circumstance. Over 500 people were in attendance, as the desert ceremony unfolded between two colonnades of the famed Isis temple. One witness described the remarkable sunrise spectacle this way:

In the darkness, well before sunrise, the Cairo Symphony Orchestra, under the wondering eyes of the Nubians, in full evening dress and with their instruments, had filled the Nubian boats to be carried to the re-erected Philae. With them went guests to hear the morning prayer and see the temples first red then golden in the light of the rising sun.

This event crowned the unprecedented twenty-year campaign of the United Nations Education, Culture, and Science Organization to cut, transport, and relocate twenty-three massive Nubian statues to higher ground in order to save them from submersion by Egypt's High Aswan Dam project of the early 1960s. The International 'Save the Nubian Monuments' initiative enlisted the support of dozens of countries and NGOs, along with thousands of archaeologists, engineers, and volunteers, in a common enterprise of fundraising, political will, and technical virtuosity that transcended Cold War division. The Senegalese Director General of UNESCO, Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow, was on hand to pay tribute to the dawning of a global universal heritage: 'our generation is the first in history to perceive the totality of these works as an indivisible whole, each of them being considered as an integral part of a single universal heritage,' concluding that '[i]t will be numbered among the few major attempts made in our lifetime by the nations to assume their common responsibility towards the past so as to move forward in a spirit of

brotherhood towards the future.’¹ A similar spirit informed the words of Egyptian President Anwar el-Sadat:

The success we are celebrating today gives us concrete evidence that when people work together for a good cause they can achieve miracles. We have joined hands in saving an ancient civilization, so let us join hands to save the future of all peoples by strengthening peace.²

No event better exemplified UNESCO’s abiding mission to build and safeguard what it boldly called ‘world civilization,’ and as such it constituted an instructive tale of Cold War internationalism. This was no small feat, given that the internationalization of the heritage industry after 1945 (often seen with the national reclamation of monuments, religious sites, and natural parks around the world) was usually so closely tied to projects of state-building and the construction of new national identities.³ In this way UNESCO flew in the face of international trends, and here and elsewhere made great strides in bringing together international law, historical preservation, and intercultural awareness about the historical emblems of universal humanity. UNESCO’s Nubian monument preservation project played a special role in this cultural crusade, hailed as proof that such a global heritage-consciousness could and did exist despite geopolitical antagonism and ideological difference. Given Gamal Abdel Nasser’s effort to speed along the Aswan High Dam project in the early 1960s, Nubia played host to a dramatic clash between progress and preservation that attracted worldwide media coverage. As one contemporary commentator wryly put it: ‘Thus Nubia, poor, forgotten and now doomed, commanded in its dying days the interest of mankind.’⁴ This essay explores the extent to which UNESCO’s ‘Save the Nubian Monuments’ project captured a pivotal episode of post-war universalism based on a distinctly post-war sensibility of humanity’s shared and imperilled cultural patrimony.

¹ Amadou-Mahtar M’Bow, ‘A Single, Universal Heritage’, *Unesco Courier*, 33 (Feb/March 1980), 4.

² Torgny Säve-Söderbergh (ed.), *Temples and Tombs of Ancient Nubia: The International Rescue Campaign at Abu Simbel, Philae and Other Sites* (Paris, 1987), 185–6.

³ M. Diaz-Andreu and T. Champion (eds), *Nationalism and Archaeology in Europe* (Boulder, 1996); Philip L. Kohl and Clare Fawcett, *Nationalism, Politics and the Practice of Archaeology* (Cambridge, 1995); and John Schofield and Wayne Cocroft (eds), *A Fearsome Heritage: Diverse Legacies of the Cold War* (Walnut Creek, CA, 2007).

⁴ Tom Little, *High Dam at Aswan: The Subjugation of the Nile* (London, 1965), 157.

For starters, Nubia was the name of the land in north-eastern Africa directly south of Egypt, stretching along the banks of the Nile along numerous cataracts. It was the only continuously occupied tract of land that connected sub-Saharan Africa with the Mediterranean world. Nubian culture dates back to 3500 BC, and it is generally agreed that the word Nubia derives from the ancient Egyptian word *nwb*, meaning gold, and defines the region between Aswan and Debba where Nubian languages are spoken.⁵ The region is now a sparsely populated area straddling Egypt and Sudan. It was the first and most enduring of the African trading empires, as the Nile corridor represented the safest means of commerce connecting the African and Mediterranean coasts. At times the area fell under the domination of Egypt, at other times it was an independent state. However, the modern history of Nubia has been dominated by Egypt and Sudan; there was an uprising in 1883 under Mohammed Ahmed, the Mahdi, and though he died in 1885, Nubia became for a short time an autonomous Islamic state independent of Egypt and Great Britain. In 1896 a joint Egyptian–English expeditionary force led by Sir Herbert Kitchener began a successful campaign against the Mahdist regime in the Sudan. In 1899 the Sudan and Egypt were amalgamated and placed under the rule of the British Governor-General as Anglo-Egyptian Sudan.⁶ The area was known to a number of intrepid Western travellers and colourfully chronicled by European explorers such as Louis Norden, Johann Ludwig Burckhardt, and Amelia Edwards. Nubia was the site of nineteenth-century archaeological expeditions made famous by Jean-Francois Champollion and Karl Richard Lepsius, and the region continued to exert fascination among Western anthropologists and photographers over the course of the twentieth century, ranging from Merian C. Cooper to Rolf Herzog, George Rodger to Leni Riefenstahl.⁷

Nasser's Aswan High Dam project began in 1960, and took ten years to complete. Large dam construction was not new to the region. While ideas of taming the river's flow go back to pharaonic times, the modern era's effort to devise a reservoir to store excess water from the Nile's great floods first began with the building of the first Aswan Dam between 1898 and 1912. It was

⁵ John H. Taylor, *Egypt and Nubia* (London, 1991), 4–7.

⁶ John A. Larson, *Lost Nubia: A Centennial Exhibit of Photographs from the 1905–1907 Egyptian Expedition of the University of Chicago* (Chicago, 2006), vii–x.

⁷ Alexandra Ludewig, 'Leni Riefenstahl's Encounter with the Nuba', *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 8:1 (2006), 83–101. See too Rolf Herzog, *Die Nubier* (Berlin, 1957) and Armgard Grauer, 'Die Architektur und Wandmalerei der Nubier behandelt nach dem ethnographischen Befund vor der Aussiedlung 1963/1964', PhD dissertation, Albert-Ludwigs-Universität zu Freiburg i. Br., 1968.

designed by British engineers, primarily to service cotton cultivation. The dam was raised in 1912 and then again in 1933 in order to meet Egypt's growing demands for water.⁸ Its thirty-year construction made it easily the largest civil enterprise of the British mandate in Egypt, and was celebrated as a wonder of technical achievement and British imperial might. But the side effects of the project attracted more and more attention. As the first dam construction was nearly completed, there was growing concern among Egyptologists and others about the fate of the ancient Nubian ruins (both monuments and human remains) and peoples once the area had been flooded.⁹ Hasty compromises were struck—the famous Philae monument, for example, was allowed to be half-submerged for five months of the year. In this case, the preservationists were largely overrun by the technocrats, who drove ahead with subjugating the Nile for their agricultural and economic purposes.

The conflict between old and new became even more pronounced in the wake of the Egyptian Revolution in 1952. Regulating the Nile served as the political cornerstone of the fledgling United Arab Republic, and the dam was often described as Nasser's latter-day pyramid in terms of its central political symbolism. One of the overarching goals of his revolution was economic and social progress, and the new regime targeted the High Dam at Aswan for its modernization crusade. It was deemed vital to control the new country's water supply for irrigation and hydro-electricity, as well as to protect the country from droughts and perennial flooding. In 1954 the new republic succeeded in removing British soldiers from the Suez Canal, and later that year looked to the World Bank for a loan to finance the High Dam construction. However, relations with the West were soured by the fact that Nasser had just negotiated an arms deal with Czechoslovakia and then established formal diplomatic ties with communist China, policies openly in conflict with American containment policy. The US thereafter withdrew its initial offer of financial support, as did the World Bank. Undeterred, Nasser announced his intention to nationalize the Suez Canal in July 1956, expecting that revenues generated from this would help underwrite dam construction and the creation of a 300-mile long artificial lake, Lake Nasser. With the outbreak of war later that year, Egypt was in urgent need of support and in 1958 the USSR offered financial assistance for the project, along with requisite technicians

⁸ Hussein M. Fahim, *Dams, People and Development* (New York, 1981), 7–15.

⁹ David Gange, 'Unholy Water: Archaeology, the Bible and the First Aswan Dam', in Astrid Swenson and Peter Mandler (eds), *Between Preservation and Plunder* (London, 2013), 93–114.

and heavy machinery.¹⁰ While the communist dimension of the deal was of little appeal to Nasser, he embraced it for tactical reasons; there was widespread feeling in the West and the Arab world that the US and Great Britain failed to help when they had the chance.¹¹ The joint dam project became the source of great Cold War theatre as a sign of a new Soviet-African axis, as well as a showcase of Soviet engineering (even if the Soviets simply modified an earlier West German design). In a publicized exchange of letters between Khrushchev and Nasser in January 1960, Nasser proudly confirmed that the Aswan High Dam 'will forever remain a symbol of the friendship between our two peoples. I am also confident that it will remain for all peace-loving peoples a living example of a positive and magnificent work for peace.'¹²

Even so, the High Dam project clearly had its shadow side. The director of Egypt's Antiquities Service, Mustafa Amer, was the first to sound the alarm about the fate of the Nubian monuments residing in the valleys slated to be flooded. Amer enlisted the support of Egyptologists and engineers from around the world in writing a letter of appeal to Nasser's new government to reconsider the plan. Nothing came of it, however, as Nasser's insouciance toward the Nubian monuments was well known.¹³ In 1955 Egypt's Antiquities Service quickly published a study by Osman Rostem, *The Salvage of Philae*, which pointed out the rich cache of antiquities still to be excavated in the area, but which would be lost forever were the dam project to move forward. That year UNESCO created the 'Documentation and Study Centre of the History of Art and Civilization of Ancient Egypt' in Cairo so as to document some four hundred private tombs of the Theban Necropolis along with hundreds of other sites, with Louvre director Christiane Desroches-Noblecourt driving the rescue campaign at this early stage.¹⁴ The French Institut Géographique National was called in to carry out a 'photogrammetric survey' of the area affected before it was too late, aided by the Egyptian armed forces. By 1959 the Egyptian Minister of Culture,

¹⁰ James E. Dougherty, 'The Aswan Decision in Perspective', *Political Science Quarterly*, 74:1 (March 1959) 21–45.

¹¹ Leslie Greener, *High Dam over Nubia* (London, 1962), 27. See too the booklet in the Cairo series 'Africa for Africans', *The Aswan High Dam: New Wonder of the Nile* (Cairo, 1960), 13.

¹² Gamul Abdul [sic] Nasser to N. Khrushchev, 17 January 1960, Cairo, reprinted in *The Aswan High Dam: New Wonder*, 66–7.

¹³ See the typed confidential letter from Louis-A. Christophe, Centre de Documentation sur l'Égypte ancienne, Cairo, to M. A. Vrioni, 30 Jan 1963, 069 (62) N/Abu Simbel Part I and IV, Box 53, UNESCO Archive, Paris, hereafter UAP.

¹⁴ Säve-Söderbergh, *Temples*, 64–5.

Tharwat Okasha, began to worry about the negative international publicity for both his ministry and the new state, and called a meeting with UNESCO representatives to discuss the matter in earnest.¹⁵

But why UNESCO? This is not as obvious as it may at first appear, not least because the organization was subject to bitter political wrangling among various factions from the very beginning. Over the decades its history was marred by a series of protests and dramatic walk-outs from various delegations, and in the early 1950s one director-general famously resigned in tears of frustration over further budget cuts. Worse, UNESCO's lofty internationalist mission was routinely ridiculed in the world press as woefully starry-eyed and out of step with a hard-edged world of Cold War power politics. By the late 1950s UNESCO's 'civilizing mission' was pilloried as nothing but a 'cavalry of hobby horses' and 'pork barrel riding on a cloud'.¹⁶ Max Frisch's popular 1957 novel, *Homo Faber*, was a kind of send-up of UNESCO's 'one-world' civilizational ideal and its do-gooder espousal of modernization for all; at one point the novel's protagonist, a normally reserved Swiss UNESCO technical expert en route to South America to help build turbines in Venezuela, remarked to an acquaintance that he met on the trip: 'I only lost my temper when Marcel started to talk about my work, that is to say about UNESCO, saying the technologist was the final guise of the white missionary, industrialization the last gospel of a dying race and living standards a substitute for a purpose of living.'¹⁷ But such a characterization was quite misleading, for UNESCO was as interested in preservation as it was in progress; so much so that the stewardship of ancient ruins and the protection of endangered cultural property across the world was identified as an area where UNESCO hoped to make its international mark.

Of course UNESCO by no means pioneered these ideas. The international safeguarding of cultural property had been devised a century or so earlier, often in reaction to the destructive capacities of war. In the wake of the Napoleonic Wars, for example, plunder became a key moral issue among nations, and international treaties (beginning with the 1874 Brussels 'Project of an International Declaration concerning the Laws and Customs of War') were expressly dedicated to redressing damage and destruction to state property of all kinds in times of war. The respect of cultural property in wartime was made more present in the Hague Conventions for the Protection of

¹⁵ Fekri A. Hassan, 'The Aswan High Dam and the International Rescue Nubia Campaign', *Journal of African Archaeology*, 24:3/4 (Sept/Dec 2007), 81.

¹⁶ James Sewell, *Unesco and World Politics: Engaging in International Relations* (Princeton, 1975), 153-9, 119, 135.

¹⁷ Max Frisch, *Homo Faber*, trans. Michael Bullock (London, 1974 [1957]), 55.

Cultural Heritage in 1899 and 1907, respectively, and there were proposals put forward by Switzerland and Belgium during the First World War to set up a Red Cross-like organization entrusted with protecting cultural objects during war.¹⁸ Nevertheless, it was the aftermath of the Great War that saw renewed international attention toward preservation, spearheaded by the League of Nations. The League and its new International Commission on Historical Monuments endeavoured to create new legal instruments to protect cultural antiquities as a step toward international cooperation. The League's first attempt to set up a cultural heritage conservation initiative took place in 1923, on the back of the worldwide coverage and popular excitement associated with the discovery of King Tutankhamun's tomb the year before. The League's International Museums Office was founded in 1926 to carry on the mission, and the final report of its high-profile conference in Athens in 1931 concluded with the words that the 'question of the conservation of the artistic and archaeological property of mankind is one that interests the community of States, which are wardens of civilization.' Likewise, the Pan-American Union signed a Treaty on the Protection of Artistic and Scientific Institutions and Historical Monuments in 1935, and two years later an International Conference on Excavations took place in Cairo infused with a similar claim to save the world's 'common archaeological heritage'.¹⁹ But for all of the rhetoric of universalism, World War II cruelly put paid to this budding internationalist preservation movement.

After 1945 there was a move to rehabilitate and extend this interwar dream, even to the extent of rendering such destruction an internationally recognized criminal offence. At the Nuremberg Trials, for instance, the destruction of cultural property was now declared a crime against humanity. In the proceedings Alfred Rosenberg—infamous Head of the Third Reich's Centre for National Socialist Ideological and Education Research—was singled out for his office's unlawful seizure of cultural treasures.²⁰ UNESCO sought to build on this new political sensibility. American poet and UNESCO delegate Archibald MacLeish went so far as to say that UNESCO solemnly held the

¹⁸ Michael Elliott and Vaughn Schmutz, 'World Heritage: Constructing a Universal World Order', *Poetics* 40 (2012), 262-3; and Astrid Swenson, *The Rise of Heritage: Preserving the Past in France, Germany and England, 1789-1914* (Cambridge, 2013), 220-8.

¹⁹ Sarah M. Titchen, 'On the Construction of Outstanding Universal Value: Unesco's World Heritage Convention (Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, 1972) and the Identification and Assessment of Cultural Places for Inclusion in the World Heritage List', PhD Thesis, Australian National University (April 1995), 15-35.

²⁰ Elliott and Schmutz, 'World Heritage', 265.

‘responsibility of civilization itself’ and that its guiding objective should be to stand above state conflict and partisan politics in an increasingly divided Cold War world.²¹ But despite its post-Nazi internationalism, UNESCO’s early preservation campaign was expressly geared toward Europe, fuelled in particular by the need to shore up Western civilization in crisis. At the famed Council of Allied Ministers of Education Conference in 1944, a meeting of Education Ministers from sixteen countries in London to discuss post-war reconstruction, European education and culture were the main priorities. Shock and outrage were directed toward the Nazi looting and decimation of European treasure and heritage. The conference’s newly created Commission for the Protection and Restitution of Cultural Material tipped its hand in declaring that ‘a concentrated effort is being made for the immediate protection and ultimate restitution of the cultural heritage of Western civilization’.²² The early years of UNESCO continued this logic, as it developed an expansive notion of reconstruction.²³ In this case, reconstruction meant books for libraries, materials for schools, scientific equipment for laboratories, the distribution of musical instruments, and the creation of International Youth Camps.²⁴ Focus fell on the ‘Translation of Classics’, to the extent that UNESCO was to spearhead translations of ‘world’s classics in the various languages of the Member States of the UN’, together with drafting a Bill of Human Rights.²⁵ Article 1 of UNESCO’s 1946 Constitution stated its mission as ‘assuring the conservation and protection of the world’s inheritance of books, works of art and monuments of history and science’.²⁶

UNESCO’s heritage protection mission began to take shape over the course of the next decade. The 1950 earthquake in Cuzco, Peru launched UNESCO’s first mission to save archaeological ruins. On this occasion it sent down teams of international archaeologists and technical experts to work with Peruvian locals to save its Aztec ruins, and by all accounts this was a

²¹ Sewell, *Unesco*, 169.

²² *Allied Plan for Education: The Story of the Conference of the Allied Ministers of Education* (London, 1945), 29 and 33.

²³ *UNESCO General Conference: First Session, Paris, 1946* (Paris, 1947), 136–47.

²⁴ *UNESCO Report of the Director General on Activities of the Organisation in 1947*, presented at Second Session in Mexico City, Nov–Dec 1947 (Paris, 1947), 6–7.

²⁵ Interim Report of UNESCO to the Economic and Social Council of the UN, 11 July 1947, 13, JG Crowther Papers, SxMs29 Box 84, Univ. of Sussex Special Collections, Falmer.

²⁶ Address Delivered by Dir. Gen. at the Meeting of the International Committee on Monuments, Artistic and Historical Sites and Archaeological Excavations, Unesco House, Paris, 21 May 1951, 1, 069: 72 A02/06 III, UAP.

very successful initiative.²⁷ Its new global vision found further expression in the 1954 Hague Convention on the 'Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict', which was explicitly designed as a fortified version of the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907.²⁸ 'Cultural property belonging to any people', so it proclaimed, is 'also the cultural heritage of all mankind'.²⁹

Yet these were still pipe dreams, and UNESCO needed a big project to showcase its new role as guardian of world civilization. The timing of the threat to the Nubian monuments could not have been more fortuitous. At a moment when Egypt had just removed British military force after seventy years of occupation, UNESCO was viewed by Nasser as a non-partisan inter-governmental alternative to Western institutions.³⁰ There was growing interest in the Nubians among *National Geographic* photographers in the early 1950s, and the 'Save the Nubian Monuments' campaign looked to capitalize on this international publicity.³¹ In 1955 Luther Evans, the new American Director General of UNESCO, went to the famed site of Abu Simbel, where-after an agreement was made with Cairo about UNESCO's technical assistance. Now there was a hurried effort to explore, map, and record all sites of 'archaeological importance for the history of Nubia from the beginning of the Egyptian dynasties onwards'.³² Egypt and the Sudan then entreated UNESCO for assistance, citing its constitutional responsibility for 'the conservation and protection of the world's inheritance'. Proposals were solicited from various quarters of Europe, and eventually the experts selected a Swedish plan to have the temple facades and walls cut into big blocks that could be transported to a safe place and then rebuilt on higher ground. Rock temples were to be hewn from the cliffs and then transported in sections, while free-standing temples

²⁷ Cuzco: *Reconstruction of the Town and Restoration of its Monuments* (Paris, 1952).

²⁸ *Records of the Conference Convened by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization Held at the Hague from 21 April to 14 May 1954* (The Hague, 1961), 6.

²⁹ Lowenthal, 228.

³⁰ Hassan, 'Aswan High Dam', 79.

³¹ George Rodger, *The Village of the Nubas* (London, 1955). Many of these images first appeared in Robin Strachan and George Rodger, 'With the Nuba hillmen of Kordofan', *National Geographic Magazine*, 99:2 (February, 1951), 249-78. The interwar photographic fascination with the Nubians can be seen in Merian C. Cooper, 'Two fighting tribes of the Sudan', *National Geographic* (1929), 464-86 and Charles and Gabriel and Brenda Seligman, *Pagan Tribes of the Nilotic Sudan* (London, 1932).

³² Harry S. Smith, *Unesco's International Campaign to Save the Monuments of Nubia: Preliminary Reports of the Egypt Exploration Society's Nubian Survey*, United Arab Republic, Ministry of Culture and National Guidance, Antiquities Department of Egypt (Cairo, 1962), 1, Pamphlet Box 96, S-Z, Sackler Library, Oxford.

were to be dismantled, transferred, and reassembled. To give the temples an 'appropriate setting', so argued the Egyptian government in one of its publicity brochures, 'hills would be built up, which, though not exact copies of the cliffs where the Temples originally had been hewn, would nevertheless preserve their memory'.³³ To further drum up support, the Egyptian government organized an exhibition, 'Five Thousand Years of Egyptian Art', which started its world tour in Brussels in 1960.³⁴

In March 1960 UNESCO's new Director General Vittorio Veronese kicked off the international appeal 'to governments, institutions, public and private foundations and all people of goodwill'. UNESCO was careful not to offend the Egyptian government in any way, lest it appeared too partisan in this delicate Cold War climate. Vittorese conceded that this was a difficult issue for the new Egyptian state, and that 'it is not easy to choose between temples and crops'. But then he made his case for the higher cause of universal civilization:

These monuments, the loss of which may be tragically near, do not belong solely to the countries who hold them in trust. The whole world has the right to see them endure. They are part of a common heritage which comprises Socrates' message and the Ajanta frescoes; the walls of Uxmal and Beethoven's symphonies. Treasures of universal value are entitled to universal protection.³⁵

Notably the language of rights and legal protections was gravitating to the centre of this heritage campaign, driven forward by UNESCO. Such views were given additional imprimatur by UNESCO's deputy director, the Swiss René Maheu, who intoned that 'the affirmation of the existence of an artistic heritage that belongs to humanity and the recognition of a duty to international solidarity to ensure its preservation is a human idea in the widest and noblest meaning of the word' and that such a campaign signalled 'the universalization of the human consciousness of values'.³⁶ Where the early

³³ Arab Republic of Egypt, Ministry of Culture, *The Salvage of the Abu Simbel Temples: Concluding Report, December 1971*, prepared by Swedish engineering team of Vattenbyggnadsbyrån (Örebro, 1976), 25.

³⁴ Little, *High Dam*, 163.

³⁵ 'March 8 Appeal by Vittorino Veronese, Director-General of Unesco', *Unesco Courier*, 13 (May, 1960), 7.

³⁶ Statement by Mr. R. Maheu, Assistant Director-General of Unesco, on the progress made in the international campaign for safeguarding the monuments of Nubia, UAR Consultative Committee, Cairo 23-1 June 1960, 3, R1/3, CLT/CIH/MCO Box 29, UAP.

twentieth-century preservation drive to save the famed Nubian monuments was justified by Egyptologists for the study of biblical narratives and theories of racial diffusion,³⁷ this post-1945 campaign was animated by a decidedly secular ideal of universal civilization that linked ancient past and present around the ideas of science, culture, and peace, best reflected in UNESCO's commissioned six-volume series, *History of Mankind*, that covered pre-history to the present day.³⁸ For this reason Maheu dubbed the rescue of Abu Simbel a kind of 'spiritual act'³⁹ in a secular international world.

Internationally, this project offered UNESCO the chance to 'act as the essential intermediary between States and institutions anxious to participate in the great enterprise' of Nubia's archaeological salvage.⁴⁰ This was widely seen as UNESCO's moment. Jacquetta Hawkes, co-author of the first volume of UNESCO's high-profile World History series on 'The Scientific and Cultural History of Mankind', concluded an *Observer* (London) article with the question: 'Could any request be more exactly addressed to the ideals of Unesco as we dreamed of them in the high, hopeful, early days?'⁴¹ As such the UNESCO initiative challenged state sovereignty in subtle ways. Until that point all monuments within states were of exclusively national concern and were to be cared for by individual states. This time things were different. As UNESCO's director of the Monuments of Nubia Service, Ali Vrioni, understood at the time: 'For the first time the world has seen organized international action to save monuments of archaeological wealth, which, in law, belong only to the two countries where they are located.'⁴² A number of publications in various languages were quickly published by UNESCO to help publicize the urgency of the campaign.⁴³

American assistance was also crucial. In 1961 an exhibition of Tutankhamun treasures toured the US, visiting thirteen American cities,

³⁷ Gange, *Unholy Water*, 112-14.

³⁸ Glenda Sluga, 'Unesco and the (One) World of Julian Huxley', *Journal of World History*, 21:3 (2010), 393-417; and Poul Duedahl, 'Selling Mankind: UNESCO and the Invention of Global History, 1945-1976', *Journal of World History*, 22:1 (2011), 101-33.

³⁹ Max-Pol Fouchet, *Rescued Treasures of Egypt*, trans. Michael Heron (London, 1965), 40-1.

⁴⁰ *Philae Resurrected* (Paris: Unesco, 1980).

⁴¹ Quoted in Sewell, *Unesco*, 253.

⁴² Ali Vrioni, 'Victory in Nubia', *Unesco Courier*, 17 (Dec 1964), 5.

⁴³ See, e.g., *Republique Arabe Unie: Centre de Documentation sur L'Egypte Ancienne* (Paris, 1961?); and *Temples de Nubie: Des Trésors menaces*, preface by Christiane Desroches-Noblecourt (Paris, 1961). See too *La Nubie Antique* (Brussels, 1963?) and Louis-A. Christophe, *Abou-Simbel et L'Épopée de la Découverte* (Brussels, 1965).

partly 'organized to publicize and awaken interest in the Nubian campaign'.⁴⁴ That same year President John F. Kennedy launched an impassioned plea before Congress on 7 April 1961 to garner American support, and fully subscribed to the UNESCO mission of converting these ancient ruins into world heritage:

The United States, one of the newest civilizations, has long had a deep regard for the study of past cultures, and a concern for the preservation of man's great achievements of art and thoughts [sic]. . . By thus contributing to the preservation of past civilizations, we will strengthen and enrich our own.⁴⁵

The US thus sought to make up for the failure to support the Aswan Dam project, heeding the call to rescue the ancient monuments by matching Egypt's \$10 million financial commitment.⁴⁶ Accompanying exhibitions took place both in the US and Europe, and a number of countries (such as Ghana and Nigeria) issued commemorative stamps to keep the campaign in the public eye.⁴⁷

The European dimension was significant too. The original 'Honorary Committee of Patrons' for the Nubian campaign was chaired by King Gustav VI Adolf of Sweden, flanked by other royals (Queen Elizabeth of Belgium, Queen Fredrika of Greece and Princess Mikasa of Japan), the UN Director Dag Hammarskjöld, UNESCO's first director Julian Huxley, and French Culture Minister André Malraux. Malraux waxed lyrical about this great UNESCO mission to undo the corruption of time and to reconceive world history as a new 'family of man' dedicated to peace and concord. He underlined the novelty of the project by saying that '[s]uch an appeal, in the last century, would have seemed fanciful', but now it was 'historic' because 'for the first time, world civilization publicly proclaims the world's art as its indivisible heritage'.⁴⁸ On one level having Malraux endorse the project

⁴⁴ 20 December 1961, 2, E1/ 168, 1947-1966, Press Review, UAP.

⁴⁵ Message of Mr. John F. Kennedy, President of the United States of America, Delivered to the US Congress on 7 April 1961 concerning the Participation of the United States of America in the International Campaign to Save the Monuments of Nubia, CUA/107/ Annex II: CLT/CIH/MCO Box 28, UAP.

⁴⁶ Greener, *High Dam*, 31. Notably, British support was relatively absent, and has sometimes been attributed to rancour following the Suez debacle. Little, *High Dam*, 182.

⁴⁷ International Campaign to Save the Monuments of Nubia, Executive Committee, Ninth Session, Unesco House, Paris, 17-20 March 1965, 1-2, UNESCO/NUBIA/CE/IX/2, E1/ 144, UAP.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Rex Keating, *Nubian Twilight* (London, 1962), 16.

might be seen as entirely in keeping with UNESCO's broader brief. After all, UNESCO was based in Paris and was seen as a particularly French institution in terms of its crusade of defining and defending the idea of universal civilization. Yet it is worth recalling that Malraux was hardly a figure associated with universal culture in the 1920s. In 1924 Malraux was scandalously charged with removing and stealing some stone Khmer statues and bas-reliefs from the temple of Bantea-Srei in Cambodia during an expedition to study ancient monuments of Khmer architecture. Apparently he had been warned of the illegality of removing the sculptures, but ultimately justified his archaeological 'recovery' on the grounds that the temple was in a state of total oblivion and disrepair, and thus fell under the category of 'abandoned property' (*res derelicta*) belonging to no one, given that it had not been officially classified by any legal authority at the time. He and his assistant were seized while trying to transport his ton of material across to Saigon en route to Paris, and his trial in Phnom Penh became a major cause célèbre (the so-called Angkor Affair) about the international ownership of heritage, to say nothing of French-Indochinese relations.⁴⁹ The stolen pieces were eventually returned to the temple wall (where they are today) and ownership transferred to the state. Such a figure espousing the importance of a world heritage may seem hypocritical to some, but it can also be argued that his conversion to the anti-national universalist cause was thus symptomatic of a changed internationalist sensibility (at least among Unescan Europeans) after 1945. Malraux's shift of attitude dramatically demonstrated that this UNESCO project was in large measure an effort to move archaeology (and indeed civilization itself) beyond the sphere of imperialism and nationalism once and for all. The whole enterprise, as Malraux slyly summed it up later, was 'a kind of Tennessee Valley Authority of archaeology. It is the antithesis of the kind of gigantic exhibitionism by which great modern states try to outbid each other.'⁵⁰

For its part, the Egyptian government funded around one-third of the project, even if its ideas diverged from UNESCO's in subtle ways. Publications were quickly prepared to raise awareness, and the internationally renowned Egyptian singer Oum Kalthum gave a concert in the shadow of pyramids to generate support for the cause.⁵¹ To assuage sceptics who feared that this was nothing more than velvet-gloved imperialism in a new guise, Sarwat Okasha,

⁴⁹ Walter G. Langlois, *André Malraux: The Indochina Adventure* (London, 1966), 3-51. See too Herman Lebovics, *Mona Lisa's Escort: André Malraux and the Reinvention of French Culture* (Ithaca, 1999).

⁵⁰ André Malraux, 'TVA of Archaeology', *Unesco Courier* 13 (May 1960), 10.

⁵¹ John Bulloch, 'Pearl of Ancient Egypt Preserved', *Daily Telegraph* (London, 31 July 1969), unpaginated.

Egyptian Minister of Culture and National Guidance, made clear that the international response 'is a testimony to the bonds that can unite our race in brotherly concord and in friendly cooperation'. Nonetheless, it was also emphasized that these monuments belonged to Egypt first. As Okasha insisted, the United Arab Republic has done its 'utmost to preserve its ancient inheritance which links the past to the present and which is the foundation of both present and future'.⁵² Nasser—who showed no interest in the issue a few years before—now changed his spots, and made clear to whom the ruins belonged:

We pin our hopes on the High Dam for the implementation of our plans of economic development; but likewise we pin our hopes on the preservation of the Nubian treasures in order to keep alive monuments which are not only dear to our hearts, we being their guardians, but dear to the whole world which believes that the ancient and the new components of human culture should blend in one harmonious whole.⁵³

The national dimension of this international rescue mission was underscored by Sudanese officials as well, to the extent that the mission was lauded for having 'sparked interest among the Sudanese in their own past and cultural heritage'.⁵⁴ The international rescue mission to instil a post-national sense of humanity also worked to spur new national concern with national heritage.

But these funding bids were still not enough. To secure the necessary funds, UNESCO struck a curious deal with the Egyptian and Sudanese governments about the terms of excavation. Egypt agreed to cede to excavators in threatened areas 'at least half the proceeds of their finds, with the exception of certain items which are unique or essential for completing the national collections'. The host countries also authorized excavations elsewhere (such as the Royal Necropolis of Sakkara) and promised to cede 'with a view to their transfer abroad certain Nubian temples and various antiquities from the State

⁵² Statement of Dr. Sarwat Okasha, Minister of Culture and National Guidance, on the Occasion of the Opening of the Second Meeting of the Unesco Executive Committee for the Preservation of the Nubian Monuments, Cairo, 18 April 1962, 1-2, Nubia/2/CE/2, E1 143, UAP.

⁵³ Statement by Pres. Gamal Abdel Nasser on the Safeguarding of the Nubian Monuments, 5 June 1961, CUA/107/ Annex 1: CLT/CIH/MCO Box 28, UAP. For background, Donald Malcolm Reid, *Whose Pharaohs? Archaeology, Museums and Egyptian National Identity from Napoleon to World War II* (Berkeley, 2002), esp. 292-7.

⁵⁴ Negm-el-Din Mohamed Sherif, 'Victory in Nubia: The Sudan', *Unesco Courier*, special issue on 'Victory in Nubia', Feb-March 1980, 19.

reserves, on the understanding that all such items would be assigned to museums or scientific organizations open to the public'.⁵⁵ UNESCO was then granted the 'scientific, technical and financial responsibility for the missions which are sent to undertake excavation work'.⁵⁶ Egypt also offered 'many objects from the State reserves', including tables, alabaster vases, earthenware, and jewellery. The Sudanese government added a rather wistful and despondent plea for help in light of this uncomfortable historical relationship with Western excavators. Aiada Arbab, Sudan's Minister of Education, entreated the international community accordingly:

In our country every excavator has always been, and is still, entitled to fifty per cent of the objects discovered by him; but this is the only counterpart we can offer. We do not possess important reserves in our museum which we could cede, [so the] only hope that is left to us [is that] the prehistory, history and archaeology of the area endangered in our territory are much less known than Egyptian Nubia and for this reason might attract enough scholars to help us to undertake [further excavations].⁵⁷

The ruins were photographed and advertised with captions, much like a sales catalogue for international prospectors and adventurers.⁵⁸

In this race against time and scramble for antiquities, some twenty-five countries sent archaeological teams to Nubia 'in a frantic effort to record, relocate, or salvage the monuments of Nubia before the waters of the Nile destroyed them'.⁵⁹ With it Northern Nubia 'became the most thoroughly excavated area in the world before it was submerged beneath Lake Nasser'.⁶⁰ Shifts worked frantically day and night to record and save the monuments, turning 'the temples into film studios' of study and documentation.⁶¹ Spectacular photographs recording the herculean engineering task were widely circulated, most notably regarding the dismantling and relocation of Abu Simbel (see Figures 1 and 2). At this site one could hear Arabic, English, German, French, Spanish, Italian, Swedish, and Polish being spoken,

⁵⁵ *A Common Trust: The Preservation of the Ancient Monuments of Nubia* (Paris: UNESCO, 1960), 4.

⁵⁶ *A Common Trust*, 27-8.

⁵⁷ Greener, *High Dam*, 52.

⁵⁸ *Common Trust*, 29-31. See too Rex Keating, *Nubian Rescue* (London, 1975).

⁵⁹ Sève-Söderbergh, *Temples*, 68.

⁶⁰ *Nubia: Africa in Antiquity: The Arts of Ancient Nubia and the Sudan*, expo. catalog, Brooklyn Museum, 1978, unpaginated, Pamphlet Box 113, Sackler Library, Oxford.

⁶¹ Little, *High Dam*, 164.



Figure 1. Abu Simbel, 1965. Photograph [©] UNESCO.



Figure 2. Abu Simbel, 1965. Photograph [©] UNESCO.

as archaeologists and engineers worked together in apparent harmony and good will in the name of world heritage. Archaeological teams hailed from Spain, Scandinavia, Ghana University, the University of Chicago, a Joint French-Argentinian Mission, as well as key missions from Great Britain, West Germany, and Italy. Significantly, support came from across the Cold War blocs, with teams from the USSR, East Germany, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Yugoslavia. The expedition from the Polish Academy of Sciences and National Museum of Warsaw made some of the greatest discoveries, uncovering an eighth-century cathedral that was built on the site of an ancient church, whose excavation yielded over 100 frescoes made between the eighth and eleventh centuries.⁶² Yugoslav newspapers generously covered the Nubia campaign, with special reference to the country's experts in Sudanese Nubia.⁶³ In numerous publications the East European missions (such as the GDR's in the Sudan) proudly boasted of their contribution.⁶⁴ Added lustre derived from the on-site presence of Crown Princess Margrethe of Denmark, who arrived in 1962 as part of the Scandinavian Mission, and reportedly impressed everyone by refusing the luxury accommodation of the Nile Hotel in favour of living with members of the mission so as to get a taste of the 'Nubian way of life'.⁶⁵ But it was less the glamour than the anti-Cold War spirit of international cooperation that struck international journalists at the time. One *New York Times* reporter in 1961 marvelled at the way that the project brought together countries that officially did not recognize each other (such as Spain and the USSR) or were in political conflict (India and Pakistan); as he put it, 'there seemed to be no Cold War in the Land of Kush', as Moscow and Washington, 'so feverishly contesting the future of all Africa, are working hand in hand to protect its past'.⁶⁶

This whole project seemed like a UNESCO dream come true of overcoming Cold War antagonism in the name of common purpose and cooperation. It was 'an exemplary occasion for demonstrating the international solidarity which Unesco has been striving to make a reality in all domains'.⁶⁷ This was all the more important, given that UNESCO's assistance initiatives in the late 1940s and early 1950s—such as in UN Trust Territory of Tanganyika (later

⁶² IES Edwards, 'Archaeological Consequences of the High Dam in Nubia and Egypt', *Probe* (Johannesburg, 1965), 44-7.

⁶³ 17 March 1964, 4, E1/ 168, 1947-1966, Press Review, UAP.

⁶⁴ Friedrich W. Hinkel, *Auszug aus Nubien* (East Berlin, 1978).

⁶⁵ Hassan, 'Aswan High Dam', 320.

⁶⁶ C. L. Sulzberger, 'No Cold War in the Land of Kush', *New York Times* (20 March 1961), 28.

⁶⁷ Veronese, 'Message', 3.

Tanzania) and Haiti—were widely condemned as failed endeavours.⁶⁸ Even Nasser—who just a few years earlier with the dam construction had turned his back on the West and joined forces with the USSR—came around to this international ideal. At the UNESCO project launch in March 1960 Nasser exhorted:

This action will constitute, we have no doubt, a happy precedent for the generation of the United Nations, that generation which is trying to make the Charter [of Human Rights] a living reality, a belief and a faith which affirms its confidence in the value of human cooperation and seeks a better knowledge of civilizations and cultures despite differences of time and place.⁶⁹

UNESCO made much of its success in having found a way to exorcise the spectre of violence from this land, both in the ancient past and Cold War present. Indeed, UNESCO Director Vittorio Veronese could not resist plugging UNESCO's achievement, rejoicing that 'from a land which throughout the centuries has been the scene of—or the stake in—so many covetous disputes should spring a convincing proof of international solidarity'.⁷⁰ Other international commentators—including those from communist Eastern Europe—made a similar point. One article in the Prague publication, *New Orient*, mouthed UNESCO ideals: 'The Nile Valley, where so many battles had been fought, destroying human lives and great cultural values, will now see peaceful international co-operation for saving the cultural heritage of the past. There are, indeed, few nobler tasks.'⁷¹

Still, there were problems. A 1959 French report revealed growing tension between Egypt and the Sudan. Apparently, the Sudanese felt that Egypt was not consulting them properly, and that Egypt had much to gain with the High Dam while Sudan had much more to lose.⁷² And not everyone was convinced of the project's virtues or even necessity. A March 1962 piece in the Italian daily *Corriere della Sera* by Cesare Brandi, Professor of Art History at

⁶⁸ Marian Neal, 'United Nations Technical Assistance Programs in Haiti', *International Conciliation*, 468 (February 1951), 102-11; and Glenda Sluga, *Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism* (Philadelphia, 2013), 108-11.

⁶⁹ 'Unesco's Nubian Campaign is Launched', *Unesco Courier* 13 (May 1960), 5.

⁷⁰ 'March 8 Appeal by Vittorino Veronese, Director-General of Unesco', *Unesco Courier* 13 (May, 1960), 7.

⁷¹ Zbynek Žába, 'Ancient Nubia Calls for Help', *New Orient: Journal for the Modern and Ancient Cultures of Asia and Africa* 1:3 (June 1960), 6-9, quotation p. 9, Pamphlet Box 96, S-Z, Sackler Library, Oxford.

⁷² Typed Report from Jean Thomas, Sous-Directeur General to JK van der Haagen, Chef de la Division des Musées et Monuments historiques, 6, MUS/6063, 20 Oct 1959, 069 (62) NUB, UAP.

University of Palermo, predicted that the massive statues may end up as a 'floating wreck', lamenting the ways these monuments are brazenly 'dis-mantled and thereby falsified and destroyed, put together again like copies of themselves in alien sites, lost by a civilization thousands of years old . . . and all of this at a time when atomic energy is about to substitute, more advantageously, energy produced by water. . .'. Another piece in *Die Welt* (Hamburg) remarked that UNESCO should not be involved in the project since there is 'neither interest nor money for the safeguarding of the temples'.⁷³ A *Sunday Times* science correspondent was even more damning:

For many archaeologists believe that the attempt to save the temples by removing them from their original position is scientifically worthless. 'They will be no more than a tourist attraction', one archaeologist told me. 'They have been photographed and measured and examined in every detail so, from an archaeological point of view, it is not very serious if they are now submerged.'⁷⁴

Funding was also slow, and the international press did its best to ratchet up the rhetoric. One 1962 article in *News* (Chicago) by an US Egyptologist associated with the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute wrote that this is the 'biggest artistic crisis that the world has ever known'.⁷⁵ By 1962 press articles appeared with such titles as 'Drowning Antiquity'; one *Herald Tribune* piece from that year complained that the 'most prominent hold-outs are the United States and the Soviet Union. And the deadline is approaching fast',⁷⁶ while an *Observer* piece concluded that the publicity calling for a timely rescue may turn out to be 'an advance obituary of a fascinating land which Progress is about to do to death'.⁷⁷ Frustration (and suspicion) was mounting in Egypt too. An article of 11 February 1962 in the *The Egyptian Gazette* wondered whether the slow international response was a 'politically-inspired drive to slow down the construction of the High Dam'.⁷⁸ The carnivalesque atmosphere was also a favourite theme of journalists. In one 1962 piece in *Art News*, the area south of Aswan was described as a 'gargantuan beehive of men and machines' encompassing both the outsized dam construction and archaeological salvage operation. In this 'Alice-in-Wonderland anomaly in the totalitarian United Arab Republic',

⁷³ 6 April 1962, 5, E1/ 168, 1947-1966, Press Review, UAP.

⁷⁴ 15 October 1962, 3, E1/ 168, 1947-1966, Press Review, UAP.

⁷⁵ 14 November 1962, 5, E1/ 168, 1947-1966, Press Review, UAP.

⁷⁶ 16 August 1962, 4, E1/ 168, 1947-1966, Press Review, UAP.

⁷⁷ 7 May 1962, 2, E1/ 168, 1947-1966, Press Review, UAP.

⁷⁸ 15 March 1962, 6, E1/ 168, 1947-1966, Press Review, UAP.

the article went on, there were potential dangers everywhere:

even if no UAR official originally thought enough of Abu Simbel to provide for it in the High Dam agreement with the Soviets, the temple has now become a symbol of a sort of national Irredentism which says that if the Western world would not help to build the High Dam it now ought to pay for the consequences. . . For the moment Abu Simbel remains a test, a test of whether civilization is more than skin deep.⁷⁹

But there was one particular issue that was most awkward of all: the evacuation of the Nubian peoples themselves. Some 100,000 Nubians were removed over a painful period of nine months starting in October 1963. This dimension of the project is not so well integrated into UNESCO's broader success story of relocating the monuments, and remained relatively invisible. Still, its jarring presence could not be glossed over so easily. Amid the 1980 celebrations of the end of the project chronicled in the UNESCO *Courier*, the Egyptian Minister of Culture, Shehata Adam Mohamed, sheepishly admitted that

nothing could be done to prevent the waters of the lake from engulfing every aspect of Nubian life, both in Egypt and the Sudan. . . The Nubians tearfully gathered together their belongings, beasts of burden and chickens, and set off for a new life in another town, Kom Ombo. But they really gave up all hope of being able, one day, to return to their dear homeland on the banks of the lake.⁸⁰

In the same publication, Negm-el-Din Mohamed Sherif, director general of the Sudanese Antiquities Service and director of Sudan National Museum in Khartoum, conceded that the decision to build Aswan Dam 'had meant the loss of their fatherland for good, and on the other hand it entailed the complete disappearance of the cultural remains of their ancestors', and that they were 'deeply concerned about the known and the unknown archaeological remains which would ultimately be lost under the waters of the proposed Dam'.⁸¹ The debit side of the High Dam project was captured by a *National Geographic* photographer covering the rescue mission:

The new bustle struck me with special intensity, contrasting as it did with the dying land around us. Nubia had always been mostly empty

⁷⁹ Alfred Frankfurter, 'Is Abu Simbel lost?' *Art News* (Summer Issue, 1962), 24-9.

⁸⁰ Shehata Adam Mohamed, 'Victory in Nubia: Egypt', *Unesco Courier*, special issue on 'Victory in Nubia', (Feb-March 1980), 5-12, here 12.

⁸¹ Negm-el-Din Mohamed Sherif, 'Victory in Nubia: The Sudan', *Unesco Courier*, special issue on 'Victory in Nubia', (Feb-March 1980), 16.

space, and the Nubians had ever felt themselves to be denizens of the horizon. But after the modern Nubians were relocated to save them from the rising flood, the area lost its last trace of life. Not a soul, not a sail.⁸²

It is well to remember that this evacuation of the Nubians was hardly the first. They had been forced to relocate three times already before the 1963 resettlement—in 1902, 1912, and then again in 1933. This time an estimated 100,000 Nubians were relocated from Lower Nubia northward to Kom Ombo in Egypt, losing their ancestral land and social fabric with it. In the Sudan, riots broke out when the news was announced, and local Sudanese authorities were even taken hostage at one point. They were deeply anxious about the health conditions of the new sites, insufficient compensation, and the spiritual dangers resulting from submerging the tombs of local saints.⁸³ The deportation ran more smoothly in Egypt, mainly because the government there began evacuation plans earlier. Both governments tried to accommodate the Nubians in areas christened ‘New Nubia,’ but the Egyptian scheme was better provisioned. Compensation for land lost was to be paid in cash, and new houses and land prepared by local governments ‘were to be given free’. A model house was erected, but Nubian visitors criticized and modified it. Some 25,000 homes were to be built, and the government planned irrigation channels, pumping stations, and electricity supply. There was to be training in new agricultural techniques and village handicrafts as well. One report finished by saying that Nubians had adjusted to the last two dam extensions by rebuilding homes on higher ground, and therefore could do it again.⁸⁴ According to one estimate, the Egyptian state built some 25,000 houses, 138 stores, 33 mosques, and 36 schools.⁸⁵ While some Nubians, especially young men, were often in favour of resettlement,⁸⁶ confusion and anger on the part of the Nubians were rife. In a 1955 letter Jean Vercoutter, Commissioner for Archaeology in the Sudan just before the Nubian restoration campaign, wrote: ‘The attitude of the Nubians themselves was bitter. “We would be better looked after if we were statues”’, was a remark

⁸² Georg Gerster, ‘Saving the Ancient Temples at Abu Simbel’, *National Geographic Magazine*, 129:5 (May 1966), 694-742, here 709.

⁸³ Little, *High Dam*, 135-9.

⁸⁴ Chetata Adam and K. Van Der Haagen, 29.9.1962, enclosed 6 page typed report in English called ‘The Evacuation and Resettlement of the Nubians’, undated, 069 (62) NUBIE/A 114/133 (436), Box 40, UAP.

⁸⁵ Hassan, ‘High Dam’, 85.

⁸⁶ Hussein M. Fahim, *Egyptian Nubians: Resettlement and Years of Coping* (Salt Lake City, 1983), 40-1.

often heard.⁸⁷ American archaeologist Leslie Greener bitterly summed up the sentiment in 1962, a year before the evacuations:

Yesterday, little was known of Nubia, even by the archaeologists. Today there is world-wide interest in Nubia. But it too is largely theatrical: the dramatic threat of drowning; last-minute United Nations effort at rescue; the spectacular attempt to elevate spectacular Abu Simbel. It is enough to make you forget that people lived in Nubia too.⁸⁸

While the UNESCO archive contains little on the evacuation, other sources captured the upheaval of the Nubian people in great detail. The Sudanese administrator, Hassan Dafalla, lived with the Nubians for six years in the northern part of Wadi Halfa District during the long resettlement, and in 1975 published a diary about the deportation, *The Nubian Exodus*. Dafalla was responsible for evacuating some 50,000 people (there were some 70,000 Nubians in Egypt) and to compensate them for lost homes and trees. He had to cope with opposition, and to address myriad issues arising from relocation, including those associated with the twenty-two archaeological excavations going on at the same time and the reburial of the 'illustrious dead' of tribal heroes in higher ground. He chronicled the sense of people being 'perplexed and confused' and 'sunk in a mire of gloomy thoughts', as the elderly 'with no future to live for met the news with a groan and envied their dead colleagues in their graves'. Individuals were reported as 'seen walking alone in the streets, talking aloud to themselves looking left and right, gazing in astonishment'.⁸⁹ A number of citizens reacted by writing petitions to the local courts, and sought redress and compensation, mainly in the form of freehold property rights.⁹⁰ And once they had moved, they needed to cope with the fact that the new area was essentially without trees, had to learn new cultivation techniques, and to live in new Sudanese style homes designed to suit the weather conditions of the new environment. Many Nubians even wanted the reconstruction of the old cinema house in Wadi Halfa (which had been built during World War II to provide entertainment for troops on the way to North Africa) in the new area, which was done in 1973. Already after a few years Dafalla observed changes in the Nubians—young women had given up traditional costume, and men wore more Western clothes. Weddings featured

⁸⁷ Sæve-Söderbergh, *Temples*, 73.

⁸⁸ Greener, *High Dam*, 187. See too Alan Cowell, 'The Ancient Temples Shine, but the People Suffer', *New York Times* (15 December 1990), 4.

⁸⁹ Hassan Dafalla, *The Nubian Exodus* (Uppsala, 1975), 90.

⁹⁰ Dafalla, *Nubian Exodus*, 187.

modern music and dancing, whilst beds were no longer made from date branches and instead featured steel frames with wire springs; food dishes had changed, and they began to use the Coptic and Arabic stellar calendar. Even so, he acknowledged that adaptation was very slow and painful.⁹¹

Nevertheless, UNESCO's Save the Nubian Monuments campaign can certainly be counted as a great success in archaeological terms. For one thing, it set in train broader ideas and practices of international heritage protection. Reclaiming ancient ruins around the world as the property of humanity (and managed by UNESCO) found formal expression in the organization's 1964 International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites, known as the Venice Charter, which stated that 'people are becoming more and more conscious of the unity of human values and regard ancient monuments as a common heritage'.⁹² By the late 1960s, the new concept of World Heritage Sites as a common language of universal patrimony was fuelled by the growing belief that defending 'world cultural heritage' would help promote tolerance and thus international peace.⁹³ Such ideals of world civilization gained further credence with UNESCO's formal passing of the 1972 Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and National Heritage, which boldly proclaimed that each country 'holds in trust for the rest of mankind those parts of the world heritage that are found within its boundaries' and that the international community 'has an obligation to support any nation in discharging this trust if its own resources are not equal to the task'.⁹⁴ This led to the formation of a canon of designated World Heritage Sites around the world placed under international protection. While in 1978 there were only 12 sites inscribed on UNESCO's inaugural World Heritage list, today there are over 900 listed sites. With time the world heritage concept was expanded beyond material artefacts toward the environment. In 1965 the UNESCO Director General René Maheu dramatically claimed that the world's oceans were becoming 'a gigantic ditch into which man discharges the waste from his organic exchanges and the detritus, as it were, of his civilization'.⁹⁵ By the end of that decade, the UN declared the seabed and ocean floor as 'the common heritage of mankind'. Several years

⁹¹ Dafalla, *Nubian Exodus*, 294. See too Hussein M. Fahim, *Egyptian Nubians: Resettlement and Years of Coping* (Salt Lake City, 1983).

⁹² Titchen, 'On the Construction of Outstanding Universal Value', 50-2.

⁹³ Helaine Silverman and D. Fairchild Ruggles, *Cultural Heritage and Human Rights* (New York), 3-22. See too H. Cleere, *Approaches to the Archaeological Heritage* (London, 1984).

⁹⁴ Säve-Söderbergh, *Temples*, 220-1.

⁹⁵ Cited in Sewell, *Unesco*, 246.

later the moon and its resources (as stipulated in the UN's so-called Moon Treaty) were designated as part of this universal common heritage, followed in the early 1980s by proposals to place Antarctica on the list.⁹⁶ Like its sister concept of human rights, the post-war universalist mission slowly but surely made its long march through international institutions, and UNESCO had done much to put the old dream of universal civilization in a new post-imperial and even post-European key. World culture, in its post-1945 incarnation, now had now its 'ornamentalist' moment.

What is more, UNESCO's success in this project also helped shore up the legitimacy of its claim to be the new warden of world civilization. The *Indian Express* (Delhi) reported in 1966: 'The moral responsibility of Unesco is clear. It is the guardian of the artistic heritage of the entire world and has rightly taken the lead in Nubia.'⁹⁷ The success of the Save the Nubian Monuments Project also inspired salvage operations in other lands. Soon thereafter the Greek government invited UNESCO experts to give advice about preserving the Parthenon, and Florence and Venice recovered from their respective floods in 1966 thanks in large part to UNESCO's international fundraising campaign. Further afield, the Buddhist temple of Borobudur in Indonesia was cleaned and restored between 1970 and 1983 under UNESCO auspices, and related restoration projects took place in Venice and Athens around the same time. The Nubian Monuments project was also a remarkable consciousness-raising event. By the end even Nasser had been brought around to declare that the 'preservation of the legacy of mankind is no less important than the construction of dams, the erection of factories and the greater prosperity of the people.'⁹⁸

Even so, the marriage of universalism and ruins also prompted renewed interest in national claims toward material heritage. In 1970 UNESCO passed the 'Convention on the Means of Publicizing and Preventing Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property' at the General Assembly (16th Session), which concerned the restitution of taken objects by former imperial powers. This harked back to some of the international agreements on the restitution of objects of art and science stolen by Napoleon's army,⁹⁹ but this time UNESCO aimed to go much further. Indeed, the 1970s witnessed a range of claims from smaller countries against 'ex-colonials' to have their cultural treasures returned to them; this trend

⁹⁶ Kemal Baslar, *The Concept of the Common Heritage of Mankind in International Law* (The Hague, 1998), xix-38.

⁹⁷ 25 Feb 1966, 4, E1/ 168, 1947-1966, Press Review, UAP.

⁹⁸ Sève-Söderbergh, *Temples*, 90.

⁹⁹ Swenson, *Rise of Heritage*, 31-46.

augured a certain move away from world heritage and toward the repatriation of cultural resources, akin to the national management of World Heritage Sites. Already a decade before it was reported in the London weekly *West Africa* that the Nigerian Department of Antiquities stepped up its contribution to the Nubian rescue project on distinctly regional, pan-African grounds, to the extent that its contribution was seen as reflecting a 'Nigerian awareness of Africa's cultural heritage of which it considers the Nubian monuments to be among the richest'.¹⁰⁰ In October 1975 a Restitution of Works of Art to Countries Victim of Expropriation was put forward to the UN General Assembly by Burundi, Dahomey, Equatorial Guinea, Egypt, Ghana, Greece, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Nigeria, Somalia, Uganda, Cameroon, Upper Volta, and Zaire.¹⁰¹ To its credit, UNESCO worked to accommodate this growing antagonism, declaring in 1976 that 'the promotion of national culture can enhance a people's ability to understand the culture and civilization of other peoples and thus can have a favourable impact on international co-operation'. This may not have been a full renunciation of the world heritage concept in favour of a defence of national culture, but it did show that material artefacts had become a site of struggle between internationalist and nationalist agendas, be it for nation-building or tourism.¹⁰² World Heritage sites now served as vehicles of national self-promotion often in spite of UNESCO's initial intentions.¹⁰³

The campaign saved more than twenty massive Nubian temples and archaeological treasures, including Abu Simbel. By the end, the Egyptian government donated four temples as tokens of appreciation—Debod to Spain, Taffa to Holland, Dendur to the US, Ellesiya to Italy—to be housed overseas as part of the 'open air' worldwide Nubian museum.¹⁰⁴ The University of Chicago's Oriental Institute played a key role, and most of the Nubian antiquities now in its collection were excavated by its archaeologists at that time.¹⁰⁵ The Egyptian government built the Nubian Museum in Aswan and the

¹⁰⁰ *West Africa*, 14 March 1964, in Press Round-Up, 6 April 1964, 4, E1/ 168, 1947-1966, Press Review, UAP.

¹⁰¹ The text and claims of restitution of works of art to lands of origin from 1973 to 1977 can be seen in the file ED 245/41, National Archives London (NAL).

¹⁰² Alma Robinson, 'Art Objects in Foreign Hands', *FESTAC* (Africa) 59 (July 1976), 118-23; Pearson Phillips, 'The BM May Lose its Loot', *The Observer* (23 May 1976); 'Plea for 'Plundered' Treasures', *Sunday Times* (22 May 1976).

¹⁰³ J. E. Tunbridge and G. J. Ashworth, *Dissonant Heritage* (London, 1996); and B. Graham and G. J. Ashworth, *A Geography of Heritage* (London, 2000).

¹⁰⁴ Shehata Adam Mohamed, 'Victory in Nubia: Egypt', *Unesco Courier*, 33 (Feb/March 1980), 12.

¹⁰⁵ Larson, *Lost Nubia*, x.

National Museum of Egyptian Civilization in Cairo as a result of the project. Furthermore, these 1960s excavations helped unearth much about the early history of Africa and the development of modern humans.¹⁰⁶ No less important is that given its size, scope, and international participation, this rescue mission was commonly seen to have changed the general attitude toward international salvage programmes.¹⁰⁷ By the late 1960s, the Nubia campaign led to the 1968 adoption by UN member states of the 'Recommendation Concerning the Preservation of Cultural Property Endangered by Public or Private Works,' in which it was stipulated that preservation costs must be included in all major construction budgets, which helped pave the way for the World and National Heritage protection laws in 1972. In a very real sense, the Nubian rescue mission changed 'forever the practice of archaeology on a global scale'.¹⁰⁸ One American journalist in 1961, observing the remarkable spirit of cooperation during the Nubian project, could not help but wonder about its long-term legacy beyond the Cold War present:

If the habit of cooperation can be established to share in the world's common cultural heritage, maybe someday statesmen may take a cue from archaeologists and devise formulas to insure its legacy. Otherwise, it is a grim thought to contemplate possibly scientific teams, under similar auspices, labouring perhaps a century hence to unearth the shards of our own throbbing time.¹⁰⁹

Leaving such utopianism aside, it is worth noting that the universalism invoked to overcome Cold War antagonism effectively outlived the Cold War, and has framed the way that heritage sites are managed around the world ever since. No doubt this really was—as one 1966 *Guardian* article put it—the 'most spectacular archaeological rescue the world has seen', and as such rescued the idea and legitimacy of global civilization itself.¹¹⁰ Today Abu Simbel and Philae still stand as 'symbols and the monuments of a new type of international solidarity' that have survived their reconstruction as one of the very touchstones of world heritage.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁶ Fred Wendorf (ed.), *The Prehistory of Nubia*, 2 vols (Dallas, 1968).

¹⁰⁷ Torngny Sæve-Söderbergh, *The Scandinavian Joint Expedition to Sudanese Nubia* (Det Kongelige Danske Videnskabernes Selskab Historisk-filosofiske Meddelelser, 49:3 (Copenhagen, 1979), 8, Pamphlet Box 96, S-Z, Sackler Library, Oxford).

¹⁰⁸ Hassan, 'The Aswan High Dam', 81.

¹⁰⁹ Sulzberger, 'No Cold War', 28.

¹¹⁰ 11 Feb 1966, 3, E1/ 168, 1947-1966, Press Review, UAP.

¹¹¹ Sæve-Söderbergh, *Scandinavian Joint Expedition*, 52-3.