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The Invisibility of Sudan's Civil War

Isabelle Vella Gregory

Institute of Continuing Education, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK
Email: iv219@cam.ac.uk

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Abstract

The civil war in Sudan, often overshadowed by other global conflicts, has deep roots in the country's colonial past and ongoing struggles with governance. Despite early hopes for democracy, the situation deteriorated, leading to widespread violence and humanitarian crises. The war has seen mass displacement and severe restrictions on communication. Academia cannot remain silent in the face of such events. More importantly, we need to re-centre our practices from the outset, not just during in times of war. Archaeology plays a crucial role in this endeavour, but only if it actively moves away from its colonial past. The archaeological project at Jebel Moya is a fully joint collaboration between Sudanese archaeologists and those based in the Global North. It highlights the intersection of archaeology and contemporary conflict, underscoring the importance of equitable partnerships in post–colonial contexts. The narrative calls for international support for Sudanese scholars and students, emphasizing the need for flexibility, assistance, and a platform for Sudanese voices in the global academic community.

Keywords: Sudan; Archaeology; Jebel Moya; War; Africa

All eyes are on Rafah, and rightly so, yet as Palestine serves as the global epicentre of exposing the effects of colonialism, capitalism, and Western imperialism, there is one aspect of this struggle for liberation that tends to be sidelined. An equally important part of this conversation is global anti-Blackness and the civil unrest within Sudan.

1. What is going on right now in Sudan?

Officially, the war in Sudan is entering its second year. In reality, it started in 2019 when a coup attempted to overturn the dictatorship of Omar al-Bashir, who seized power in 1989.[1] By April 2019, there was a coup but people had long been calling for democracy and a new Sudan.[2] In particular, young people had had enough of the situation. It is crucial to understand that Sudan is a very diverse country, a mosaic of languages, practices, and landscapes – generations of rulers have overlooked this diversity, with devastating consequences. Diversity does not have to mean division, and in 2019, the younger generation

[1] See "Profile: Omar al-Bashir" 2019.
[2] See "How Civic Mobilizations Grow" n.d.

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Figure 1. The location of Jebel Moya. Source: Google Earth.

showed the world exactly what that means. Except that the world did not listen. Sure, there was press attention directed towards the 2019 coup, but the many stories and sacrifices of people on the streets barely made a splash in the Global North.[3] The world was warned many times.[4] But nobody listened.

The years 2019–2023, in particular, were marked by many tragedies, and in early 2023, the residents of Khartoum woke up to bombs and an all-out war.[5] For a long time, the government forces cut off Sudan from the rest of the world. People in Khartoum were essentially under house arrest with intermittent unreliable access to the internet or phones. When things somewhat calmed down, many of us returned to Sudan (even if many institutions had strong reservations). All was not well.[6] There was a marked increase in armed presence; it was often not clear if these were army or militia men. Sudanese colleagues, particularly those who worked at universities, were subject to intense scrutiny and many searches. We discovered many had their houses and offices raided, their few possessions were stolen or destroyed. People whispered about death threats – the fear was palpable. Walking around Khartoum came with a sense of unease, even as a foreign visitor working in Sudan.

Since 2017, I have been a deputy director of an archaeological project at Jebel Moya in Sudan. One of my main responsibilities is to ensure everyone's safety on sites. I am haunted by the question of whether we should have returned in 2022 and 2023, even as our Sudanese colleagues explicitly assured us they wanted us there. They did not want to be abandoned. It was an opportunity for archaeologists to do their job, and we have no regrets in that regard. Even in a tense atmosphere, we carried on, laughing and building tighter bonds as we worked. The normally arduous drive to Jebel Moya, some 8 hours away from Khartoum, was even

[3] See Elbagir 2024.
[4] See Hashim 2019, Khair 2024, and Khair and Akam 2023.
[5] See Elbagir 2023 and Hashim 2022.
[6] See Hashim and Fleming 2023.

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longer because there were so many new checkpoints (Figure 1). Often, we could not tell who was running which checkpoint, either the army, police, or militia. Sometimes we encountered all three within a few metres. I witnessed small children with machetes that almost dwarfed them and saw defiance in the eyes of women and girls who had every reason to be afraid. We all knew that this quiet period in which we were able to be there wouldn't last.

Many field expeditions have large teams with archaeologists from various countries. We were forced to adapt to increased instability and took different approaches to new challenges. The project directed by Ahmed Adam (Sudanese), Michael Brass (South African), and myself (Maltese) is a fully joint project between University College London's Institute of Archaeology, the University of Khartoum, and NCAM (National Corporation of Antiquities and Museums, the entity in charge of heritage, museums, and fieldwork in Sudan). All the archaeologists who work with us on the field are Sudanese and a number of archaeologists from the Global North have various post-excavation roles. Although those of us outside the region long to return, we must prioritize our colleagues' safety in the region. We can't jeopardize anyone's safety. Regional unrest is a heartbreaking new reality for our community as scholars. We are connected through our field, a shared commitment to discovery, a love for archaeology, and deep admiration for each other.

In April 2023, the country erupted into a full-scale civil war, a power struggle between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), a paramilitary militia. It is a fight between General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and Mohammed "Hemedti" Dagalo, not a fight for Sudan or democracy.[7] As the war rages, there is mass displacement and a humanitarian crisis that does not seem to overly trouble the media in the Global North. Sudanese journalists and activists in and across the diaspora continue to do their utmost, with little international support or attention.

2. How did Sudan get here?

Did this crisis really start in 2019? Did it even start in 1989, with Bashir's ascent to power? No, it did n't. In 1899, the United Kingdom forced Abbas II, then *Khedive* – ruler of Egypt – to transform Sudan into a "condominium," a technical term of international law by which sovereignty would be shared by Egypt and the United Kingdom. Abbas' predecessor, his younger brother Tewfik I, was seen as acquiescing to the British occupation to secure his own monarchy. Additionally, the British empire was skilled at creating acquiescence across the globe. Despite the condominium designation, Sudan effectively became a British colony in all but name, and the British governor-general at the time, Herbert Kitchener, excercised an extraordinary amount of power.[8] By the time Sudan acquired independence in 1956, the country had been through deep changes and the scars ran deep. Independence from an empire is not a salve for centuries of "divide and conquer" policies. Like many former colonies, independence came at an extortionate price[9] because colonialism leaves countries impoverished and without the tools and agency to rebuild on their own terms. By 2011, Sudan's southern territory seceded and formed a new state, the Republic of South Sudan.

[7] See "Who is al-Burhan" 2023 and "Who is 'Hemedti'" 2023.
[8] See Abushouk 2010, Daly 2004, and Sharkey 2003.
[9] See Rodney 1972.

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Figure 2. The village of Jebel Moya as seen from the top of the mountain. Photo: IVG.

Figure 3. The archaeological site of Jebel Moya, right above the village. Photo: IVG.

3. Looking back

As an archaeologist, I often say that the various echoes of the past are all intertwined into our complicated present. A multifaceted past is embedded within our very being. Although I cannot return to Jebel Moya in person, let me turn to it as our focal point here because it gives us insights into broader global issues relating to colonialism and the fangs of western imperialism. The site lies above the village of Jebel Moya, about 240 km from Khartoum in the province of Sennar. Despite the name, "Mountain of Water," the village is located between the Blue and White Niles in an area that is now arid. It is far below the Nile's Sixth Cataract (Figures 2 and 3). The archaeology of the land around the six Nile cataracts is well-established, although gaps remain in the areas between the Fourth and Fifth cataracts. Most of the Gezira plain remains under-explored, and the area around Jebel Moya was almost

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erased from archaeological memory. Henry Wellcome (1853–1936), a pharmaceutical entrepreneur, set up camp in 1911 and oversaw four field seasons until 1914, funding other aspects of the projects until his death in 1934. The trustees subsequently oversaw the publication of the site.[10] For various reasons, he never returned to the site and the camp shut in 1936, two years after his death. The official publication appeared in 1949, and subsequently, there was sporadic interest in the Jebel Moya material.

When our field team arrived for our first project in 2017, it was widely thought that we were on a fool's errand, despite extensive preparatory work that we hoped would prove otherwise. Ultimately, this project was the very opposite.[11] From the outset, we were aware of the colonial burden.[12] When we assessed the viability of our first field season at Jebel Moya, we did not simply consider the archaeological potential – we were aware that the area and country as a whole were plagued with the remnants of colonialism. This legacy includes the dehumanization and devaluing of Sudanese labour, among other things, something that a Western eye ignores through its anti-Black lens.

As I delved deeper into Wellcome's archives, the situation was much more dire – even by the standards of the time. Researching the archives did not just uncover pieces of the deep past; the archives bore witness to more recent times in which the Sudanese have been treated as sub-human.[13] Race science was prevalent as "experts" compared skeletal remains of actual human beings to apes to determine how "negroid" they were. There was unacknowledged labour of workers. Equally horrific was a case of a wealthy American man (British as of 1910) who viewed the people of Jebel Moya as degenerates and set out to "civilize" them. He styled himself as the Pasha, a high rank in the Ottoman political system typically granted to governors and senior military men. In the 20th century, the Pasha was one of the highest titles in the Kingdom of Egypt; thus, Wellcome exploited this privilege by imposing harsh financial penalties and punishments on workers, ignoring violence by European staff towards the Sudanese and praising himself for his philanthropy. He maintained detailed notes of equipment, everything from tent ropes to nails, but only a handful of names are noted. The latter likely refers to Egyptian workmen. The Sudanese workmen were known only by a number, which they wore on a medallion around their necks. One side had their number, the other the Jebel Moya logo and the words "Jebel Moya, Henry Wellcome" in Arabic.

There are many ways to make reparations. In this case, we insisted on an equal partnership, with Sudanese archaeologists taking lead roles. Permission was sought and given to live in the village, and the community was involved in the project from the outset. Working in these situations requires building trust. We never faced hostility but, rightly so, we had to earn the trust of both the villagers and Sudanese archaeologists. These issues are intertwined. Wellcome's project utilized labour from the village and the surrounding large area across the Gezira plain. Wellcome spoke at length of indolent and hostile "natives," especially when interviewed by Percy Falcke Martin.[14] A Fellow of the Royal Geographic Society, Martin wrote numerous books, ostensibly on history but in reality superficial readings of complex histories in the service of the British Empire. While Wellcome employed many Sudanese, there was widespread discontent. The Wellcome archives show that Sudanese workers

[10] See Addison 1949–51.
[11] See Vella Gregory 2024.
[12] See Vella Gregory 2020.
[13] See "Decolonising the Excavations" 2021.
[14] See Martin 1921.

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signed an indenture, rather than a contract. Although it was written in Arabic, many were illiterate and relied on someone reading out the harsh terms. The locals had no real choice – either accept the work or starve. The archives spoke of an exploitation that is seldom discussed but continues today all across the African continent. Wellcome interacted very little with the village, letting his deputies deal with the day-to-day affairs. When we arrived in Jebel Moya, there was a lot of suspicion – *Would we be the same? Would we try to cheat and demand lower prices for supplies? Would we even pay people for their labour?* Our work was cut out for us to build trust, which we prioritized.

In Malta, I was raised in a very community-oriented environment, and I've carried this forward in my working life. To me, it was obvious to share meals. Initially, villagers and colleagues were somewhat surprised – but we gravitated naturally to a communal time together. Here we all were, eating out of the same bowl, using our hands and sitting together. Living in Jebel Moya made me reconsider my privilege and identity. Having a language with shared roots turned out to be very helpful, as it allowed us to connect, talk more openly, and enjoy company. Slowly, I was invited into people's homes. As a woman, I was allowed into female spaces, where we sat together, drank coffee, and conversed about lots of different things. It was instinctive for me to help with food preparation (because that's how I grew up) and soon I felt connected. Like the Sudanese, us Maltese love to talk and tell stories – some shared cultural bonds made connecting easy. As I sat and told stories, brought artefacts, and showed the tools that we used, word quickly spread. Many women told the men of the village, who in turn started coming to the mountain site.

There is a certain way to tell stories in contexts like this where conveying narratives allows listeners to be active participants. It is a type of public scholarship that invites locals to be a part of the learning, discovery, and teaching process. Linear stories may be *de rigeur* in academia, but not here. Our excavations were open, accessible, and hands on for locals – this was *their* heritage after all. Our post-excavation hut was always busy – lots of young girls visited daily, asking for help with their homework, examining pottery, showing off their latest henna, and so forth. This was not just an excavation. It had deeper meaning with real people that we connected with. In the end, we created almost daily events, gathering under the welcoming shade of trees to reflect on our days.

Back in England, I attained teaching resources for the local Sudanese schools. I wrote stories for older children and a book about Jebel Moya. Ahmed translated it into Arabic, and Michael printed multiple copies. In 2023, we scraped together enough money to organize a heritage festival. The response was overwhelming. We visited schools, distributed copies of our book, and spoke to teachers and pupils. Villagers turned up with musical instruments and a treasure trove of poetry and song. I raided my childhood toys and found puppets. Together with the children, we performed the story of Jebel Moya on a makeshift stage. Proud parents watched as their children drew pictures of the site – images of us at work and anything else that caught their attention. The Umda (leader of the village and surrounding areas) joined in the fun and was very pleased to see members of the Dinka community who live on the village outskirts and are generally more reserved.

We were all relieved to be away from the political upheaval. This village, far from political machinations, felt like a respite. We spent many peaceful hours on the mountain, toiling away, laughing, talking about archaeology, and breaking bread together. For a time, we could all feel normal even as we felt the world contract. We made plans; we discussed book proposals with our colleagues; we organized a heritage festival and revelled in the sound of the children's laughter. We admired their drawings and clapped as young adults stood up

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and sang and recited songs about Sudanese culture and Jebel Moya. We drank endless cups of tea while talking about Jebel Moya's past, and we dared to hope for a future.

Later that evening in 2023, the locals and all of our team members shared a meal and reflected on the Wellcome years. As we looked at archival photographs, the Sudanese team identified a number of people and spoke of their ancestors. Then the conversation turned to darker things – finally, they felt they could talk freely about how hard those times were. "We were told we have nothing, then you came and we thought you were fools for coming because we have nothing," said one of the men. "You thought [the archaeologists] would not recognize anything," another pointedly observed, remembering the Wellcome days when archaeologists, or rather Henry Wellcome and George Reisner, concluded that there was nothing much at Jebel Moya. And this is the crux. The Sudanese have always been aware of their history and identity. Sudanese archaeologists are keenly aware of the colonial attitudes that permeate archaeology. These attitudes are not simply part of the history of archaeology. They are part of present practice, although very slowly there are increasing initiatives to redress the situation. Decades of white superiority and being told that they do not know how to excavate and look after their own heritage have led to understandable distrust.

Academia is a complex place. On paper and geographically, I am part of institutional power. In practice, I am one of the many precariously employed academics. This is a hard distinction to explain in a context where people have been consistently marginalized, demeaned, or erased. As a Maltese woman and resident in the Global North, I am privileged enough to have been able to pursue a PhD in a field I love, and to work with relative ease in Sudan. At the same time, I have fiercely met the demands of academia and fought against its ability to diminish me as a female scholar. One day, while talking to a senior Sudanese colleague, he stopped me mid-sentence and hugged me. He explained that I did not once assume that he lacked knowledge in key areas of archaeology. I was momentarily taken aback but realized that the worth of scholars in the Global South is often overlooked and disregarded. I wept as our Sudanese students, now in supervisory positions, marvelled at the fact they were given their own trowel and told to fill in their own context sheets. This is something archaeology undergrads in the Global North are privileged to learn early, yet nobody had entrusted these Sudanese students with this job, despite being on many a foreign-led excavation. They deserve better, and colonial baggage has robbed these young scholars of their own right to be the experts they are.

Challenging these practices is an ongoing process and we have much more to learn and do better. We also need to contend with institutionalized power in the Global North. All the good will and white saviorism in the world cannot fund a research project or ensure publications see the light of day. We have found many good people along the way, but the problem is bigger than the sum of its parts.

4. Where do we go from here?

Can we talk of the future in a time of war? Can we even talk about archaeology? The question for us is not when we can return to Jebel Moya, but what we can do now. Our team is spread across Sudan and neighbouring countries. The same applies to NCAM staff, including inspectors. During breaks in fighting, inspectors have continued to try and monitor sites. They have travelled great distances and persevered with their job.

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Archaeology matters, but it has never been independent of its social context. It is deeply enmeshed with colonialism and has a history of being used and abused for various ends by states and high-powered actors in pursuit of ethnonationalism.[15] The heritage of colonized and formerly colonized people has been appropriated and demeaned, especially across the African continent.[16]

In Sudan, both the army and the militias have used archaeological and historical remains in their war. Targets have included libraries and archives in Omdurman and museums and laboratories.[17] The latter included skeletal remains awaiting analysis, which Rapid Support Forces (RSF) fighters declared to be victims of Omar al-Bashir and his administration. The Khalifa House Museum, officially opened in 2023, was also destroyed.[18] One of its aims was to address the colonial legacy, including the looting of human remains of victims of the 1898 Battle for Omdurman.[19] Reports reached me of various key sites occupied by armed men; it is not always clear if these occupying forces are the army or militias. Sites were chosen partly because of strategic locations (hilly areas, access to resources), but also because of presumed “treasure” buried within. Archaeological sites became part of the battleground. This kind of scholasticide is not an isolated incident.[20] Israel too has consistently destroyed universities and libraries in Gaza.[21] Archaeological sites have also been deliberately targeted, and many archaeologists and heritage bodies have remained silent.[22] For archaeology to have a future, we need to heed Innocent Pikirayi’s call to develop a deeper appreciation of long-term history with detailed engagement of local communities and be part of the process of change.[23]

On June 24, 2024, news reached us. Jebel Moya was also officially in the war. This place, far away from the centre of political power, could not escape the war. When you consider how much the village has been marginalized over the years, the situation becomes even more poignant. We watched videos of men with rifles running roughshod across the village, firing machine guns in the air. Each side claimed victory. Even more harrowing was that each side showed a complete disregard for the people who lived there. We had always hoped that people would learn about Jebel Moya, but not like this. In the meantime, many in the West still do not understand this dire situation.

Here is a short manifesto on how to help Sudanese scholars and students in the immediate future:

1. *Invitations*: If you are in a position of power, you need to actively bring Sudanese archaeologists to your institution. As a team, we do not have that power – but many do. Spend your budget on helping scholars and students, taking the lead from the small number of institutions that have already done so. Many Sudanese students had their studies disrupted – offer them a place, even if it means they get to repeat a year.

[15] See, for example, Arnold 1990.
[16] See, for example, Chirikure 2020, Moro-Abadía 2006, and Shepherd 2002.
[17] See Abbas 2024 and Rickett 2023.
[18] See Salih and Burke 2023.
[19] See Burke and Salih 2022.
[20] See “UN Experts Deeply Concerned” 2024.
[21] See “How Israel Has Destroyed Gaza’s Schools and Universities” 2024.
[22] See Al-Houdalieh 2024, Leathem 2024, and Saber 2024.
[23] See Abungu and Ndoro 2022 and Pikirayi 2015.

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2. *Flexibility*: A number of diaspora students were already undertaking Master's and PhDs in Europe and America. Offer them support, including mental health support. You cannot expect them to meet faculty deadlines while their families are facing violence. Advocate for flexibility.

3. *Assistance*: If a visa is set to expire, do not abandon them. Do everything in your power to have the visa renewed. Their lives depend on it.

4. *Voice*: Do not be silent. Diaspora Sudanese are not able to speak freely, because their families are still in Sudan, often in villages occupied by armies or the militia. Militias can and do seek revenge by harming their loved ones.

5. *Spotlighting*: Being part of a diaspora does not take away one's identity as an archaeologist. Provide a platform for Sudanese archaeologists to speak about their heritage and patrimony in their own terms. Provide the resources and take a step back – this is not about you or me. This is about our colleagues and brethren. Sudanese scholars are perfectly capable of giving Keynote talks.

6. *Citation*: Whatever your field, cite Sudanese authors – there are many brilliant minds across many disciplines.

7. *Learning*: Listen to Sudanese journalists. Many publish stories in English: Yousra Elbagir, Nesrine Malik, Kholood Khair, Mohanad Hashim, Isma'il Kushkush, and many more.

If you are not an academic, or you work in a different sub-field of archaeology, take the time to read about Sudan. Talk about Sudan. Insist that these histories form part of your children's curriculum. If you enjoy reading, read works by Sudanese authors – Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* and *River Spirit*, Fatin Abbas' *Ghost Season*, Ibrahim Ishaq's *It Happened in the Village*, Jamal Mahjoub's *Navigation of a Rainmaker*, Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*, and so many more.

We do not know how this war will end, but all things come to a conclusion. When that moment arrives, it is the silence of those in power that we will remember most.

Isabelle V. Gregory is an archaeologist who works in Sudan. She is Deputy Director of excavations at Jebel Moya, Sudan, https://thejebelmoyaproject.wordpress.com/.

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