

Narrating Nubia

A Collaborative Exhibit at U-M

By Bailey Franzoi and Geoff Emberling

Author's Note

On April 15, 2023, a civil war broke out in Sudan. We are in close contact with our friends in El-Kurru, who are hosting friends and family from the south and trying to live as normally as possible. Electricity and telephone service go down often, but we are grateful that our colleagues and friends, as well as their families, are safe. We hope for the continued safety of our Sudanese colleagues and for an end to the crisis.

To celebrate the conclusion of our three-year collaborative research project, “Narrating Nubia: The Social Lives of Heritage,” we are excited to announce the planned opening of an exhibit at the Duderstadt Gallery, located in the James and Anne Duderstadt Center on the University of Michigan’s North Campus. The exhibit will be free to the public and will run from October 2 to October 27, 2023.

“Narrating Nubia” is a project funded by the U-M Humanities Collaboratory that focuses on developing ways to move beyond the colonial past of archaeology and cultural anthropology. We have

aimed to develop collaborations with varied communities as we explore the meanings of Nubia in Egypt and Sudan—both ancient and modern—as a way of making our research “reparative.”

Just as the project has four branches, the planned exhibit has four main sections: a presentation on the ongoing archaeology in Sudan, an animated film about Egyptian Nubia, a podcast, and an online classroom program.

The exhibit begins with ancient Nubia—or Kush, as it was then known—by presenting some of the Kelsey archaeological team’s work at El-Kurru, northern Sudan, over the



Figure 1. Students in the Community Heritage Center classroom at El-Kurru, Sudan. Photo by Anwar Mahjoub, 2023.



Figure 2. The north wall of the antechamber to King Tanwetamani's tomb in El-Kurru. Photo by Martin Thygesen Jensen.

past 10 years. El-Kurru was a royal pyramid cemetery for kings and queens of ancient Kush, including kings who conquered and ruled over Egypt as its 25th Dynasty from about 750 to 663 BCE. Our recent work at the site has focused on developing a Community Heritage Center (as described in the Spring 2022 Kelsey Museum Newsletter) that will serve in part to teach local students about the historical importance of the site and reasons for preserving it (FIG. 1).

In the exhibit, two short films will provide context for the archaeological site: a TED-Ed animated film (written by Geoff Emberling) presents the ancient historical setting, and a flyover film of the village and site contextualizes the latter in its landscape. A highlight of the archaeological presentation will be an evocation of the painted tomb of King Tanwetamani (FIG. 2), who reigned around 664–650 BCE. There will also be a chance to pour an offering—of water rather than the more traditional beer or wine—to Queen Khensa, whose broken offering table (FIG. 3) was found in the



Figure 3. Offering table from the tomb of Queen Khensa in El-Kurru, 690–664 BCE. A 3-D model of this artifact, created by Heidi Hilliker, will be displayed in the exhibit this fall. Photo courtesy of Harvard University—Boston Museum of Fine Arts Expedition.

excavation of her tomb at El-Kurru and has been 3-D reconstructed and printed by Heidi Hilliker, a fellow in the Museum Studies Program (MSP) and a PhD student in the Department of Middle East Studies.

Contemporary local heritage from El-Kurru will also be on display,

through the eyes and in the words of community members. The project hosted annual photo contests for village community members over three years (2017–2019). A panel of international staff and community members selected the best pictures, and the winning photographers were invited

to share the deeper meanings behind their images. The photos will be accompanied by materials and objects from Sudan, including traditional coffee pots (*jebena*), incense burners (*mubkhar*), and hibiscus flowers (*karkade*), which are used to make a local sweetened drink.

We are hoping that a film about life in the village made by Alyaa Musa, a Sudanese documentary filmmaker, will be ready in time for the exhibit, but the civil war in Sudan is making final editing extremely challenging.

We are also very excited to display illustrations from our children's book. Since 2020, the El-Kurru team has been in the process of writing an illustrated children's book, to be published in both Arabic and English. Titled *Leaving Our Mark*, the book follows two children in the village as they learn about the meaning of ancient, medieval, and modern graffiti on El-Kurru's archaeological sites.

The text of the story is largely sourced from interviews of local residents and contributions from

members of the International Kurru Archaeological Project. Local and international community members who contributed to the book include Fatima Mohammed Ibrahim, Abd el-Jalil, Anwar Mahjoub, Geoff Emberling, Shannon Ness (an IPCAA/MSP student), and Heidi Hilliker. The book is being illustrated by Hatim-Arbaab Eujayl, a Sudanese-American artist, type designer, writer, and Nubian-language activist.

The animated short film *Hanina/Homesick* will be another key component of the "Narrating Nubia" exhibit. Directed by U-M Professor of Anthropology Yasmin Moll and animated by Stamps School alum Karson Schenk, the film documents the nostalgia many modern Nubians feel for their lost homeland, which was flooded by the creation of the Aswan Dam in 1964. *Hanina/Homesick* is backed by the song "Wa Hanina"—originally sung by famous Nubian vocalist Sayid Gayer and rerecorded specifically for this animation by Ahmed Sayid Gayer, the artist's son.

The animation will be displayed in full, along with highlighted stills (FIG. 4). There will also be a series of 50-second animations giving moving form to the oral history archive focusing on Nubian memories of displacement. The illustrations in *Hanina/Homesick* were directly inspired by ethnographic photographs from the 1960s—prints of which will accompany the film stills. The photos will be on display this fall in an exhibit in U-M's Harlan Hatcher Graduate Library as well.

Amal Hassan Fadlalla, a professor in the Department of Afroamerican and African Studies, will also display some clips from the podcast she is making, in which she interviews artists and intellectuals from Sudan and the diaspora as they talk about the country's 2018–2019 revolution. One of her interviewees designed posters that were popular cultural touchstones during the revolutions, and prints of those will be on display too. Many of the podcast episodes reference themes or figures from the ancient Nubian past (FIG. 5).

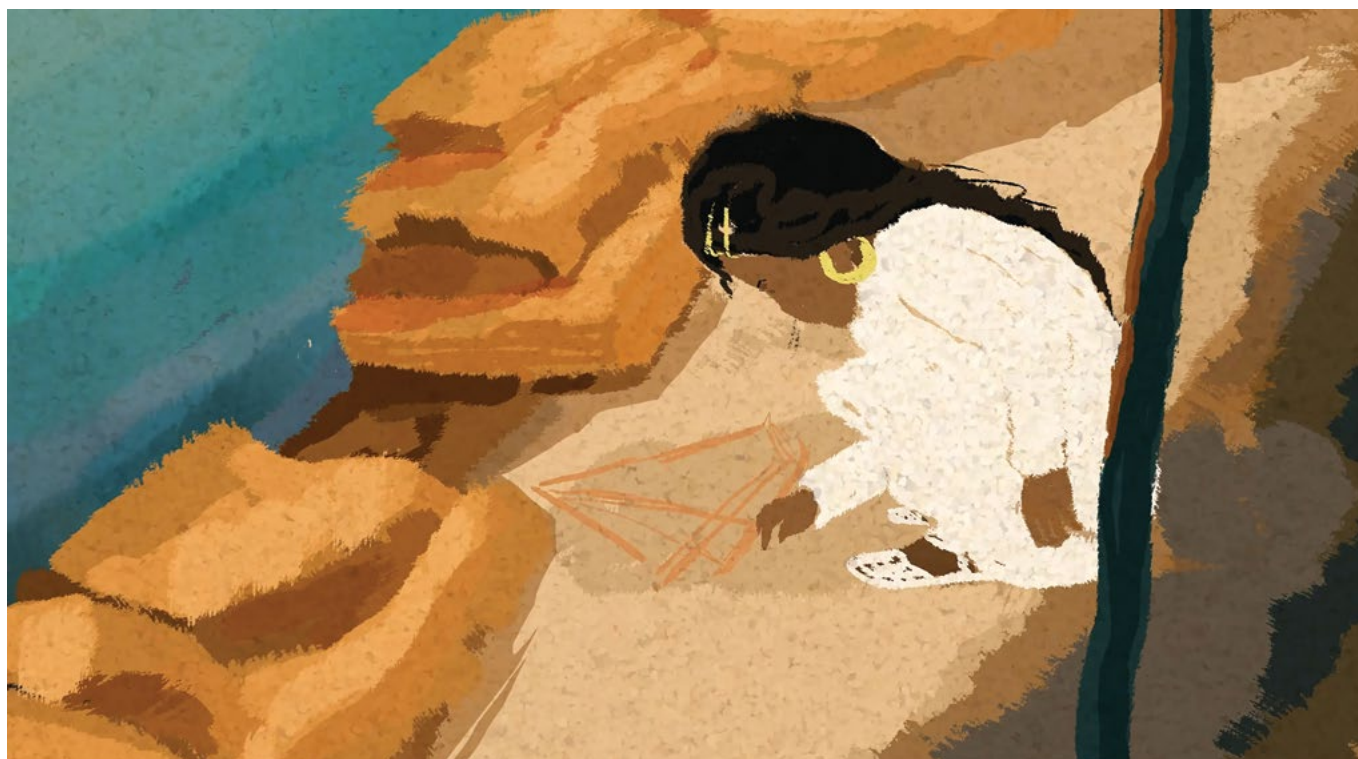


Figure 4. A still from the animated short film *Hanina/Homesick*. Illustration by Karson Schenk.



Figure 5. This mural of a Nubian Queen is painted on the Sudanese Embassy in Washington, DC. Photo by Amal Hassan Fadlalla, 2023.

Finally, visitors will be able to interact with the *Nubia Odyssey* website. U-M’s *Odysseys*, developed by Michael Fahy and Jeff Stanzler from the U-M School of Education, encourages classrooms of American students to engage with people from all over the world and make connections between someone else’s experiences and their own. The *Nubia Odyssey* is made up of “reports” for students to read and respond to. Some anonymized student responses will be displayed in the exhibit to give a sense of the impact the *Odyssey* has made.

Tying all this together will be a timeline tracing the history of Nubia from the Paleolithic period to the present day. We are proud that the archaeological work that we have been so focused on will be explicitly put in conversation with the other aspects of Nubia that the Humanities Collaboratory principal investigators have been studying—testifying to the richness of the region’s history and

positing that we all could benefit from and be interested in Nubia.

The accessibility of this work has been a major concern for the team. We are eager to have our exhibit be represented online as well as in person so that those not in Ann Arbor—especially our collaborators in Egypt and Sudan—have the ability to engage with the material. To that end, “Narrating Nubia” sponsored a MSP capstone project in during the Winter 2023 semester for students to explore the possibilities of a digital exhibition/exhibition website. Capstone group members Abigail Staub (an IPCAA/MSP student), Tessa Oliviera (Department of Romance Languages and Literatures), and Tori Herzig-Deribin (History Department) took on this challenge admirably, producing an extensive report outlining the various avenues “Narrating Nubia” might take to put itself online.

The exhibit itself is being designed by two U-M Stamps School

alumni—Shengyuan Liu and Orville Mo-He—with the support of Professor Franc Nunoo-Quarcoo.

Keep an eye out for an opening reception to be announced; we would love to see you there! ▲

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Stay Connected

Subscribe to the *Narrating Nubia* website to receive updates on the project and upcoming exhibition.

sites.lsa.umich.edu/nubia