

Nettie K. Adams

1934–2024

One does not embark on a textile archaeology journey after reasonable pondering and strategic considerations. It usually takes the serendipitous meeting between a crafty mind and a body of material. The latter is usually lying forlorn and understudied in an excavation storage magazine while the former is curious to tease as much information as possible from these sometimes unsightly rags. For Nettie K. Adams, this meeting occurred early in the 1960s, in the wake of the UNESCO Aswan High Dam salvage campaign in Nubia.

The site that became emblematic of this meeting is undoubtedly Qasr Ibrim. Now located c. 240 km upstream of Aswan, 70 km north of the modern border between Egypt and Sudan, the site barely survives as a small island surrounded by the waters of Lake Nasser. In earlier history however, this major settlement stood as a key point between two worlds, one turned towards the south and the other open to the Mediterranean, thus negotiating encounters between people, ideas and goods from the Kushite period in the mid-eighth century BCE to 1814 CE in the Ottoman period (Adams and Adams 2013). Perched high on a promontory, it housed temples and officials, as well as craftspeople and merchants. Most importantly for our story, the excavation of large midden deposits produced 25,000+ archaeological textiles every season. For Nettie Adams, there began the research of her life. Through years of hard work, patience, and curious inquiry, Nettie became a pioneer of ancient textile research and a true inspiration for anyone interested in the archaeology of the Middle Nile valley.

Before reaching Ibrim, Nettie had chosen the

adventures of archaeology very early on. Born in Tulsa, Oklahoma (USA) on 7 June 1934, she discovered archaeology as part of a Girl Scout program. Through her teenage years, she took part in the Senior Girl Scout Archaeological Camps organised by Bertha P. Dutton in the American southwest, the “Dirty Diggers”. This post-war initiative aimed at introducing girls to the cultural and scientific heritage of the region

and showed them new career possibilities in fields previously dominated by men (Fowler 2020). Nettie embraced that spirit and enrolled next at the University of Arizona, where she gained her bachelor’s degree in archaeology. There, she also met graduate student William Adams (Bill), whom she married in 1955 (More information on Nettie K. Adams’s personal history can be found at [https://www.kerrbrothers.com/obituaries/Nettie-K-](https://www.kerrbrothers.com/obituaries/Nettie-K-Adams?obId=32026744)



Fig. 1: Nettie K. Adams preparing a textile for study on the deck of the team houseboat at Qasr Ibrim (Image: archives N.K. Adams/ Centre for Textile Research, UCPH)

Adams?obId=32026744, consulted 29/10/2024). Together, they started a shared career in archaeology, first surveying Native American sites along rivers of the southwest, and soon in Nubia, where they applied this “riverbank” experience for the count of the UNESCO Aswan High Dam project. They lived several years in Khartoum and Wadi Halfa, working at Faras and Kulubnarti for the then Sudan Government Antiquities Service. In 1972, their path led them to Qasr Ibrim, to work under the auspices of the Egypt Exploration Society (London, UK) and the Egyptian Antiquities Services. For the next 16 years, a season of excavation was organised every second year, for eight to 12 weeks, during which the crew of archaeologists

was housed on a flotilla of boats and barges under the cliff side, far from any amenities and supplies (fig. 1). Nettie joined Bill at Qasr Ibrim starting in 1976, accompanied by their young sons (Plumley 1977). Besides coordinating many aspects of the complex daily logistics, Nettie was soon in charge of the lab and documenting “small finds”, a task she pushed through publication for the rest of her career, all the way to the mid-2010s.

Nettie had previously worked on the textile finds excavated at Kulubnarti (Adams et al. 1998; Adams 1989a-b; 1990; 1999), but it is her meeting with the Qasr Ibrim material that truly made her the textile researcher that she became. While other sites, including those in Egypt and Sudan, would give at best a few hundreds of textile pieces a year, the astonishing quantity of material produced during the Qasr Ibrim excavations presented extraordinary challenges. Luckily, Nettie did not meet these difficulties alone but was accompanied by another textile pioneer: Elisabeth Crowfoot. Elisabeth Crowfoot joined the Ibrim team the same year as Nettie, as a textile expert, and soon associated Nettie with her work (Crowfoot 1977; Anderson and Adams 1979). In the following seasons, together they devised a quantitative approach that allowed them to analyse a vast amount of material. From the 1978 season, while Bill Adams mentions the recording of over 20,000 textile fragments (Adams 1979, 10), Elisabeth describes their method as such: “During the season thousands of fragments of textile were examined. It soon became obvious that it would be impossible to keep such a quantity, often from very similar and highly deteriorated fabrics. A great mass of the material, therefore, had to be catalogued briefly – fibre, spin, weave, grade, colour, borders, and other details – and then discarded, but should still provide valuable statistical evidence. The more interesting fabrics were cleaned and catalogued fully, a study collection being preserved as well as numbered pieces possibly suitable for museum exhibition” (Crowfoot 1979, 39). This encapsulates their approach for the following seasons: sorting immense quantities of textiles, processing basic but still precise data by the thousands, selecting, sorting again, washing, and analysing (fig. 2). Every season, they also compiled a brief summary of the material for the excavation report (Crowfoot 1977; 1979; Adams et al. 1983; Alexander and Driskell 1985). While these methods – especially the washing of archaeological textiles – would not be routinely carried out today, their combined efforts laid the foundations of our understanding of textile production and usage at Qasr Ibrim, and more generally in Nubia. Thanks to Crowfoot’s training

and continued correspondence, Nettie acquired a very solid knowledge and an extensive experience in dealing with such varied textile material.

Nettie, however, went far beyond the technical analysis of the weave, as she quickly understood the historical value of such exceptional material. She began publishing short articles focussing on the finds as early as 1981 (Adams 1981; 1986) in journals specialized in African archaeology and textile archaeology, comparing them with neighbouring sites (Adams 1985). She also devoted an in-depth study of a specific openwork technique, which she traced back to the Bronze Age period and the pot nets produced at Kerma (Adams 1998). Nettie kept herself well abreast of methodological advancements in textile research and used available resources in her network to enhance her documentation. For example, she sent samples for fibre identification by Scanning Electron Microscopy and attempted elemental analyses to identify the liquid that soaked offering textiles from the Isis temple at Ibrim (research conducted in 1987 by several scholars in the USA, including Donna Harris at Allied Fibre, unpublished).

This interest in understanding textile production through time and space developed with our growing understanding of the political changes in Nubia during Late Antiquity and the early medieval times, so she was able to identify larger trends and view specimens from Qasr Ibrim at a macro-regional scale (Adams and Crowfoot 2001; Adams 2013). In that respect, the painstaking sorting carried out in the field and the use of expanding study collections of representative examples for each period of Ibrim’s occupation proved invaluable. She combined solid statistical analyses, based on thousands and thousands of artifacts, with her observations on the manufacturing of threads, and discovered clear changes in the use of fibres through time: first flax, during the first Kushite phase of the site and then during the short occupation of the fortress by the Roman army, then the arrival and hegemony of cotton, during the Meroitic period, and the subsequent domination of wool, combined with a growing number of imported fabrics in the Medieval and Ottoman periods. She framed these fluctuations in the political and economic evolutions at the site itself and in Nubia in general (Adams 2007/2010). This was the first attempt in Nubian archaeology at linking textile data with economic interpretations and broader historical questions.

From the beginning of her research, she was also interested in understanding the textile material in its context of use, despite the immense difficulties posed by the archaeological context at Ibrim. Used and



Fig. 2: Nettie K. Adams and colleague at work on the textile-washing table, among the buildings of Qasr Ibrim (Image: archives N.K. Adams/Centre for Textile Research, UCPH)

reused, fragmented and dumped in refuse ditches or storage cellars, then excavated by archaeologists in troves, most of the artefacts had lost all information of provenance or context by the time they reached Elisabeth Crowfoot and Nettie Adams. Piecing together their original shape and function was, from there, a hard and rarely successful endeavour. Nettie chose to tap into other sources to interpret the material: using the plentiful Meroitic iconography showing high officials in different attire, she proposed parallels between images of ancient Sudanese costume and preserved finds of the same period (Adams 1989c; 2015). At a time when textiles were disregarded as an uninteresting material by many archaeologists, Nettie chose to entitle her 1989 seminal paper “Meroitic high fashion” in an unapologetic act of academic bravery, but certainly not without humour. She managed to show that dress practices were a crucial part of society and identified patterns of change in the Qasr Ibrim material as markers for social and religious transformations (Adams 2001; Adams 1996a). Her work was also marked by the discovery of an

incredible textile assemblage in a small temple dedicated to Isis and dated to the end of the Meroitic or Postmeroitic period, c.350–550 CE (Adams 1987; 1996b, 2006; Adams and Adams 2013; Driskell et al. 1989). Left abandoned in the temple after the conversion to Christianity, the textile material encompasses a wide array of objects that Nettie interpreted as the furnishings of a sacred building: tapestry pieces used to decorate the walls or altar(s), cases for sacred objects such as wooden containers and a pair of arms from a statue, or even textile bundles used to soak up milk or other liquids given as offerings to the goddess. Interestingly, the temple also contained a storage pit filled with loom weights and several textile tools, as well as a group of miniature textiles decorated with complex openwork borders and fringed tassels or tapestry patterns. Nettie put forward the hypothesis of a textile production carried out in the temple, maybe in a workshop setting, which included the teaching of specialised techniques. Drawing parallels with the Graeco-Roman world, she framed this material

in concepts of knowledge transfer and craft apprenticeship, opening avenues that remain, to this day, mainly unexplored in Nubian archaeology.

Without any doubt, Nettie's research has propelled textile research in Sudanese and Nubian archaeology, merging material analyses with theoretical thinking. Her relentless efforts to give talks and to publish in many different types of venues, specialised in textiles as well as open to the wider archaeological community, has made Qasr Ibrim a "household name" in textile research and has shown the high potential of textiles to answer wider historical questions. In that sense, Nettie was a pioneer in both textile and Sudanese archaeology. She was extremely generous with her knowledge, in her everyday work at the Webb Museum of Anthropology in Lexington as well as with her research, which she openly shared with other scholars. After a meeting in 2001, for example, she started exchanging with John Peter Wild, inspiring a growing research interest in the expansion of cotton production and trade in the ancient world. John Peter soon took over the documentation of Qasr Ibrim's textiles, together with his wife Felicity. They found themselves welcomed on site by the study collections assembled by their predecessors in the storage magazines at Shellal, supported by copious notes designed to enlighten newcomers to the material. Later, while residing in Cambridge, Nettie and Bill invited them to see their documentation and discuss the Qasr Ibrim assemblage, sharing their experience in a lively question and answer session. John Peter remembers Nettie as "having a firm grip on the archaeological background of all the finds, full of fertile ideas, and as someone who could always be relied on for a speedy response to a query from a distant correspondent".

Through emails and letters, she continued to be a driving inspiration for the next generation of textile scholars, starting with the present author. During my doctoral research in the 2010s, Nettie shared a lot of her work and data, sending me unpublished versions of her articles and very generously allowing me to use her photographic records of the Qasr Ibrim textiles curated at the Bolton Museum in the U.K. Sarah Hitchens, who recently conducted research on this large collection for her PhD, reports that opening the boxes and reading the textile inventories was like "walking in Nettie's footsteps". Neat notes and long lists of textiles, technical characteristics, and even early dye analysis results, reveal how meticulously Nettie went through the material, considering every aspect of the textile's manufacture. To start researching Nubian textiles is to dive headfirst into

Qasr Ibrim's material and – inevitably – to start following Nettie's ideas, one thread after the other, to continue weaving Nettie's work.

Acknowledgements

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