

Pamela Rose

Hisn al-Bab

A New Project of the Austrian Archaeological Institute/Cairo Branch

In November 2011 the Austrian Archaeological Institute/Cairo Branch undertook a short season of work at the site of Hisn al-Bab, a new concession awarded to the Cairo Branch by the Egyptian Ministry of State for Antiquities. The following article presents the background to the site and briefly outlines plans for the future.

Hisn al-Bab lies on the east bank of the Nile at the south end of the First Cataract. It is some 10 km south of Aswan, and a short distance south of the original site of the temple of Philae, the ancient boundary between Egypt and Nubia. The visible remains consist of a fortified enclosure on a steep cliff side overlooking the principal navigable Nile branch. Deep wadis to the north and south of the site run eastwards and curve around behind it, enclosing an area of fairly flat plateau on which there are remains of further buildings, and providing a defensible space. Access to Hisn al-Bab was gained from the river, along the wadis which rose to the east to reach the plateau, and overland from the east: a trackway leads northwards from the point at which the north and south wadis intersect towards the modern village of Gebel Shisha, and thence to Aswan. Overland routes to the south are less clear, but travel in this direction probably necessitated going into the desert before rejoining the river some distance further south, as J. Burckhardt had to do in the early 19th century¹.

Little notice has previously been taken of Hisn al-Bab, despite its walls being clearly visible from the river (fig. 1). It is shown on a survey map of 1910, on which it is described as the »Ruins of an Arab fortress«², and was briefly mentioned by U. Monneret de Villard in his work on the Christian remains of Nubia as a »castello arabo«³. The only archaeological work that has been carried out is a survey by P. Rose and A. Gascoigne in 2007 on behalf of the University of Cambridge⁴. They identified two fortresses at the site, the later of the two being the one visible from the river (fig. 2).

The later fortress

The later fort is an enclosure about 190 by 120 m in size, and is very well preserved on its north, east and south sides, although its western limit is lost as a result of flooding. Its external walls consist of lower courses of rough stone around a rubble core, and some of the faces preserve traces of mud mortar (fig. 3). The stone courses stand between 2 and 4 m in height, and above them the walls are of mud brick, occasionally with some stone patching. It is clear that the walls were built in sections, and the height of the stone lower parts in adjacent sections can be very different. The surviving external corners of the enclosure are protected by rounded towers, and in the middle of the east side a large particularly well-preserved tower extends eastwards from

¹ Burckhardt 1819, 6.

² Reisner 1910, I 2, Plan II.

³ Monneret de Villard 1935, 17.

⁴ Gascoigne – Rose 2012, 88–95; Rose – Gascoigne 2012, 251–268.



1 The later fort from the river



2 Plan of Hisn al-Bab



3 The north face of the central tower of the later fort

the wall. This stands to two storeys in height above the solid stone base, and traces of at least one further storey can be seen in the surviving masonry. The lower room preserves slit windows in the mud brick (fig. 3). The tower's entrance seems to have been from the top of the fortress wall, along which a narrow walkway ran, but how this walkway was accessed remains unclear.

The fort had three entrances. The one at the north end of the east wall shows a typical Nubian ground plan⁵. The remaining two lie in the south wall. The larger and more imposing of these lay at the east end of the wall, and was enclosed between round towers on the outer side. The other entrance, at the west end of the steeply sloping south wall, is a small vaulted gateway, later blocked. It is unclear how it was accessed from either side because of the nature of the terrain.

The east and south enclosure walls were repaired within the lifetime of the fort. On the east side, occasional rainfall resulted in water pooling against the outer face of the wall south of the central tower, and this undermined the wall. As a result, the wall was repeatedly thickened on its interior to reinforce the structure. On the south side, the wall on the sloping cliff side was rebuilt at least once, presumably because of the difficulty of making a stable structure on such difficult terrain.

U. Monneret de Villard first proposed the identification of the visible remains at Hisn al-Bab with al-Qasr, a Nubian frontier fortress mentioned by a number of medieval Arab historians⁶, and this identification has more recently been supported by A. Łatjar⁷. The identification is based on the location of al-Qasr, which was specified in the texts as a certain distance from Aswan and Philae, and by the association the place with a named mosque and a church⁸. In all these respects the site of Hisn al-Bab conforms to what is known of al-Qasr, and it is certain that they are the same place.

The texts provide a few further details concerning al-Qasr. These include the fact that a garrison was stationed there⁹. Furthermore, the texts show that al-Qasr played a key role in the exchange of goods specified under an arrangement between the Nubian Christian kingdom of Makuria and the Muslim state of Egypt, known as the ›baqt‹. This came into being after the confrontation between invading Moslem forces and the Nubian army in 651–652 AD at Dongola, the Makurian capital. Whilst the precise origin and nature of the ›baqt‹ has been the subject of

⁵ Welsby 2002, 159–160.

⁶ Monneret de Villard 1935, 17.

⁷ Łatjar 1997, 49–51.

⁸ Gascoigne – Rose 2012, 88–89, for details of these sources.

⁹ Al-Maqrizi, ›Al Khitat‹ translated in Vantini 1975, 601.

much scholarly debate¹⁰, it entailed the transfer of slaves and goods from Nubia to Egypt, and of commodities from Egypt to Nubia. Both parties also committed themselves to less tangible obligations, such as ensuring the safety of travellers in each other's territory.

There was no doubt in the minds of medieval Arab historians that al-Qasr was a Nubian establishment on the Nubian side of the Egyptian-Nubian frontier. This identification is borne out by the similarities between the later fort at Hisn al-Bab and a number of fortified enclosures found along the river in Lower Nubia, which date from the 6th to the 12th century¹¹. The Lower Nubian enclosures are roughly rectangular, have towers at the corners and sometimes along the sides, have only one or two entrances of the plan seen in the northern entrance of Hisn al-Bab, and appear to exhibit a similar construction technique. These enclosures, scattered as they are amongst unwallled settlements¹², clearly have one or more specific functions. Although the earliest of them, Ikhmindi, is recorded in an inscription as serving as a refuge for the local population in the 6th century¹³, the generally peaceful political situation that prevailed from the later 7th century suggests that such refuges were no longer necessary. The fact that similar enclosures continued to be built shows that they fulfilled some other purpose. Their most likely role is as trading posts, or as secure stops for goods in transit along the river; this would also fit very well with what is known of the importance of trade between Egypt and Nubia at this time¹⁴.

By this interpretation, the later fort at Hisn al-Bab would then be the last or first secure station in a chain of posts along the river, and the one at which goods could be disembarked to go overland to Aswan around the cataract, or put onto ships or camels to travel south. Furthermore, it seems that there was a system for monitoring those entering Nubia, and an additional function as a border control point is also possible. This is certainly a more convincing role for the later fort at Hisn al-Bab than a purely military establishment¹⁵.

Identification of the later fort as Nubian is supported by other features. Sight lines from the fort are directed towards the north, where the mouth of the wadi leading around the cataract from Aswan is clearly visible, as is the river. Looking southwards, the view of the river is blocked by a cliff, and there is also no distant view into the eastern hills. Whether there were signaling towers to connect the fort with the settlements to the south is unknown, since any that existed are almost certainly now lost under the waters of Lake Nasser.

The textual references to al-Qasr are almost entirely from the 9th–10th centuries, and the place seems to disappear from the historical record by the 12th century¹⁶. Unfortunately, there is very little archaeological evidence from Hisn al-Bab from which to confirm or challenge these dates. Almost all the ceramics so far examined seem to come from the earlier fortress (see below).

The earlier fort

The earlier fortified enclosure at Hisn al-Bab lies partly on the plateau to the east of the later fort, and partly underlies it. It appears to have been somewhat larger than the later fort, at about 220 by 240 m. It is best preserved in the easternmost part, where its walls stand up to 3 m in height, and form two sides of a large triangular enclosure. Towards the west, these walls are increasingly reduced in height and were quarried to provide building materials for the later fort. The surviving walls are of large unshaped boulders filled with stone rubble (fig. 4). Two narrow entrances,

¹⁰ Hinds – Sakkout 1996; for a very different view, Spaulding 1995.

¹¹ Those identified are: Kalabsha (Curto et al. 1965), Sabagura (Stenico et al. 1962), Ikhmindi (Stenico 1960), Shaikh Daud (Presedo Velo 1964), Nag' el-Scheima (Bietak – Schwarz 1987; Bietak – Schwarz 1998) and Faras (Griffith 1926).

¹² Trigger 1965, 142.

¹³ Donadoni 1959.

¹⁴ For example, Adams 2010, 254–255.

¹⁵ Rose – Gascoigne 2013, 263–266.

¹⁶ Rose – Gascoigne 2013, 254–255.



4 Wall of the earlier fort, looking south. The mounds in the background are the remains of the south wall of the earlier fort, and the later fort is visible at the right of the picture.

each less than 2 m wide, can be identified through the east wall of the enclosure, and around both are scattered fragments of mud brick and fired vaulting bricks. These remains come from mud brick linings to the gateways, with fired brick vaults above. In one case sufficient debris exists to suggest that one gateway might have had a small chamber within the thickness of the wall. The gateways opened from the enclosure onto points where the wadi sides could be most easily scaled and this in turn suggests that controlled access was regularly gained from them. A narrow bastion-like projection at the west end of this side overlooks the wadi at its midpoint.

No clear doorways can be identified from surface remains along the southern side of the enclosure. The only apparently defensive feature here is a very small tower against the outside of the enclosure wall, located approximately at the point where the southern wadi emerges onto the plateau.

The area enclosed by these walls is empty. There are no visible archaeological remains on the surface, nor in the deep channels cut by running water resulting from occasional rainfall which are found over much of the area. The enclosure itself is subdivided at its north end, and within this smaller area remains of structures can be seen on the surface (see fig. 1). Recent robbery pits dug into the deposits here show a considerable accumulation of material including pottery, glass and organic materials. A preliminary study of the pottery thrown out from these deposits in 2007 suggested a date in the 6th–7th century¹⁷. The pottery consists of both local Aswani products, and a significant number of pieces of Nubian production, raising a question as to the ethnicity of the inhabitants of the earlier fort¹⁸.

To the west there is an outer complex of walls which at least in part continues the line of the south side of the triangular enclosure. The complex also incorporates features which appear to relate to the later fort, such as a wall running between the outer wall to the tower flanking the gateway, and it will not be possible to clarify the chronology of the architecture here without excavation. Fired vaulting bricks are also found in a doorway through the southward continuation into the complex of the southern triangular enclosure wall, and may suggest that this gate was part of the earlier fort.

The remains of a wall built in the same manner as those of the triangular enclosure can be identified within the later fortress, at its southern end. It extends down the cliff face towards the

¹⁷ Gascoigne – Rose 2012, 91.

¹⁸ Gascoigne – Rose 2010.

river, and seems to have had a gateway at its eastern end, where it disappears under the later fort wall. There are traces of another wall extending southwards from it, running along a sharp break in the slope, and this also disappears under the later fort wall. The northern limit of the earlier fort cannot be established, and it is possible that its wall ran directly under the north wall of the later fortress.

A garrison at Philae is well attested in the late Antique period¹⁹, but its precise location is uncertain. Although it has been widely accepted that it was based on the island of Philae²⁰, this has been recently challenged²¹, and the known Roman camps identified by G. Reisner²² in the wadi mouth leading to Aswan to the north of Hisn al-Bab were almost certainly out of use by the 6th–7th century²³. However, in later times the toponym Philae encompassed the river banks as well as the island²⁴, and it is thus possible that Hisn al-Bab might have been the site for this garrison. Alternatively, a reference in a papyrus of the 6th–7th century talks of a »camp of the Moors« (Moors here meaning Nubians) somewhere in the immediate vicinity of Philae²⁵, and it is possible that this refers to the earlier fort at Hisn al-Bab. This argument is perhaps strengthened by the fact that Hisn al-Bab/al-Qasr was recognized as the Nubian side of the frontier in the immediately following centuries, and it is likely that the location of the border at this spot had a longer history. It is also possible that there was no break in occupation between the older and later fortresses, rather perhaps only a rethinking of the design of the fortifications, again suggesting a Nubian rather than an Egyptian origin for the earlier fort.

Structures inside the fortresses

Within the later fort, and probably also therefore lying within the earlier one, there are archaeological remains, but as yet it is impossible to associate them specifically with either the earlier or the later fort. Relatively level terrain is restricted to areas immediately inside the two principal entrances of the later fort, and the rest of the enclosed area is very steeply sloping. The habitable areas on the slope are separated by a large rock bluff which it is hard to negotiate safely. There is no indication of pathways, stairways or other means which would assist movement over the terrain. In the later fort, one secure route was along the top of the eastern wall, but we know nothing of arrangements for the earlier structure.

Most of the structural remains consist of carefully-constructed stone terraces extending down the hillside as far as the high water mark. Some of the terraces appear to connect to form clusters of rooms which can perhaps be interpreted as housing complexes. Almost nothing is left of walls that originally stood on them: only occasional patches of mud brick rubble suggest that the superstructures were at least partly made of this material. Rarely, mud floor levels are visible, and the presence of door sockets, and a few undecorated stone blocks from the temple of Philae that seem to have been reused as thresholds or door lintels suggest that there was some density of occupation on the terraces. A robbery pit dug into one of the complexes at the southern end of the enclosure revealed some well-preserved pottery, including a globular Nubian cooking pot (ware H1, which dates between the later 4th and the end of the 9th century²⁶), and the base of an imported amphora dating from the 5th to the mid-7th century AD²⁷, suggesting that at least some of the occupation was coeval with the earlier fortress.

¹⁹ See, for example, Keenan 1990.

²⁰ As stated by Prok. BP 1, 19, 27.

²¹ Dijkstra 2008, 27–31.

²² Reisner 1910, 72–3.

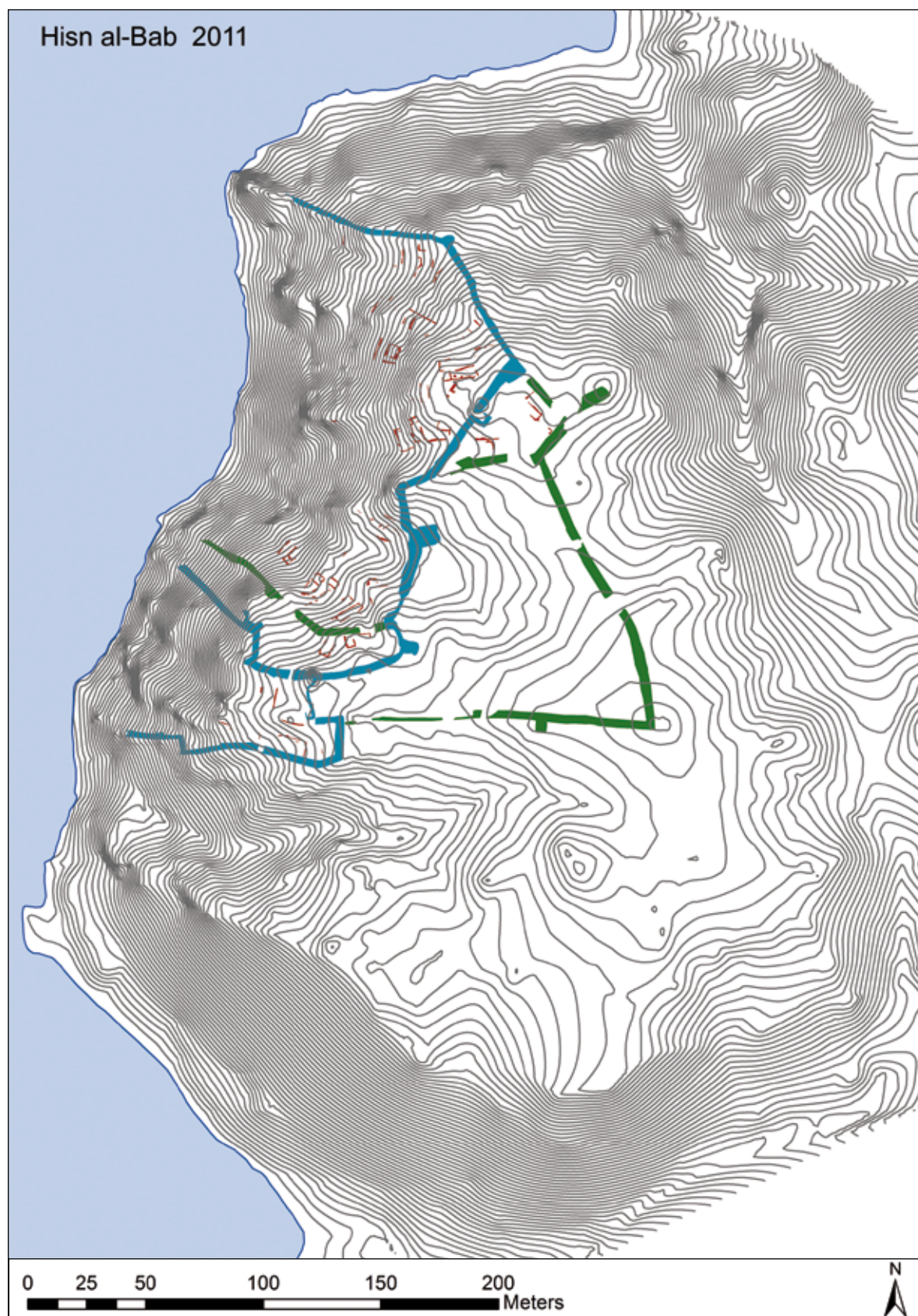
²³ Grossmann 1980, 10. 27 note 156; Welsby 1998, 160–161.

²⁴ Al-Mas'udi, translated in Vantini 1975, 133.

²⁵ Łatjar 1997.

²⁶ Adams 1986, 421–423.

²⁷ Peacock – Williams 1991, 185–187, Class 44.



5 Topographic map, contours at 10 m intervals (M. Weissl, 2011)



6 The abandoned village of Bab

There are few comparable remains giving evidence of the early medieval occupation; some of the Nubian pottery wares found in the enclosure can be dated as late as the end of the 10th century but this appears to be a far smaller proportion of the material than that associated with the earlier fortress.

New work and future plans

The brief season in 2011 comprised a topographic survey of the terrain in and surrounding the fortress, undertaken by M. Weissl (fig. 5), and a more detailed examination of entrances and some of housing groups inside the fort. Future work will entail limited clearances to expose walls, gateways and the internal structures more fully, as all these features are currently obscured by collapsed rubble; excavation of certain of the stratified deposits for purposes of dating and collecting organic remains for investigation of the subsistence economy; and architectural recording.

Furthermore, immediately north of Hisn al-Bab are the remains of the Nubian hamlet of Bab (sometimes also labelled on maps as the village of Bugga), from which the site takes its name (fig. 6). Abandoned by the early 20th century when the flooding resulting from the construction of the Aswan barrage and then the low dam made dwelling there untenable, the remains preserve an immensely valuable record of Nubian vernacular architecture which has otherwise been completely lost in Egypt. Future plans include the survey and documentation of these remains, and a short season to do this is already planned for autumn 2012 by L. Zabrana.

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Dr. Pamela Rose

Austrian Archaeological Institute, Cairo Branch, 6A, Ismail Mohammed Str., Apt. 62, EGY-Zamalek/Cairo

E-Mail: pamela.rose@oeai.at

References of figures: Fig. 1: P. Collet, 2007; figs. 2–4. 6: P. Rose; fig. 5: M. Weissl, 2007; all figures © OeAI.

Abstract**Pamela Rose, Hisn al-Bab. A New Project of the Austrian Archaeological Institute/Cairo Branch**

A new project to document the fortifications at Hisn al-Bab, south of Philae on the Egyptian-Nubian border, began in 2012. Of the two forts identified, the earlier is of late Antique origin, and adds to our knowledge of the border arrangements at this period. The early medieval fortress is Nubian in character, and forms the northernmost of a chain of such fortifications seen throughout Lower Nubia. It can probably be identified with the border fort of al-Qasr, mentioned by medieval Arab historians as the site of Nubian-Egyptian interactions. Thus Hisn al-Bab provides an opportunity to study the details of changing border controls over a period relatively little documented archaeologically in Egypt.

Keywords

Egypt – Nubia – Hisn al-Bab – Philae – Fortifications