
Where did all the big fish go?

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Résumé

The ancient towns of Elephantine, situated on an island, which is nowadays called Gezirat Aswan, and Syene, which could be identified by the joined Swiss-Egyptian excavation teams since 2000 in several parts of modern Aswan, have functioned as a centre for trade and exchange throughout the whole pharaonic and post-pharaonic history including the Middle Ages until recent times. In the course of the Greco-Roman period the functions of the town on Elephantine as administrative, trade and religious centre of the first Nile cataract were gradually transferred to Syene. While the island settlement diminished considerably, the mainland town flourished. However, taking into account the archaeological remains of both sites, the settlement history of the southern border of Egypt can be followed consistently over up to six millenia.

Through the placement of military units in the town for means of warfare and border control as well as the settlement of their families and merchants, the inhabitants of Elephantine and Syene have been highly influenced in their cultural and everyday life by foreigners from various backgrounds: e.g. Persians, Arameans, Greeks, Romans and others. Both towns thrived at the height of their inhabitation periods, which means that the first cataract area had to supply for several thousand people at the same time.

The influence from foreign cultures on culinary habits as well as on knowledge of husbandry becomes obvious in the comparison of the archaeozoological remains from both sites through time. New recipes for meat processing and storage were introduced and adjusted to the local resources. Preferences of meat changed noticeably from fish to mammal and also within these faunal groups between the species. Apart from that, the impact of a numerous human population on the natural environment can be traced at the example of the two towns. The exploitation of local aquatic resources and its influence on the habitat composition in the river Nile shows especially in changes in size of various fish species. As a result, the outcome of a profit-oriented fishing industry can be followed at this historic examples though several millenia. The speed of this change might be compareable and exemplary for similar events all over the world in modern times.

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