

FARAS

The name given in modern times to a small village on the west bank of the Nile, on the [frontier](#) between Egypt and the [Republic](#) of the Sudan. In earlier history it was one of the most important religious and administrative centers in Lower Nubia. It is named both in Meroitic and in medieval texts as Pakhoras, while the most common Arabic rendering of the name is Bakharas or Bukharas. Bejrash, which appears in certain late medieval Arabic manuscripts, is probably another variant of the same name, although some nineteenth-century scholars attempted to locate Bejrash farther to the north.

At least two temples were built at Faras during the Egyptian New Kingdom, but the main importance of the place apparently began in Meroitic times. A walled enclosure was built at that time just beside the riverbank; texts found in a nearby Meroitic cemetery indicate that this was a major administrative and cult center. After the collapse of Meroitic power, some scholars believe that the [capital](#) of the post-Meroitic kingdom of NOBATIA was established at Faras. However, the evidence for this is largely speculative, for the remains of the post-Meroitic period that have been uncovered at Faras are not very extensive. A number of medieval Arabic documents refer to Faras as the capital of Nobatia (or al-Marīs, as they often call it), but these date from a later time, after Nobatia had been absorbed into the larger kingdom of MAKOURIA. After the merger, which probably took place in the seventh century, it is clear that the eparchs or viceroys of Nobatia resided chiefly at Faras, though they evidently had other residences as well.

The primary importance of Faras in the Middle Ages was undoubtedly religious. A bishopric was established in the seventh century, not long after the [conversion](#) of Nobatia to Christianity, and the first cathedral at Faras was apparently begun at the same time. It was replaced in the [eighth century](#) by a much larger and most imposing building, the famous Faras Cathedral, whose discovery was one of the highlights of the

archaeological Campaign to [Save](#) the [Monuments](#) of Nubia. In the immediate vicinity, there were in the early Middle Ages at least six other churches. A sizable monastery (known in recent times as Qasr al-Wizz) occupied a nearby hilltop; there may have been a second monastery within the town. A pottery factory, probably operated by one of the monasteries, made finely decorated vessels that were traded all over Nubia. These and other Christian remains were scattered over a fairly considerable area, suggesting that Faras was one of the largest communities in Nubia in the early Middle Ages.

A marked decline is evident at Faras in the later medieval period. Some of the outlying churches were abandoned, and eventually, the great cathedral itself was surrendered to the encroaching [sand](#) drifts. The list of Faras bishops, which was compiled over a period of several centuries on one of the cathedral walls, comes to an end with Jesu in the late twelfth century. Later inscriptions found at QASR IBRIM indicate that the bishopric of Faras was ultimately combined with that of Qasr Ibrim, the latter evidently being the chief episcopal residence. This development did not quite spell the end of Christianity at Faras, for the buried cathedral was overbuilt by a small monastery and church, where occupation continued until the end of the Christian Nubian period. With the coming Ottoman rule, these structures were converted to serve as a small military outpost, but Faras was no longer a place of any importance, either religious or civil.

The decline of Faras in the later Middle Ages is probably attributable to the fact that its exposed riverside location was not readily defensible. In the disturbed military and political conditions which followed the Ayyubid conquest of Egypt, the Nubian population began increasingly to congregate in defensible localities such as the fortified hilltops at Qasr Ibrim and JABAL 'ADDA, and in the BATN AL-HAJAR. Much of the population at Faras may have migrated across the river to the old pharaonic fortress of Serra, which was reoccupied and refortified in the twelfth century.

Major excavations were carried out at Faras between 1910 and 1912 by an Oxford University expedition, directed by F. L. GRIFFITH. This expedition uncovered several of the Faras churches, the pottery factory, and the Christian cemeteries. At about the same time, two other Faras churches were investigated and recorded by G. S. Mileham. Still more extensive work was done between 1960 and 1965, mainly by the Polish Center of Mediterranean Archaeology. The Polish expedition uncovered the buried Faras Cathedral, another large church that had been built alongside it, an episcopal palace, and the monastic complex that had been built on top of the earlier remains. The outstanding achievement of the expedition was undoubtedly the discovery and preservation of the great FARAS MURALS decorating many of the walls in the buried cathedral.

[*See also:* Nobatia, Eparch of; Faras Murals; Nubian Church Organization; Nubian Church Art; Nubian Inscriptions; Nubian Monasteries.]

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adams, W. Y., P. E. T. Allen, and G. J. Verwers. "Archaeological Survey of Sudanese Nubia." *Kush* 9 (1961):7-43.
- Griffith, F. L. "Parkhoras-Bakharas-Faras in Geography and History." *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 11 (1925):259-68.
- _____. "Oxford Excavations in Nubia." *University of Liverpool Annals of Archaeology and Anthropology* 13 (1926):54-93; 14 (1927):57-116.
- Jakobielski, S. *Faras III, a History of the Bishopric of Faras on the Basis of Coptic Inscriptions*. Warsaw, 1972. Michalowski, K. *Faras*. Warsaw, 1974.
- _____, and G. Gerster. *Faras, die Kathedrale aus dem Wüstensand*. Zurich and Cologne, 1967.
- Mileham, G. S. *Churches in Lower Nubia*. University of Pennsylvania, Egyptian Department of the University Museum, Eckley B. Coxe Junior Expedition to Nubia, Vol. 2, 1910.
- Vantini, G. *The Excavations at Faras: A Contribution to the History of*

Christian Nubia. Bologna, 1970.

- ___. *Christianity in the Sudan*, pp. 138-40, 144-47. Bologna, 1981.

WILLIAM Y. ADAMS

Tags: [Places](#)