

Cover Page



Universiteit Leiden



The handle <http://hdl.handle.net/1887/23598> holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation

Author: De Simone, Maria Costanza

Title: Nubia and Nubians : the 'museumization' of a culture

Issue Date: 2014-02-12

CHAPTER 1

Nubia and Nubians: An Outline of the History of Nubia

Land of the sands and waters of the Nile, Nubia, geographically, ethnologically and spiritually evokes memories of humankind's earliest known existence and early organization. Archeological evidence indicates that the Nile region has been continuously inhabited since the Lower Paleolithic period (from c. 500,000 years to the present). Nubia in particular has been a core area for major socio-cultural and economic changes since the Late Paleolithic. Evidence of pottery manufacturing and cattle domestication has been found in the Nubian area, both along the Nile and in the desert, dating back to the Early Holocene (c.9000 BC). These changes have been of paramount importance not only for the development of the Nubian culture, but also for those of North Africa and more importantly to that of Egyptian.⁸

The first description of the Nubian culture is traditionally linked to the American archeologist George Andrew Reisner. During his *Archaeological Survey of Nubia*, undertaken in view of the construction of the Aswan Dam in the area stretching from Shellal to Wadi el-Sebua (Lower Nubia in Egypt), between 1907 and 1912, George Reisner⁹ and his colleague Cecil Firth¹⁰ brought to light about 8,000 tombs and 121 cemeteries. This was the first of the great salvage programs that became the dominant feature of archeology in the middle of the twentieth century, and in many ways it set the pattern for those that followed. Today, thanks to a century of systematic excavations, Lower Nubia can be unquestionably considered the best-known region in Africa, including Egypt itself.

On the basis of his discoveries and later excavations,¹¹ Reisner developed his typology and chronology, thereby giving the modern world its first glimpse of the main outlines of Nubian culture and history. He divided the history of this land into phases and utilized the term 'Group' to indicate the changes in material culture. Today, many scholars reject the term 'Group', arguing that it indicates not only changes in material culture but also physical changes in the population. In fact, Reisner and his team attributed each major cultural advance or change to the arrival of some new population group which reduced the whole of Nubian history to a series of disconnected episodes.¹² Other studies seem to demonstrate that the multi-migration theory does not have a sound biological basis.¹³

Reisner's cultural periods and their chronological relationship have been amply confirmed by subsequent work and still remain the standard interpretation of Nubian history. If he was substantially correct about the individual characteristics of the Nubian cultural phases, his explanation of the relationship between the phases appears much less satisfactory.¹⁴ Particularly controversial is his theory that says all the Egyptian material found in Nubia was somehow 'out of fashion' compared to what was in contemporary use in Egypt, stressing the idea of a *backward periphery*.

⁸ Gatto, 2011: 21-29.

⁹ Reisner, 1910.

¹⁰ Firth, 1915.

¹¹ Reisner, 1909: 5-6.

¹² In this study, for the sake of simplicity, I shall refer to these phases as Reisner's 'Groups', since these categories are still commonly used, despite their obvious limitations.

¹³ Adams, 1968: 194-215; Van Gerven, Carlson, Armelagos, 1973: 555-564.

¹⁴ Adams, 1970: 269-277.

William Adams, the American archeologist pioneer of the UNESCO *International Campaign to Save the Monuments of Nubia* in the 1960s, says:

The main achievements of the UNESCO Campaign has not been in advancing our knowledge of the different Nubian cultural phases individually, but in improving our understanding of their interrelationship. This has allowed the acquiring of a whole new perspective on Nubian cultural history and its place in the general historical development of Africa, the Mediterranean, and the Near East.¹⁵

The artificial divisions of Nubian history do not end with Reisner. Scholars currently working in the Sudanese part of the area are continuing to create other terminologies to name materials they consider to be ‘new or different’.¹⁶

¹⁵ Adams, 1967: 68-78.

¹⁶ An example are the archeological excavations conducted at the IV Cataract in the frame of the *Merowe Dam Salvage Archeological Project*. Since this area was poorly known before this campaign, archeologists working there have used new terminologies, such as *Early Kush* to name some of the findings. Therefore we have an *Early Kush I, II, III* etc.

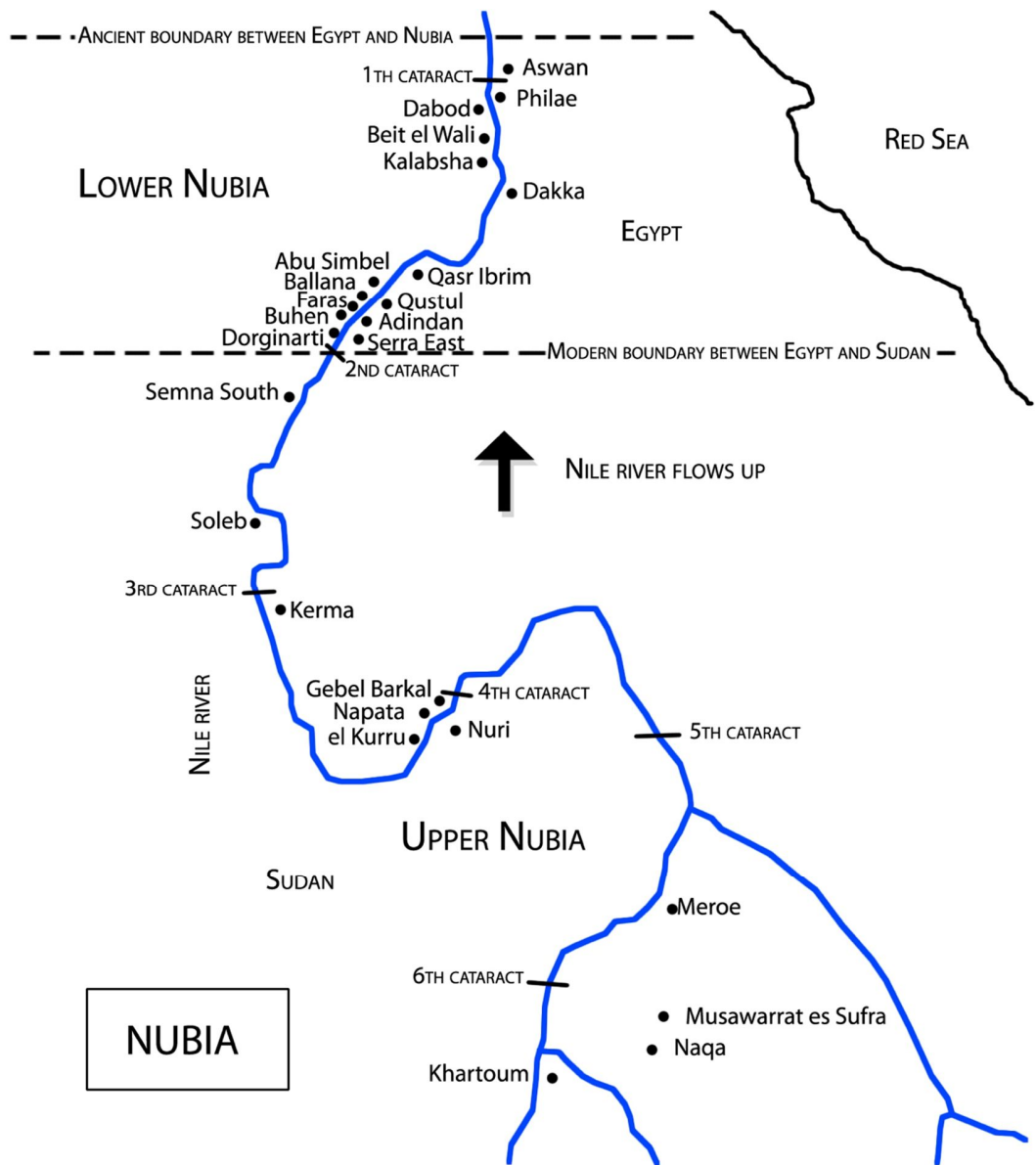


Fig. 1: Map of Nubia

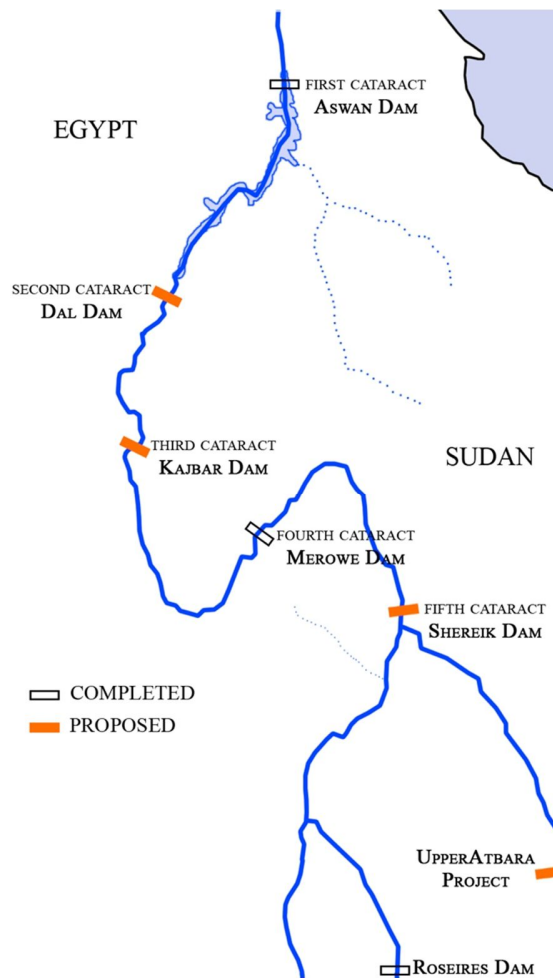


Fig. 2: Map of built and planned dams in Egypt and Sudan (Ancient Nubia)

Prehistory

The *International Campaign to Save the Monuments of Nubia* during the sixties has shed light on a period which was, at the time, very little known in area studies: Prehistoric Nubia. Previously, scholars believed that this period was a culturally conservative *cul-de-sac* both in Nubia and Egypt. Prehistoric technological and typological attributes were unchanged for a long time. As Fred Wendorf, director of the Combined Prehistoric Expedition in Nubia during the Campaign, states:

The UNESCO Campaign not only disclosed the presence of numerous rich prehistoric settlements ranging in age from Early Paleolithic to the beginning of written records. These sites also yielded convincing evidence that they were occupied by groups whose lithic

technology and typology were as fully complex and as progressive as those from other parts of the world or more precisely, Egypt.¹⁷

The first Neolithic evidence in Nubia was found by Myers in the area of the Second Cataract before the Second World War.¹⁸ Slightly earlier is Arkell's work on the prehistory (Mesolithic and Neolithic period) of the Khartoum region.¹⁹ The prehistoric sequence in Lower Nubia was established during the UNESCO Campaign and only recently revised;²⁰ it shows how the same communities lived both along the banks of the Nile and in the desert where they relied mainly on cattle-breeding. The adoption of a productive economy happened earlier in Lower/Upper Nubia and its nearby deserts (eighth millennium BC) and it was only during the fifth millennium BC that it spread southwards to the Khartoum region and northwards to Upper Egypt.

A Group or Early Nubian

The so-called A Group is the cultural unit that characterized the fourth millennium in Lower Nubia. Its spatial and chronological distribution was subject to regional variability. It is highly likely that an A-Group-related unit was present in Upper Nubia as well, but for the time being only some scanty information gives on this matter.²¹

In the A Group context, both local and Egyptian elements have been found. At the architectural level, local elements consist of simple settlements and tombs dug in the Pleistocene or Holocene alluvial substratum.²² The artifacts, which consist of pottery (Fig.3), jewelry and cosmetic palettes, demonstrate a high level of decorative awareness. While female steatopygous figurines (Fig.4) might have served some spiritual, magical or religious function.

The Egyptian imports are signs of exchange trade. However, if generally speaking the social organization of the A Group appears to have been tribal, a discovery by the Oriental Institute of Chicago in a cemetery at Qustul, not far from the Sudanese border, raised a question at which Egyptologists trembled and Afrocentrists became excited: the possibility that royalty in Nubia is older than in Egypt. The discovery in the Qustul cemetery consisted of thirty-three tombs that had been heavily plundered in ancient times. Eight of these were extraordinarily large and contained a great abundance of a variety of funerary offerings.²³ Above all, the picture on a stone incense burner indicated that 'we really had the tomb of a king,' in the words of Bruce Williams, the archeologist who studied the tombs and published the results of his research.²⁴ This hypothesis, far from being accepted even by convinced Nubiologists,²⁵ has now been completely superseded following the discoveries at Abydos (Egypt) that confirmed that the kingship in Egypt is older than that in Nubia.²⁶ Nonetheless, these tombs certainly indicate that wealthy leaders owned them.²⁷

¹⁷ Wendorf, 1968.

¹⁸ Myers, 1958: 113-141; Myers, 1960: 1974-1981.

¹⁹ Arkell, 1949.

²⁰ Gatto, 2011: 21-29.

²¹ Nordström *et al.*, 1972; Williams, 1989; Gatto, 1998: 515-519.

²² Maria Carmela Gatto (Personal Communication, 2011).

²³ Williams, 1980:12-21.

²⁴ Williams, 1980:12-21.

²⁵ Adams, 1985.

²⁶ O' Connor, 2009.

²⁷ At Qustul there were certainly king-pharaohs who did make attempts to emulate Egypt. The Egyptian themselves allowed the creation of some elitist structures. In fact, apart from the three big cemeteries, the rest has no social

The A Group culture met an abrupt, complete breakdown when the Egyptian kings of the First Dynasty (2900 BC) seized complete control of the southern trade and the flow of raw materials. The scanty archeological findings related to the following period led to the interpretation that most of the population might have become nomadic, and hence left few material remains behind.



Fig. 3: A Group Pottery



Fig. 4: Steatopygous figurine (Nubia Museum- Aswan)

Middle Nubian (C Group, Kerma and Pan Grave) and Egyptian Occupation (c. 2494 -1230 BC)

C Group

Nubian cultural phases of the C Group, Kerma Culture and Pan Grave Culture, are grouped under the general title of Middle Nubian (2900-1090 BC). While the C Group developed in Lower Nubia, Kerma flourished in Upper Nubia. The Nubian eastern desert seems to have been the homeland of the Pan Grave Culture, although archeological evidence of such a culture is only present along the Nile in both Egypt and Nubia and no trace of it has been found in the desert so far.²⁸ Throughout this period, Nubia interacted with Egypt. The nature of these contacts was varied, some were peaceful and advantageous to both, others were characterized by heavy Egyptian occupation that led to the partial assimilation of the local population into the Egyptian culture.

The chronological gap between A Group and C Group, a hiatus of almost 800 years, was one of the unresolved problems of Nubian history that caused considerable contention among scholars. Recent research has unearthed remains classified as pre-Kerma, ending the debate that over the years threw up various theories about evolution or migration.²⁹ The C Group, as mentioned, developed in Lower Nubia at the same sites where A Group remains have also been

differentiation that would allow a hypothesis of a local development of royalty. Maria Carmela Gatto (Personal Communication, 2012).

²⁸ Cf. below 'Pan Grave' sub - paragraph.

²⁹ Honegger, 2004a: 38 - 46; Honegger, 2004b: 31-34; Honegger, 2004c: 27-32; 2005: 239-247; Honegger, 2006:77-84; Honegger, 2007: 201-212; Honegger *et al.*, 2009.

found. The C Group has been divided into four sub-phases, that represent further internal development changes, including the addition of Egyptian elements at a certain point.³⁰

While the A Group is considered to have been more sedentary and dedicated to agriculture, the C Group is considered to have been pastoralist, whose culture was more nomadic culture. This conviction, although no strong supporting evidence is available, is based mainly on the representations of cattle on pottery and rupestrian drawings. While some scholars consider that pastoralism contrasts with sedentary, I prefer to argue that the presence of large cemeteries and settlements indicates that C Group was composed of sedentary shepherds. Indeed what has to be taken into consideration is the fact that the evidence along the Nile reflects only a part of the multifaceted pastoral Nubian culture. To discover the evidence of the nomadic segment of the society, the deserts are the place to look.³¹

The artifacts found do not differ greatly from those of the A Group, apart from the polished incised ware, which is the equal, artistically speaking, of the A Group eggshell on which the same motives are designed rather than incised (Fig. 5). This latter category of pottery can be considered the most striking C Group artifact. It appears at the beginning of the earliest period of the C Group and disappears with the disintegration of this cultural phase during the Egyptian New Kingdom. It seems that this kind of ceramic was inspired by the basketry work found along traditional trade routes throughout Sudan. The beauty of this pottery and the care with which it was created indicate that, for those who produced it, it was much more than just an artifact. In this regard Manfred Bietak in his extensive study of this Group and of its material culture says:

The achievements of the C Group culture ceramics are very attractive indeed and artistically superior to the ceramic production of the contemporary Egyptian civilization. From the paleo-psychological point of view this means that pottery had more meaning for the C Group people within their restricted material culture than for the population in the Egyptian Nile Valley. For this reason, they devoted more time in fashioning and decorating their pottery. Economically speaking, the pottery fabrication in Pharaonic Egypt was an industry, mass-production for anonymous consumers, while in Lower Nubia, due to its prehistoric societies, the consumers produced their own pottery according to old traditions [...] For such reasons, it is a very important diagnostic means for cultural analysis, i.e. of the origin, the development, the economy, the interrelations of this population with other neighboring cultures, and finally for historical conclusion.³²

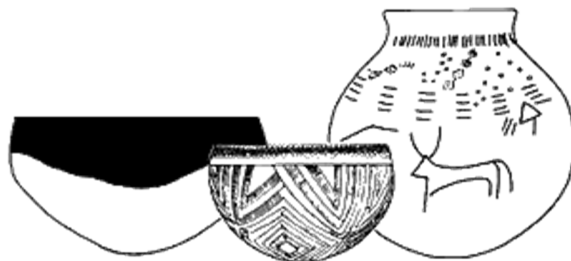


Fig. 5: C Group Pottery

³⁰ Bietak, 1968.

³¹ Gatto, 2011: 21-29. For the C Group cf. also Säve-Söderbergh 1991; De Simone, 1997: 112-124; De Simone, 2004: 242-246; Hafsaas, 2006.

³² Bietak, 1979: 107-127.

C Group is one of those phases of the Nubian culture considered a 'mute' cultural reality, whereas simultaneously in the southern part of Nubia, Kerma, is not. Findings do not show signs of a complex social, political or religious organization.³³ However, other scholars claim that this theory requires some reconsideration, since new research is pointing out that Nubia was basically a pastoral culture and that pastoral cultural assets cannot be compared with their agricultural counterparts.³⁴

Kerma: A Nubian Empire

While Lower Nubia was occupied by the C Group, the Kerma culture developed in Upper Nubia, at the Third Cataract, not far away from the fertile Dongola Plains. Kerma is generally considered to have been the first Nubian Empire, but³⁵ this is disputable since the A Group, as the Qustul tombs have shown, also had their own 'kings', or at least 'wealthy leaders'. The culture of Kerma, although stylistically appearing to belong to the same cultural horizon as the A and C Groups, clearly marks the transition between the Archaic and Dynastic phases. This theory is specifically supported by the use of writing, albeit not local but Egyptian.

The French Egyptologist Dominique Valbelle, who has worked as epigraphist for the Swiss Mission to Kerma for many years, has this to say about the nature of this Nubian Empire:

Understanding of a civilization like the Kerma culture is a permanent challenge, as it was active for more than a millennium and was subject to many external influences throughout its history. The most powerful of these exogenous forces was, of course, that of Egypt. Little is known of other African influences.³⁶

Evidence shows that Egyptian culture was used as inspiration but not copied. This process led to the original creations found in the Kerma culture. The latest studies tend to support its Nubian/local dimension which has also been found in both other contemporary and subsequent African cultures.³⁷

As a culture complex, Kerma equals the C Group, despite the substitution of a highly specialized local pottery industry (Fig.6) and the addition of social institutions (such as hereditary and perhaps divine kingship; social stratification, and *suttee* funeral practices). It has to be said that the Kerma culture did not display the full range of possibilities which appeared in dynastic civilizations of Egypt. Specifically, it lacked certain criteria that would have marked it as a dynastic civilization: state religion, imperialism and literacy.³⁸

³³ Gatto, 2010: 21-29; Adams, 1967: 26.

³⁴ Gatto, 2010: 21-29.

³⁵ Reisner, 1923; Bonnet, 1990.

³⁶ Valbelle, 2004: 176-183.

³⁷ For a complete bibliography of the work of the Swiss mission to Kerma cf. the website: www.kerma.ch

³⁸ Adams, 1970 : 272.



Fig. 6: Kerma Pottery (Museum of Fine Arts- Boston)

The most striking remains at Kerma that appear to be a sign of a local royalty are two *Deffufa* (this is a Nubian term for any prominent brick ruin) and a number of large, round tumuli. The two *Deffufa* have been variously interpreted, as being watch towers, part of a royal residence or temples. The round tumuli contained the body of the dead ruler laid out on a bed that was sometimes made of glazed quartz and sometimes of slate, with many luxury goods of gold, ivory and jewelry as valuable grave goods. The most impressive finding was the existence of a large number of human sacrifices that seem to have been part of an indigenous custom. It is most likely that the upper class at Kerma greatly admired Egyptian culture as can be understood from the fact that they manufactured for their own use acceptable imitations of Egyptian furniture, jewelry, weaponry and even architecture. Nevertheless, much that was manufactured at Kerma belonged to an indigenous cultural tradition and was produced by a large local population of craftsmen. The pattern developed at Kerma was fully adopted by the Napatan kings who made themselves Pharaohs of Egypt in the 25th Dynasty.

Pan Grave

Among the Nubian cultural groups of the second millennium, there is also what experts describe as the 'Pan Grave' group/culture. This group is named after the form of their tombs.³⁹ Their graves, shaped like 'pans' are only found along the Nile at the edge of the desert. Scholars identify the Pan Grave people in the *Medjau*. Referred to in hieroglyphic texts, from the 6th dynasty up to the Roman Period, their name meant 'foreign peoples'. It is generally accepted that this group lived in the eastern Nubian desert.⁴⁰ Renowned for their activities as policemen in the Nile Valley, in particular in Egypt, it has been hypothesized that the association between the Pan Grave group and the *Medjau* might have had something to do with changes in the definition of their name. At the moment, the evidence from the desert is too scanty to allow any more thorough clarification on the nature of the *Medjau* themselves or of their association with the Pan Grave.⁴¹ Characteristic of the Pan Grave is the presence, in the tombs of the later period, of considerable numbers of weapons

³⁹ Bietak, 1987.

⁴⁰ Sadr, 1987: 265-291; Sadr, 1990: 63-86; Sadr, 1994: 69-75.

⁴¹ The ongoing PhD research *We Have Come to Serve Pharaoh: A Study of the Medjay and Pangrave Culture as an Ethnic Group and as Mercenaries from c. 2300 BCE until c. 1050 BCE* conducted by Kate Litzka, at the University of Pennsylvania, aims to clarify the idea of Pan Grave, *Medjau* and their relations with Egypt.

and *bukrania* (cattle skulls) (Fig.7). The finds show a great similarity, sometimes difficult to distinguish, with other Nubian cultures of the second millennium (C Group and Kerma) and also with the former A Group.⁴²

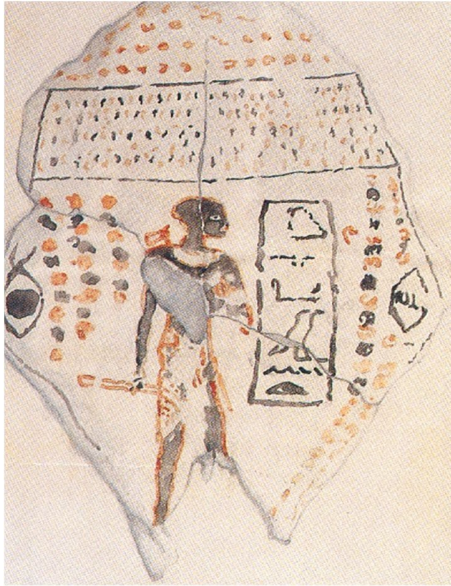


Fig. 7: Pan Grave cow skull painted with the image of a Pan Grave soldier (British Museum, London)

Egyptians in Nubia

During the period called Middle Nubian, the Egyptian presence in Nubia was constant. The intense exchange between Nubians and Egyptians is also expressed in the first written information on Nubia in Egyptian sources, dating from the Old Kingdom and corresponding more or less to the beginning of the appearance in Nubia of the C Group.⁴³ The tombs and remains of the princes of Aswan on the hill of Qubbet el Hawa offer valuable archives of information on the geographical and political situation of Nubia during this period. In these texts little mention is made of the social structure of Nubian society. The texts record the experiences in Nubia of expeditions led by officials serving as caravan leaders and troop commanders, which, it should be remembered are accounts not only of outsiders but sometimes of warring enemies.

The messages inscribed on these stones reveal much about everyday activities in Nubia. They reveal that Nubian society was politically organized and at an early stage developed into 'individual chiefdoms'. It was only at a later time that the 'chiefs' of these small kingdoms united.⁴⁴ Therefore Egyptians needed the friendly cooperation of these leaders if they were to carry out their military/commercial missions. The archeological remains appear to attest to this cooperation. Commencing from the Middle Kingdom (2040 - 1756 BC), after a period of crisis in Egypt called the First Intermediate Period, the Egyptian presence in Nubia strengthened and manifested itself with the construction of massive fortresses, trading posts and Egyptian-style

⁴² Bietak, 1987.

⁴³ Bongrani- Fanfoni, 1991.

⁴⁴ O'Connor, 1986: 27-39.

temples. The many objects left to us were made from the abundant resources of gold, ebony and ivory coming from Kush (Upper Nubia) and through Kush from the rest of Africa. However, despite the strong Egyptian presence in Nubia, the local culture remained relatively untouched.⁴⁵

Following another period of crisis in Egypt, usually referred to as the Second Intermediate Period, and the beginning of the New Kingdom in 1580 BC, Egypt occupied Nubia once again. The Egyptians restored the old temples and built new ones. Their occupation was so complete that part of the Nubian population was assimilated into Egyptian culture.⁴⁶ However, the 'Egyptianization' was not total and the record shows that traces of the old Nubian culture were still present after the occupation. Probably referring in particular to this period, Reisner said that the history of Nubia is 'hardly more than a record of its use or neglect by Egypt'.⁴⁷ In a political sense this might have a ring of truth. Nubia was often strong when Egypt was weak, and indeed was tyrannized by its larger neighbor on more than one occasion. It remained in a sort of economic bondage to Egypt. Egypt's ambitions to expand and increase its wealth and the scope of its power demanded ever greater quantities of traditional raw materials, such as gold, ivory and slaves, and molded the relationship between the two groups. The upshot was that Nubia was helped to rise above a Neolithic subsistence.⁴⁸ The deities of the Egyptians clearly became subjects of worship and trade objects exhibit the influence this had on the craft style and techniques of Nubia.

The 25th Nubian Dynasty: The Black Pharaohs

In 750 BC a dynasty from Nubia ruled in Egypt for the first time: it is known as the 25th Dynasty of the Black Pharaohs.⁴⁹ The first Black Pharaohs established their capital at Napata, near the holy mountain of Gebel Barkal at the Fourth Cataract but slowly their empire expanded as far North as Palestine. Later, the capital was moved to Egypt, signifying the total identification of these Nubian kings with the Egyptian pharaohs. The kings of this dynasty met fierce opposition from both local Egyptian princes and from the Assyrians. The latter began to lay claim to the country and their aggressive campaigns are well known. In spite of all this, the 25th Dynasty saw a renaissance of classic Egyptian culture. King Taharqa was one of the most influential of these kings and he continued a sort of 'purification' of the Egyptian culture's overloaded style. This baroque style had been embellished during the Ramesside period in the New Kingdom and was most clearly visible in art and literature.⁵⁰

The acquisition of Egyptian culture by these Kushite kings, most of whom had a Nubian name, was only apparently complete. Many Nubian elements appear in the material remains of this dynasty. Art of this period exhibits a wide variety of stylistic elements testifying to the fact that Kushite artists were not just copyists but rather artists who left an individual mark on their creations. These elements are characterized by a strong and explicit realism that stands in marked contrast to the idealistic renderings found in Egyptian representations (Fig.8). The contours of the faces found in sculpted heads are deeply marked, revealing strong lines and distinctively Nubian

⁴⁵ Smith, 2003.

⁴⁶ Smith, 2003.

⁴⁷ Reisner, 1970: 348.

⁴⁸ Adams, 1970: 276.

⁴⁹ Torok, 1999: 149-159.

⁵⁰ This process of purification, if it can be called so, had already begun in the 23th Dynasty, as can be seen on the relief of Iuput II (Brooklyn Museum), where the representation of the musculature of the legs was later taken up by the pharaohs of the 25th Dynasty. I wish to thank Simone Petacchi, PhD candidate at Lille University, for a discussion on this subject; cf. also Morkot, 2003.

features. Their emblems were partly Egyptian, partly Nubian. The skullcaps depicted on these sculptures are typical of this period, distinguishing the dynasty by the carved representations of the signifying band of cloth tied at the back of the head.⁵¹

Pride in their heritage and identity emanates from such details indicating the confidence with which these ancient rulers commanded their kingdom. Even though they had their residence in Egypt, Memphis and later Thebes, the pharaohs of the 25th Dynasty were buried in Nubia, at first in Napata and later at the site of Nuri. The tombs were in the Egyptian style, but those belonging to the entourage of the kings showed Nubian customs, such as the position of the body on the bed. These characteristics of the Kushites firmly place their society on the same cultural horizon as those of the most ancient Nubian civilizations. For thousands of years, relations between Nubia and Egypt thrived, leaving deep marks on both cultures exemplified in the art of these people.

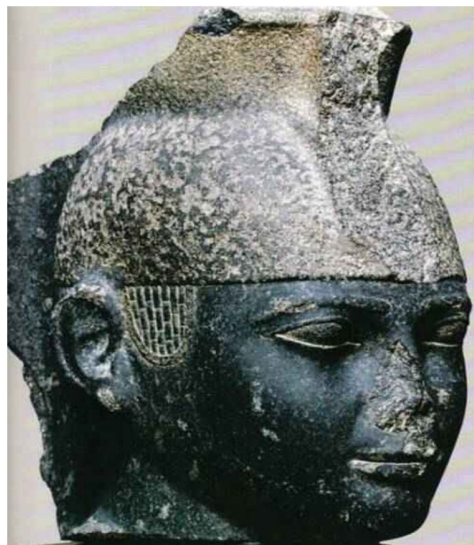


Fig. 8: Taharqa's head (Nubia Museum-Aswan)

The Meroitic period

Around 270 BC, the capital moved from Napata south to Meroe, in the Butana area between the Fifth and Sixth Cataracts, that was connected by caravan routes rather than through river transport. It is generally accepted that in the first centuries after the royal capital moved south from Napata to Meroe significant aspects of Kushite elite culture displayed features not seen during the Napatan period. As Janice Yellin says in a paper:

These new cultural forms are typically labeled as 'Meroitic' and are believed to represent cultural and/or ethnic changes that differentiate 'Meroitic' society from Napatan. What is generally called Meroitic period dated from 270 BC to 350 A.D. From 20 A.D. to 395 A.D. Egypt and Nubia were Roman provinces. However the nature of the 'disjunction' between Napatan culture and Meroitic forms in Kushite history and culture, and the processes by which it occurred, are not well understood. What was the origin of these features? To what

⁵¹ Torok, 1987; Kendall, 1999: 3-117; Kendall, 1999:164-176.

extent they do signify a break with Napatan traditions? If so, how profound was the break with the Napatan past? Do these so-called Meroitic features represent the practice of a new southern dynasty at the helm of the Kushite Kingdom or merely the inclusion of local feature introduced by a different, local group of priest? At what pace did this change occur? Was it an evolution over the time or a more rapid ‘revolutionary change’?⁵²

Whether this was an evolutionary or a revolutionary change is still under discussion, however changes are visible in the material culture as testified to by new types of stelae, new types of chapel reliefs (Fig. 9), offering tables and pottery decorations (Fig. 10); new architectural elements; the organization of burials in various royal cemeteries; and new roles for royal women. Moreover, access to female sovereignty might correlate with principles of female descent and the importance of the matrilineal succession, as this is strongly suggested in the Nubian and Ethiopian dynasties. Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban states:

The Nubian case is an excellent example of this type of matrilineal succession, as the right of kingship passed from the king’s sister (sometime also called the ‘Great Wife’) to her son. The exalted role of queen-mother occupied the semi-divine status of great progenitress and legitimizer of the king or queen. The religiously significant role of ‘God’s Wife of Amun’ with succession of this role from aunt to niece may also have provided sacred legitimacy to the regency and reinforced a basic matrilineal pattern. As historical, archeological and written sources indicate, six regnant queens reigned during the 140 year period between 60 BC and 80 A.D. By comparison, although there is a continuous tradition of queens regnant in Ethiopia from Menelik I, it is difficult to match this remarkable period of feminine regency in Nubian history.⁵³

Egyptian influences in Meroitic culture was mixed with that of local African cultures, with an admixture of some European elements which had filtered into Nubia through Egypt under the Ptolemies. At least, this is the common interpretation of the new elements which characterized Meroitic culture. However some scholars, myself included, believe that rather than influences, there were selective forms of absorption and assimilation of artistic cultures and religious traditions. These had to comply with the *mentalité* of this Meroitic society that was more detached from the desire to present itself as ‘heir’ of the Pharaonic dynasty than had been the case in the previous cultural phases.

Without doubt there was a cultural melting with the more muted elements of Nubian society. The cultural realities of groups who have not left epigraphic traces but surely contributed to the development of the Meroitic state, certainly must have had an impact on many social and cultural traditions. A relationship between these varied subgroups as well as with the ruling elite can be assumed to have existed from the very beginning, perhaps because of the original fragmentation of political identity. Nomadic groups were used mainly in a military capacity to control certain areas (Bayuda, Western Desert and so forth), as testified to by textual evidences.⁵⁴

Meroe was a flourishing center of industry and the smelting furnaces and great mounds of slag found at the site testify to the existence of a major iron-producing industry. Though iron

⁵² Yellin, 2004: 150-160.

⁵³ Lobban, 2004: 341-349.

⁵⁴ I wish to thank Simone Petacchi for his insights on the issue.

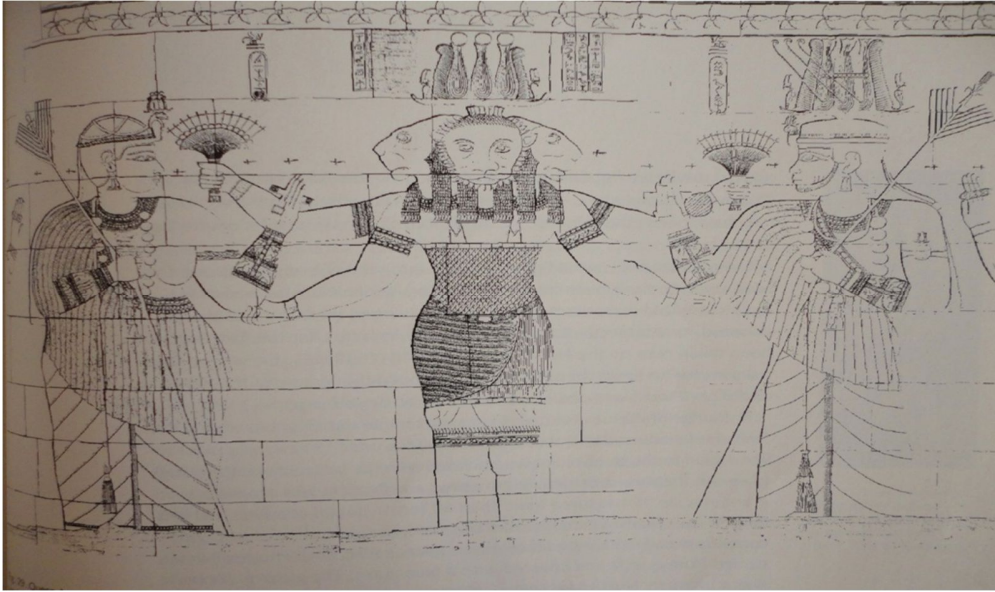


Fig. 9: Meroitic queen Amanitore and her husband King Natakamani offering to the lion-god Apedemak (Naga temple)

production at Meroe is considered to have been of only limited influence, the site is of great interest as one of the few identifiable centers of an iron industry in this part of Africa. Meroe occupied an extremely favorable economic position as it was situated in a fertile area of grassland which benefited from a good annual rainfall and was suitable to agriculture and animal husbandry.

The appearance of the Meroitic language in written form made it possible, for the first time for locals, to express themselves in their own language. Unfortunately, so far the interpretation of this language still puzzles scholars.

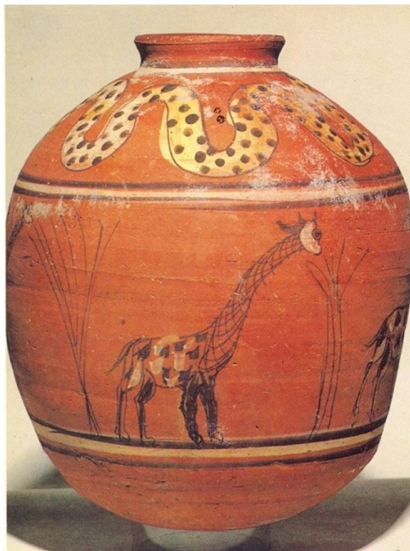


Fig.10: Meroitic pottery vessel decorated with a serpent and a giraffe. 2nd to 3rd century AD

The X Group or Ballana Culture

Around 350 Lower Nubia was taken over by a people referred to by archeologists as the X Group. Recent investigations have not resolved the X Group problem in the sense of reaching a consensus on a distinct identity for this group as either Blemmye or Nobatae. On the contrary, it now seems clear that both these groups, together with a good many others, were present in the Nile Valley between the fourth and sixth centuries, and shared in the common culture of this period.⁵⁵

The term X Group has been replaced by the term 'Ballana Culture' after the most important cemetery site. The X Group or Ballana Culture shows a mixture of Meroitic, Greco-Roman and apparently African traits. The last are traceable back to the Kerma Culture and farther beyond. All these features are found in the remains of the kings' tombs of this period excavated at Ballana and Qustul in Lower Nubia.⁵⁶ The tombs, consisting of enormous earth tumuli up to 77 m in diameter, yielded the richest treasure of grave goods ever found in Nubia. The principal person buried in each tumulus lay on a wooden bed, equipped with jewelry, weapons, bronze and silver vessels and furniture. Embossed silver crowns inlaid with glass and semiprecious stones had been placed on the head of the principal interment of the grave (Fig. 11).⁵⁷



Fig. 11: Silver crowns from Ballana (Nubia Museum-Aswan)

Other sections of the multi-chambered burial pits contained provisions vessels, tools and weapons of bronze and silver, wooden boxes inlaid with ivory, elaborate bronze lamps and items of personal adornment. The ruler's consort was sacrificed and buried with her husband, as were various retainers, some of them were clearly soldiers who seem to have met their deaths by strangulation or by having their throats cut. Horses, camels, sheep, donkey, and dogs were also killed and buried. Horses wearing their saddles and harness with silver trapping were accompanied

⁵⁵ Emery and Kirwan, 1935; Emery, 1938.

⁵⁶ Emery and Kirwan, 1935; Emery, 1938.

⁵⁷ Emery and Kirwan, 1935; Emery, 1938.

by servants who had been killed beside them.⁵⁸ There is other evidence of human sacrifice in Nubia, for example, in the tumuli graves at Kerma, and of multiple burials in the northern cemetery at Meroe that can be interpreted as sacrifices.⁵⁹

Among the most typical products of this period are the tall red ware goblets, often decorated with simple blobs or streaks of paint. In addition to pottery, both glassware and bronze were imported, and numerous fine bronze lamps and vessels were found in Ballana graves. Iron weapons were common in graves and this metal was widely used for tools and, in fact, some of the treasures from the Ballana royal tombs had been imported from Egypt. However, the royal regalia was evidently of local manufacture and testifies to the skill of the artisans in silver-smithing and inlay work.⁶⁰ William Adams, who has studied the sociological aspects of the material culture in Nubia say that:

The archeological finds also point to a sociological change. Nubia had reverted to something closer to a tribal society. There was not a clearly established 'state' religion in the X Group period, and probably no one kinglet or chieftain held sway over more than a fraction of Nubia. That the Ballana kings were the most powerful of the lot seems evident, but this does not mean that they should necessarily be regarded as the originators of the prime movers of the X Group. In the X Group, a number of different religious ideas seem to have been contending for preference. The folk religion of Nubia may have been an amalgam of Isis worship, Christian elements, and perhaps some surviving vestiges of the Meroitic imperial cult. This prevailing uncertainty, together with the establishment of Christianity in neighboring Egypt, must have created a climate favorable to the acceptance of Christianity when it was finally introduced in the sixth century. The Nubian kings, like contemporary monarchs in Europe and Asia, apparently acceded without hesitation to the establishment of a foreign-inspired faith whose power and influence very soon eclipsed their own. Thus began the third, or Medieval, stage of Nubian history.⁶¹

Although Adams' analysis is correct in its general drift, more studies are needed to clarify the nature of this historical phase of Nubian history.⁶²

Christianity in Nubia

Late Antique and Medieval Nubia was divided into three kingdoms, from north to south: the kingdom of Nobadia, with its capital at Faras, between the First and Third Cataracts; the kingdom of Makuria, with its capital at Old Dongola, between the Fourth and Fifth Cataracts; and the kingdom of Alwa, with its capital at Soba, south of the junction of the rivers Nile and Atbara.⁶³

The Christianization of Nubia officially began with the mission of Julian in AD 543. Some earlier conversions caused by the settling of a few monks in Nubia might be postulated, but they did not leave any noticeable traces. In a Greek inscription found in the temple of Kalabsha in Lower Nubia (kingdom of Nobatia), King Silko of the Nobades claimed a victory that some have thought earned him the title of the First Christian King. His role is debatable, but we do know that

⁵⁸ Emery and Kirwan, 1935; Emery, 1938.

⁵⁹ Lenoble, 1994: 107-130; Lenoble, 1996: 59-87; Dann 2007: 189-200; Dann, 2008.

⁶⁰ Torok, 1978:85-100.

⁶¹ Adams, 1970: 269-277.

⁶² Strangely, this historical phase is not the center of attention of the scholars who tend to prioritize other periods.

⁶³ Vantini, 1985; Ruffini, 2012.

Christianity was dominant by the time of Longinos in 596 and the conversion of both Makuria and Alwa, the remaining two Nubian kingdoms.⁶⁴

Closing the doors for the last time on the temple of Philae, the Christian emperors sanctioned the 'Christianization' of Nubia. The German architect Peter Grossmann who has made a profound study of the Christian architecture in the Nile Valley says:

Accepting the cross, Christian Nubia functioned under the supervision of the Patriarchate of Alexandria in Egypt. It is not surprising, therefore that many features of the remains from the inhabitants of this period echo in style, those of Egypt. Christian Nubia saw the construction of a large number of churches, but the dynamic interaction between the two cultures enriched the artistic styles and traditions of both groups.⁶⁵

Trading has always been a key factor in the development and change of language. In the flourishing, prosperous and harmonious kingdoms of Christian Nubia in which political responsibility was conflated with a moral one, communication began to reflect those interactions.⁶⁶ The language of ritual and the language of politics naturally evolved combining spoken Nubian, Greek and Coptic. Old Nubian became an accepted literary language but Coptic adapted to these changes by adding three new alphabetic signs representing sounds found in Nubian dialects. Most of the texts written in this Nubian Coptic have a religious character.⁶⁷

Masterpieces of Christian art are the mural paintings with figural representations of saints, angels, eparches and Jesus Christ (Fig. 12). The integration of contrasting configurations, including Classical, Egyptian, Greek-Egyptian and Persian motifs, as well as Byzantine and Syrian Christian influence, led to a trend in Coptic art that is difficult to define, because it is impossible to trace any unity of style.⁶⁸

Peter L. Shinnie contends that the Byzantine values of tolerance and unity in diversity and the inherent precedents for synthesis that resulted in a remarkable fusion of spiritual, linguistic, administrative and esthetic manifestations had a strong and long-term impact on the three independent Christian kingdoms of Nubia. This fusion remains most evident in the frescoes of the rock churches and was particularly motivated by the common Christian faith.⁶⁹ When, after the schism in the fifth century, Egypt turned increasingly towards Palestine and Syria, the representations of local saints and martyrs began to be influenced by the stiff and majestic style of Syrian art. Spirituality rather than naivety began to characterize the faces of the subjects represented. At the same time liturgical garments began to be characterized by more elegance and richness, highlighted by the increased use of gold in the background.

The end of Christianity in Nubia began in the Mamluk period. The patriarchs, in Alexandria, later in Cairo, absorbed with their problems in Egypt began to neglect their flocks in Nubia and rarely sent new priests in the area. The last bishop was appointed in 1372. The shortage of priests *in loco* led to a weakening of Christianity in Nubia. The last churches were built on a

⁶⁴ Vantini, 1985; Ruffini, 2012.

⁶⁵ Grossmann, 2000: 16 -19.

⁶⁶ Vantini, 1985; Ruffini, 2012.

⁶⁷ Lajtar and Van der Vliet, 2011.

⁶⁸ Dunn, 2011. A 10th-century Baghdadi bookseller, Ibn an-Nadim, reported that 'the Nub(i)a(ns) make use of Syriac, Greek and Coptic alphabets in their religious documents' (cf. Vantini, 1975:179).

⁶⁹ Shinnie [1954: 25] wonders if the sense of identity and cultural self-awareness manifested in this fusion has contributed in some part to the modern-day identity of the Christian peoples of southern Sudan, who are still struggling to maintain their faith, culture and their independence.

very modest scale during the end of the fifteenth century, even though Nubians, apparently, continued to respect the old churches since they were the religious building of their parents and grandparents.



Fig. 12: Frescos of the Cathedral of Faras

Islam in Nubia

Although Islam had already entered Nubia during the Fatimid period, the country was never part of an Islamic empire and did not come under the sway of an Islamic Caliphate until the thirteenth century. Hence it is not to be expected that its cultural manifestations would be modeled after Egypt, Iraq or Iran.⁷⁰ The process of the Islamization in Nubia was carried out to some extent by a number of Muslims who had migrated to the area during the earliest Islamic period. Historical evidence demonstrates that the major role was carried out by indigenous individuals and/or groups previously converted to Islam through the mediation of the aforementioned emigrants. It seems that a series of events led to the final Islamization of Lower Nubia. The arrival of the Kenzi tribes from the Yemen sometime after AD 350 and their settlement in the desert between Nubia and the Red Sea, was to the outcome of a process of intermarriage with the remaining Blemmye tribes in this area. The Kenzi took advantage of the anarchy in the reign of the Caliph al-Mustansir in the mid-eleventh century AD to take control of much of Upper Egypt under their chief, the Kenz ad-Dawla. The revival of Fatimid fortunes in Egypt under General Badr al-Gamali included his defeat of the Kenz ad-Dawla in the 1080s. At the end of the period of Arab incursions, many expeditions set out to colonize Nubia. Colonizing implied assimilation and implicitly the conversion of Nubia

⁷⁰ Soghayroun El Zein, 2004: 238- 242.

commenced. In 1252, Nubia was placed under the control of Sultan Baybars. Imposing the *bakt*, a tribute of one dinar taken from every non-Muslim, Baybars brought about the conversion of many Nubians. The situation did not alter much for the next few centuries, characterized by recurring unrest, sporadic raids and outright warfare. In the later Mameluk period this unrest led to the eventual depopulation of the area and signaled Nubia's entry into a long period of decline and domination by Egypt.⁷¹

The rule of Nubia was left to 'two warring tribes' whose attempt to involve the Ottoman Empire, after its conquest of Egypt in AD 1517, led to Nubia simply being annexed and garrisoned from Aswan, Ibrim and Sai. The situation did not change very much until AD 1820 when Muhammed Ali declared Nubia part of Egypt and appointed governors in the villages. Islam spread in Nubia both as an ideology and an effective socio economic system of life. The historical agents of the transmutations of the society are easily adduced: individual preachers, the first Nubian Muslims acting through trade and travel and the Sufi orders/brotherhoods. What emerged from this confluence of energies in the unique character of Nubian Islam, that never seems to have lost its pre-Christian roots.⁷² The Sudanese archeologist Intisar Soghayroun El Zein says that:

The architectural manifestation of the new dispersion was most practically the funerary buildings of the earliest religious leaders. Nubia with its unique position shows the blending of two cultural zones, African and Asiatic, which resulted in a local typical dimension of Islam expressed in its cults, practices and architecture. Central to the last point is the *qubba*, (dome), the most unique artifact of the Nubian culture.⁷³

The *qubba* certainly dominates the landscape of the Middle Nile Valley (Fig. 13). This domed structure was the tomb of local saints or heroes who not only propagated the faith but also contributed to social and cultural stability. As stated by Alexandros Tsakos and others, the *qubba* 'stabilized the state, healed the folk, and inspired the poets and the enthusiasts of the transcendental'.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Soghayroun El Zein, 2004a; Soghayroun El Zein, 2004b: 238- 242

⁷² Soghayroun El Zein, 2004a; Soghayroun El Zein, 2004b: 238- 242.

⁷³ Soghayroun El Zein, 2004b: 238-242; in the catalogue of the exhibition *From Nubia to Sudan* (Tsakos and alii, 2011) this building is commented upon as follows: 'For almost a thousand years, the medieval Nubian kingdoms of northern Sudan existed aside the Islamic caliphate and created an original and immensely attractive civilization. Nowadays the Nubia speaking tribes share the Middle Nile with Arab speaking tribes. They also share the religious experience in the unique form of Islam in the Sudan. There, the *qubb*as (tombs of saints of the Muslim faith) are more often stronger poles of ritual attraction than mosques. Moreover, the holiness of the Quran is most actively perceived in its form of *zikr*, the chanting and whirling of the darwishs (Persian for member of Sufi orders). The Sudanese sufi (Arabic for the mysticism part of Islam, as well as for its practioners), however, practice their faith of African land: and as much as their prayers follow the division of the day exemplified by traditional Islam, their *zikr* is less of a whirl and more a leap. Sudan is Africa because the Muslims jump in celebration of Allah! And since both Nubians and Arabs live in the northern Sudan, their religious and their secular community lives create this special *mélange* that is the Islamic Republic of the Sudan. Finally, in a balance of cultural, linguistic, and religious traditions, Nubia still exists in Northern Sudan.'

⁷⁴ Tsakos and Hafsaa -Tsakos, 2011.

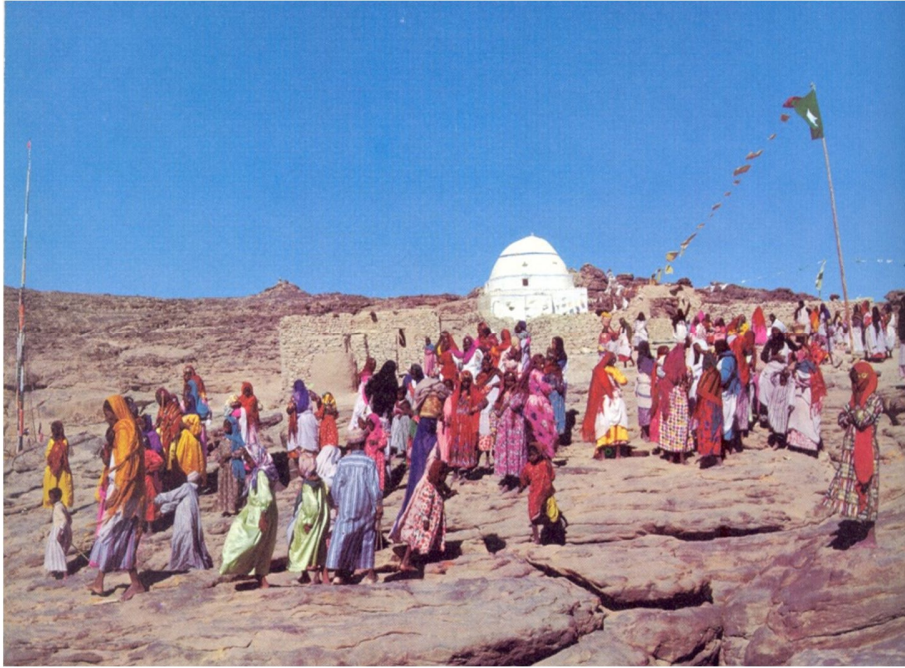


Fig.13: *Qubba* (Mothers and daughters walking in procession to the shrine of the saint during a *moulid*)

Modern Nubia: The (Hi)story of Nubiin

The history of modern Nubia begins with the 1517 invasion of northern Sudan by Selim the First and the establishment of a Bosnian garrison at Qasr Ibrim (today Egyptian Nubia).

In the historical introduction to the first small guide of the Nubia Museum of Aswan, Gaballa Ali Gaballa⁷⁵ summarizes the relatively recent historical events of the area as follows:

Nubia was a corridor for the armies that remained in conflict between the south and the north. The record of Nubian life reveals little as, like Egypt, it suffered the vicissitudes of fortune under the Mamluks and eventually the French expedition by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1798. The violent conflicts that characterized so much of earlier history did not disappear, and in the nineteenth century, nomadic groups repeatedly clashed. With the expedition of Mohamed Ali into Nubia in 1825 and the defeat of the Mamluks in Dongola, Nubia became part of Egypt. However, when the Ottomans took over, Nubia and Sudan remained provinces of the empire. Finally, with the revolt of the Mahdi in Sudan, Nubia became the battlefield upon which Egyptian troops led by British officers fought the revolutionary army. The revolution ended in Toshka (Egyptian Nubia) in August 1889 with the Darwish defeat. British ruled the Sudan exploiting its resources, dividing Nubia into Lower and Upper Nubia.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ The late Gaballa Ali Gaballa was a famous Egyptian Egyptologist. In 1997, when the Nubia Museum of Aswan opened, he was Secretary-General of the Supreme Council of Antiquities in Egypt. I decided to quote his text since this historical period is considered to be a very sensitive one in relations between Egypt and present-day Sudan. This quotation allows me to demonstrate how it is presented in museums guides of the area and by a local.

⁷⁶ Gaballa, 1997; Cf. Warner, 2000.

As the area became more settled, residents of the valley, today known as *Nubiin*, developed a more stable agricultural existence. Modern Nubia is divided into three groups, each distinguished by its dialect. For the first 145 kilometers south from Aswan, the dialect spoken is Kenzi and the people call themselves Kenzi. The next reach, stretching 425 kilometers, is occupied by Nubians who speak Mahasi, a language of several mutually intelligible dialects which is sometimes called Fadija. Speakers of Kenzi and some Fadija today are deprived of their homeland following the construction of the two dams at Aswan, the last of which in the sixties has transformed the area in a vast artificial basin called Lake Nasser. The last Nubian reach of about 350 kilometers is inhabited by those who speak Dongolawi (or Rotana) and call themselves Dongolawi. In the modern geo-political set, Kenzi and some Fadija are inhabitants of Egypt and all the rest live in Northern Sudan. Apart from some differences in their dialects, Nubians have basically similar socio-economic and cultural patterns. One of the most ancient tradition they retained is their beautiful architecture. As Hassan Fathi⁷⁷ wrote: ‘No two houses were the same, each was more beautiful than the last; each village created its own character’⁷⁸ (Fig.14).



Fig.14: Decorated entrance to a Nubian house

The Nile was the focus of life and on its banks all activities were and are concentrated. Living in scattered, extended villages separated by isolated areas, dunes and rocky hills, the Nubians continued to develop their distinctive ways of survival and growth. The construction of the dams at Aswan changed the northern area of Nubia as well as the life of its inhabitants who were obliged to live far from their homeland forever.

⁷⁷ Hassan Fathy (1900-1989) was a famous Egyptian architect who championed the use of mud-brick and traditional architecture in Egypt. He received the Aga Khan for Architecture Chairman’s Award in 1980.

⁷⁸ Hassan Fathi in: Omar El Hakim, 1999: i.v.

Kom Ombo, north of Aswan, is today home to most of the relocated Nubians from Egypt,⁷⁹ and Khasham El Qirba 300 km east from Khartoum is the new home of Nubians in the Sudan. These areas bear little similarity to Nubia with its open spaces that were so central to the psychological existence of the inhabitants. Nubian villages had unique layouts as explained below by the Egyptian architect Omar el Akim:

The homes in Nubia which made up the *nugu* extended 320 km along the Nile at irregular intervals in a staggered line more or less parallel to the river. Where the bank was steep, as in the northern area of the Kenuz district, the dwellings extended inland following the natural course of the ground, forming clustered terraces. Where the bank was relatively flat, as in the Arab and Mahas districts, the dwellings stood out in bold outlines in rows. The dwellings forming the *nugu* were clustered toward the centre, which might contain the main mosque, a communal guesthouse, a post office and a few shops.⁸⁰

Resettlement to new lands was not a solution for most Nubians. The new houses are not located near the Nile, so significant in Nubian traditions. Space for large houses that would allow the social and familiar gathering so important to the interdependent character of their culture is not available. The family network was based on sharing the same house, in which the traditional courtyard was the meeting point for family members.⁸¹ The palm trees and the water wheel, or *eskalay*, lay at the basis of the social network as well as of many marriages between members of the families sharing them. Limited economic resources led to a strong sense of cooperation and solidarity among Nubians: to underline this characteristic, they called their country *Balad al-Aman*, (Country of the Safe). The phrase, ‘strength through unity’ is a good reflection of the attitude of many Nubians intent on creating a hereditary culture of interdependence.

This chapter has briefly outlined how events developed in the area between the First and Sixth Cataracts of the Nile, commonly referred to as ‘Nubia’ by most academics and for the northern part by the communities living there today. The study of the area in the last century has improved our knowledge and awareness of the history of the people who have inhabited these lands. Although part of two different geo-political realities (Egypt and Sudan), what scientific research has brought to light, and what continues to be confirmed by new research, portrays Nubia as a country interesting in its own right rather than as an indigenous background to important and significant Egyptian antiquities.

Despite this progress in the body of scientific research, Nubian history is still beset by questions. The passage from one group to another does not often appear to have passed smoothly in the minds of modern scholars. Such questions are not confined to Egyptologists and their perspective from the hegemonic North, but also to others - as testified to by the creation of other groups, sequences or horizons generated by the current researches in the field.

Long-term debates continue. These include such questions as: Did the C Group develop from the A Group or did they come from neighboring areas? Who were the Pan Grave people? Is Kerma the place of origin for all Nubian cultures or is it only one of many phases? What was the

⁷⁹ Recently, the Egyptian government has agreed to allocate 5,320 acres, including agricultural land, to Nubians in areas adjacent to Lake Nasser. (‘Egypt Government agrees to allocate 5000 acres to displaced Nubians’, *Ahram Online*, Karim Hafez, Friday 11 Jan 2013).

⁸⁰ El Hakim, 1999: 11.

⁸¹ Although not much literature is available on the subject, this culture of interdependence can still be seen among Nubians today living in the area and also outside.

real nature of the relationship between Nubia and Egypt? Did the kings of the 25th Dynasty continue to purify the extravagant Egyptian Ramesside culture or did they want to introduce Nubian elements? Did Meroe develop from Napata or was it a spontaneous creation? Who were the Blemmyes? To what extent did Greek-Egyptian, Byzantine or Syriac elements influence the iconography of the powerful Christian kingdoms of Nubia? Are the modern Nubians heirs of their ancient predecessors? These are just some of the questions and enquiries raised by the study of Nubian culture. In a more colloquial form these questions can be simplified to the phrase, ‘revolution or evolution’? At least one thing is certain: the results of these interweaving realities is a history of the formation of an identity⁸² that has survived in the vitality and individualism of the Nubians of today. Their identity is based in this continuity and it is on this continuity that, in my opinion, scholars must orient their research rather than, as it often happens, dwelling on disconnected phases of this history. In such a context, I would like to refer to the small chapter *Surviving aspects of Nubian cultures* which concludes the catalogue *Nubia: Ancient Kingdoms of Africa*,⁸³ produced on the occasion of the opening of the Nubian Gallery at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, in May 1999. I quote this conclusion integrally in Annex I, since such conclusions are part of those rare Nubian collection guides and catalogues that add significantly to the body of knowledge concerning the context and importance of the remaining artifacts. Through tangible material culture rather than intangible theories, they synthesize how these interweaving realities, as part of a regional milieu and not of a crystallized Egypto-centric scholarly milieu, continue to act in the present time, showing the genuine link of the present with the past (Figs. 15, 16).



Fig.15: Plaited hair on mummy of Queen Nedjemet (1070-946 BC)



Fig.16: Contemporary Sudanese girl with finely braided hairstyle much like the ancient plaits

⁸² De Simone, in press.

⁸³ Haynes, 1999. An interesting book, recently published by the American University Press in Cairo, is *Ancient Nubia: African Kingdoms on the Nile* edited by Fisher, M., P. Lacovara, S. Ikram, S. D’auria, C. Higgings, 2012.