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

Issue Date: 2014-02-12

CHAPTER 2

Perceptions of Nubia and Nubians Through the Millennia

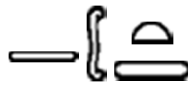
The purpose of Chapter 1 was to give a brief outline of the history of Nubia, stressing the local elements and their continuity over time, the point that offers the most solid argument in favor of the existence of a Nubian identity. This second chapter turns to various perceptions that the various interpretations of Nubian data have generated. These perceptions (sometimes contradictory) are some of the reasons related to the problematic contextualization of Nubian collections in museums.

‘Nubia’ is a word that has often confused people. This confusion is attributable to geographical, ethnographic and historical interpretations. Today, the confusion has been compounded by the fact that the name can only rarely be found on geographical maps because the area is divided between Egypt and Sudan.

The following pages examine four different ways in which the term Nubia is usually interpreted: etymologically, geographically, linguistically and historically. This is followed by a discussion of seven ‘perceptions’ of Nubia, generated by data and interpretations.

Etymological Interpretation

For the ancient Egyptians, *Nub* (*nbw*) meant ‘gold’. Nubia was very rich in precious metals, and gold was probably the principal attraction of the area for its powerful northern neighbors. However, some scholars insist that this meaning of *Nub* for Nubia is not set in stone. One reason for this uncertainty is that this toponym for ‘Gold Land’ does not appear in Pharaonic times. The word in that period referred only to the precious metal. In hieroglyphic texts, Nubia is called *Ta-Seti*, (The Land of the Bow), or simply the ‘Southern Land’.⁸⁴ Another name widely used in the ancient world is *Kush*, referring in particular to Upper Nubia (Sudan), while Lower Nubia (in Egypt) was referred to as *Wawat*. The people living in it were called *Nehesius*, by the ancient Egyptians in hieroglyphic texts. This means the burnt/bronzed (Fig. 17).



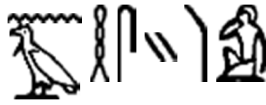
Ta-Seti (*T3-Stj*) (The Land of the Bow)



Setiu (*Stjw*) (The Land of the Bow of the Nubians)



⁸⁴ Bongrani, 1991: 10.



**Nehset / Nehsyu /
Nehsi
Nhst / Nhsyw / Nhsj
Nubians**

Fig.17: Nubia and Nubians
in hieroglyphs

The term *Noubai* is referred to for the first time by Erathostenes (c. 200 BC), quoted in Strabo's Geography,⁸⁵ and is linked to an indigenous term signifying 'slave'. Others are convinced that the word Nubia is linked to the *Noba* or *Nuba* who began moving from the regions south of Khartoum in the third century AD and settled in the territory then named Nubia.

The ancient Greeks also used another term to indicate the area, namely: *Aethiopia*, a name that had nothing to do with the modern state of Ethiopia. It is a Greek word meaning the 'Land of the Burned-Face People', and, at the time of Homer and Herodotus, it referred to all the lands to the south of Egypt and Libya.

Around 660 and 593 BC, when Greeks were employed in the Egyptian army and a mission to *Aethiopia* was organized by the Pharaoh Psammeticus II, some Greek poets used the term *Aethiopes* to indicate the night travel of the sun, from the West, the place of the *Hesperides*, to the East, the place of the *Aethiopes*. This exact localization of the land of the *Aethiopes*, probably suggests an etymological and rationalistic interpretation of the ethnic element. The ancient Greeks thought that the *Aethiopes* lived so close to the sun that they had burned faces: since the dawn is the moment at which the sun is nearest to the earth, it means that they must have lived where it rises. Today the Greek etymology has been called into question in favor of the hypothesis of a pre-Greek ethnic element, a derivation connected to a real population which at the time were extinct.⁸⁶ Greeks of the seventh to sixth centuries saw in the *Aethiopes*, the people living south of the First Cataract to Meroe, as being similar to those they recalled in their epic poem (Homer's *Iliad*). Arab geographers and historians of medieval times used the term *Bilad es-Sudan*, 'The Land of the Blacks', to define, more or less, the same geographical area.⁸⁷

Geographical Interpretation

In its traditional geographical definition Nubia is the part of the Nile Valley between the First and the Sixth Cataract where the Nile forms its six cataracts as it passes through the granite cliffs of the region. This corridor links Egypt to the sub-Saharan regions of Africa.⁸⁸ Current anthropological and archeological research suggests that this geographical definition is narrowly conceived given

⁸⁵ Strabo, XVII, 1, 2.

⁸⁶ De Romanis, 1999: 84-88.

⁸⁷ *Bilad - al- Sudan* means 'Land of Blacks'. The term is simply the derivation from the Arabic word 'Sauod' meaning 'Blacks' referring to the skin color of the inhabitants living in the region. It was, in fact, used principally by Arab travelers.

⁸⁸ Adams, 1977.

the evidence of Nubian cultures. These cultures exist over a much larger and more fluid area. Therefore, a cultural definition of Nubia must take into account the desert regions to the east and west of the Nile, as well as the areas of exchange and interaction between Nubians and nearby peoples.⁸⁹

The borders of Nubia in a longitudinal sense are interpreted in different ways and often according to the specific academic interest of the scholars involved.⁹⁰ Aswan is generally considered to be the northern border but the southern border is much more difficult to define. The travelers of nineteenth and twentieth century saw Nubia as a country inhabited by the Noba, who moved north- east from Kordofan. These people, named Kenzi, settled in a wide area stretching from Aswan to Wadi el-Sebua, occupying the land from Korosko to the Third Cataract Mahas, and from the Third Cataract to el-Debba Dongolawi (about 300 km northwest of Khartoum, Sudan). This view gives the name Nubia an ethno-linguistic meaning rather than a geographic one.

Those specialists searching for the first human presence in the north-east area of Africa tend to extend the term Nubia to the area even farther south of the confluence of the Nile with the Atbara. For Egyptologists, Nubia corresponds mainly to the area occupied by the Egyptians during the New Kingdom, reaching as far as the Fourth Cataract. The construction of the two dams at Aswan has restricted the area in longitude and in latitude even more.⁹¹

Whatever its etymology, the name Nubia, although not an official designation for a defined area, remains symbolic of its history and a source of pride for those who claim it as their heritage.

The geographical position and the character of the area have made Nubia a meeting place of cultures in the past and an isolated land in the present. In ancient times, when no planes flew over this desolate valley, it was crossed by many people. The Nubian Nile Valley was one of the easier routes for the inhabitants of the Mediterranean and Middle East civilizations to use in their efforts to penetrate into the African continent from its northern coasts. From the perspective of Mediterranean and Arabic peoples, it was the corridor that allowed them to pass from the 'known to the unknown' world. *Nubia: Corridor to Africa* is the term used by William Adams, one of the founders of the discipline of Nubiology. His publication is one of the first and still most comprehensive works produced in the field of Nubian Studies and the first of its kind to have a Nubia-centric approach.⁹² However, his standpoint has been considered restrictive by some scholars, in particular those who with their researches are demonstrating that, most likely, in ancient times the area was not just a 'corridor' limited to the Nile valley but extended into the neighboring deserts because of better climatic conditions.⁹³

The character of a meeting place and intersection of cultures has always been a main attraction for scholars:

[Nubia is a] fascinating subject for the study of acculturation and creolization phenomena, in other words for the long-range effects of the close contacts, coexistence and conflicts of cultures with different backgrounds, technical and political structures. The legacy of Nubia's geographical position as a highway for differing cultures and political powers throughout thousands of years is one of the most fascinating open air museums in the world, endowed with a wealth of impressive monuments in the shape of Pharaonic temples and fortresses, towns and settlements, Christian churches with galleries of frescoes, and

⁸⁹ Gatto, 2011: 21-29.

⁹⁰ Bongrani, 1991: 12.

⁹¹ Bongrani, 1991:13.

⁹² Adams, 1977.

⁹³ Gatto, 2011: 21-29.

tens of thousands of tombs illustrating the development of the indigenous population over the millennia and revealing how the populations came to terms with the many invaders and traders from north and south. What better reason for the scholarly and cultural interest of a whole world to become focused on this barren stretch of the Nile valley?⁹⁴

While Lower Nubia is one homogeneous geographic area, Upper Nubia consists of several well-defined areas, each with very different character. By and large it is an isolated country. The extreme climate of the region has made Nubia a poor country, not overly productive. Today, this isolation has been increased by the construction of the two Aswan dams in the northern area. The construction of these dams commenced at the beginning of the twentieth century with the First Aswan Dam, which inundated only the Egyptian area. It culminated with the High Dam, forming one of the largest artificial lakes in the world, Lake Nasser. The name honored the then Egyptian President, Gamal Abdel Nasser, who was responsible for the construction of the dam. The area in Sudan covered by the lake is called Lake Nubia. In the past decade, the area in the big S-bend of the Middle Nile, at the Fourth Cataract was inundated by a 174 km (108 miles) long lake, after the completion in 2008 of a dam built above the modern town of Merowe.

This current asset to Nubia is in danger of again being dramatically modified or, I should say destroyed, by the new damming program: hydroelectric and irrigation projects are planned at Dal, Mograt, Dagash, Sabaloqa (Sixth Cataract), Roseires (heightening of the existing dam) and Upper Atbara and Sitite. According to the Dams Implementation Unit (DIU), contracts to build dams have already been awarded for Kajbar (at the Third Cataract) and Shereiqa (at the Fifth Cataract).⁹⁵

Despite its isolation and the problems that arise from the tyranny of distance, the inhabitants love the area. Hassan Dafalla, District Commissioner in Wadi Halfa during the Salvage Campaign of the sixties, lived the particular and unique historical moment of the Nubian people: the 'Exodus'. Acquiring, as he himself says, a 'degree of intimacy which can only occur under such exceptional conditions', he observed:

Since ancient times the Nubians had clung to their narrow strip of fertile land along the banks of the Nile and perpetuated life in it. They were separated from the rest of mankind by the arid expanse of the Sahara desert, and they were content with their land and what it yielded, limited though both were. They had managed to adapt themselves to all the differing aspects of their environment, harsh or soft, fruitful or barren; and down the ages they could derive a noble meaning and high moral tradition from it. They liked the sands of their desert and its bare crags. They loved the Nile which was their sole life-giver. The remains of ancient civilizations scattered at the edges of their villages were a source of pride: they used to boast that they had deep roots, and their ancestors had contributed to building the first civilization known to man. Temples and churches were evidence of their ancient link with God. The formidable cataracts blocking the course of the river at various places were gifts of nature, and a protection against the infiltration and penetration of aliens into their country. Having no neighbors, they confined themselves to the limits of their community and land, and developed a feeling of individuality. They tended to have a good opinion of themselves.

⁹⁴ Säve-Söderbergh, 1987: 20-21.

⁹⁵ Cf. Fig 2. On February 2, 2012 the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums of Sudan has launched the appeal to the international community for Salvage Archeology and Study Campaigns in the endangered areas. On the dams in Nubia cf. also De Simone, 2008: 401-416; Leturcq, 2009: 295-328; Kleinitz, 2011: 109 -116; Hafsaas - Tsakos, 2011: 49-76.

Dafalla's comment is reflected in the fact that today those relocated Nubians are fighting to get a piece of land on the shores of Lake Nasser from the Egyptian Government to be able to return to live in their natural isolated habitat. The same can be said for those living in Wadi Halfa. Simultaneously Nubians who live in what still remains of Nubia are desperately fighting against the specter of other giant reservoirs.

Linguistic Interpretation

Linguistically, Nubia refers to the area of the people speaking the Nubian language. This would imply that, geographically speaking, today Nubia is the stretch of the Nile from Aswan through Halfa and the Mahas region and down to the end of the Dongolawi area at the Fourth Cataract (Fig. 18).

The two forms of Nubian spoken in this area are *Nobiin* in the Sukkot and Mahas area and Kenzi-Dongolawi spoken in Egyptian Nubia and in the area of Dongola at the Fourth Cataract. They are known as the Nile-Nubian linguistic group and are linguistically linked to the Old Nubian language of medieval times. Modern linguistic researchers prefer to consider Kenzi and Dongolawi separate languages.⁹⁶

How this distribution⁹⁷ should be explained is still disputed among scholars and has given rise to different theories. What is apparently the most plausible explanation, proposed by Robert Fernea, claims that the Kenzi represent emigrants from Dongola who settled near the Egyptian border at Aswan. Here they specialized in the transit trade, as the Arabic-speaking group farther south also did for the transit trade through the desert from Korosko to Wadi Hamid.⁹⁸ Another explanation for this enigmatic demographical distribution of the Nile-Nubians is that Dongolawi Nubians, historically the inhabitants of the Nubian Kingdom of Makuria, in the past could have been more powerful and dominant than those of the Nubian Kingdom of Nobatia. When Makuria invaded Nobatia (AD 701), groups of the Makurian people, known as Kenzi or Mattokki Nubians, enslaved and culturally absorbed the Nubian people.

⁹⁶ Browne, 2001; Armbruster, 1965; Asmaa M.I. Ahmed, 2004; Bechhaus-Gerst, 1989; Bechhaus-Gerst, 1996; Jakobi, 1993; Thelwall, 1982; Lajtar, Van der Vliet, 2011.

⁹⁷ Kenzi is spoken in the most northern and southern parts of the area occupied by modern Nubians, but is absent in the central part.

⁹⁸ Fernea, 1973.

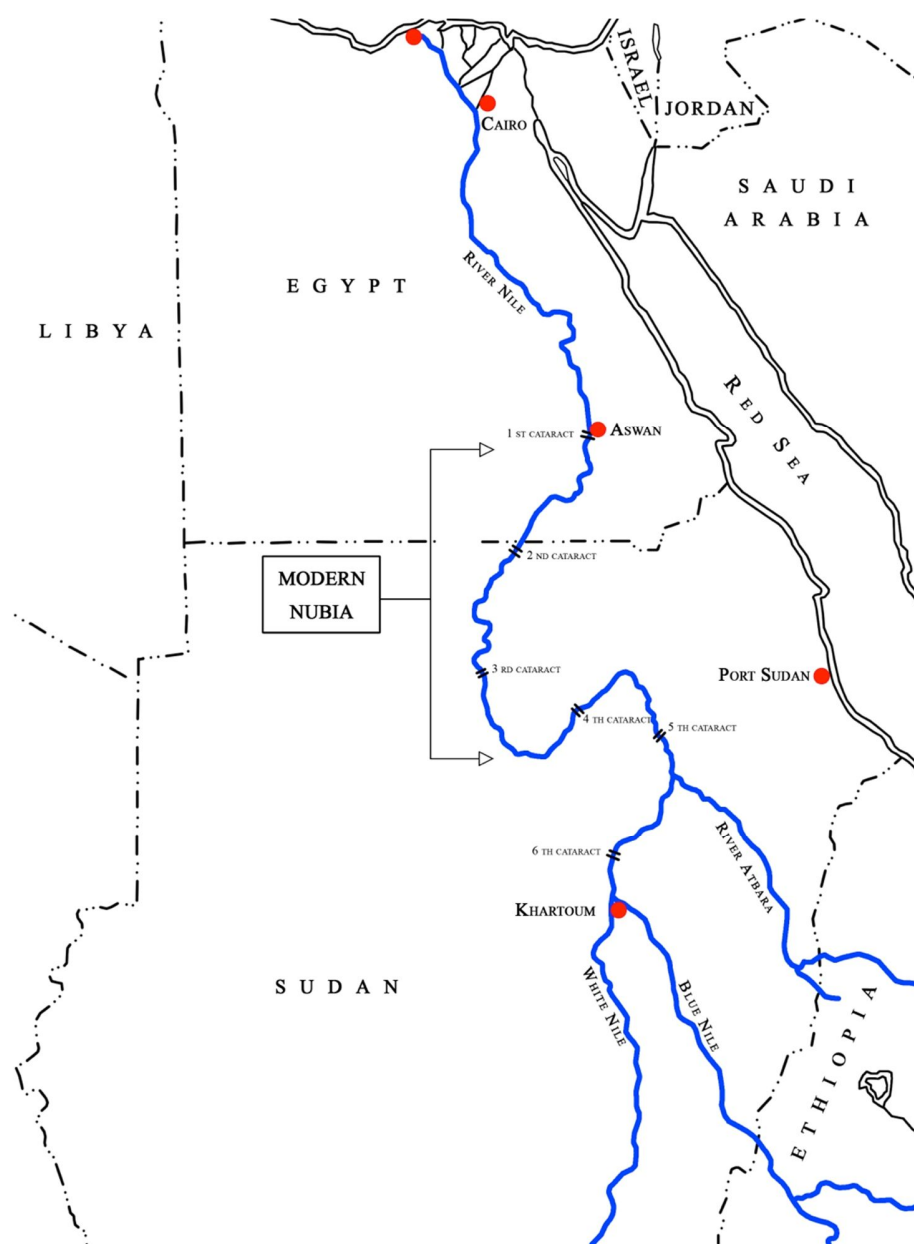


Fig. 18: Map of Modern Nubia

The Old Nubian language, used to write the texts of Christian Nubia from as early as the eighth century A.D, is considered to be the direct ancestor of the Nile-Nubian language group. It belongs to the Nilo-Saharan group, as do most of the indigenous Sudanese African languages, and it is the only indigenous African language for which the development can be traced over a millennium.⁹⁹ There were never any connections between Old Nubian and other Hamitic languages, or with ancient Egyptian and Coptic. Or, if there were any at all they are restricted only

⁹⁹ Rilly, 2007; Rilly, 2008: 2-12; Rilly, 2008: 211-225.

to loanwords. Although there is no connection between Old Nubian and the Semitic languages, its association with Meroitic is under study.¹⁰⁰

The Nile-Nubian group, with its linguistic classification described as the Nilo-Saharan phylum, shares a similar linguistic classification with many languages in both the Kordofan and the Darfur regions, among them Wali, Dair, Dilling, El-Hugeirat, Ghulfan, Kadaru, Karko, Midob and Bergid.¹⁰¹

Efforts to save the Nubian language from extinction can be primarily be credited to the Nubians themselves. The efforts of many individuals and organizations are involved in the project. The *Nubian Language Society* in Khartoum, an association of young Nubians, for example, produces booklets in the Nubian language and sponsors language training programs for the younger generations living in the villages of Northern Sudan (Fig. 19).¹⁰²



Fig.19: Cover of the booklet *Irkunila: Assarin Sorin Talay* produced by the Nubian Language Society in Khartoum

Historical Interpretation

Historically, as we have seen in Chapter 1, Nubia should be understood as the land where the Nubian people are recorded to have lived. In this sense it is very difficult to establish its limits, since there is little agreement among the sources.

It is a different picture for the information about ancient Nubian history that can be divided into written and archeological sources. The written records available from the Pharaonic period, testify to the sending of expeditions by pharaohs, mainly of an explorative, military and

¹⁰⁰ Rilly, 2007; Rilly, 2008: 2-12; Rilly, 2008: 211-225.

¹⁰¹ I wish to thank the Nubian Language Society in Khartoum for the cooperation in writing this paragraph.

¹⁰² Cf. El Hadi Hassan A. Hashim, 2012.

commercial nature. These expeditions left the marks of their passing in rock drawings, the presence of valuable precious objects given in exchange for local products that are found in tombs, temples and the remains of settlements. These documents can be royal or private, but even the latter refer to expeditions organized by the palace, expeditions that, even without specific military goals, had to be carefully organized and be supported by troops who could guarantee their safety among a scarcely known people.¹⁰³ Although these sources are very detailed in describing the Egyptian tasks in 'wretched Kush', we still do not know how far we can trust them. It is very well known that ancient Egyptians often had hidden, self-celebratory, historical realities, in particular those that did not fit into their political agenda.¹⁰⁴ The Egyptian sources are, alas, very vague about the social and administrative complexity of the Nubian people.

With the creation of the Meroitic script, the Nubians stopped using other languages, a process leading to gaps in our knowledge of this period. Meroitic script is indeed still being deciphered.

Fragmented accounts of Greek and Roman travelers and geographers have often filled these gaps, although most of them never ventured above the First Cataract and very few indeed above the Second. Therefore, much of their information is secondhand and consequently not completely reliable. In the years 449 - 430 BC, one of the first classical authors to venture to the Nile Valley was Herodotus. He gives a completely wrong geographical description of Nubia, admitting however that he never went beyond Elephantine and that all the information was given to him by the *Aethiopes*, that is, the locals. He describes Aswan as the frontier between Egypt and *Aethiopia*. He was the first author to mention Meroe. Diodorus of Sicily, who lived during the first century BC, is another classical author who probably never visited Nubia. Some parts of his encyclopedic work are reliable, as confirmed by archeological findings, others are fables or were obviously recounted to him, by unreliable informants.¹⁰⁵ Diodorus introduced a cataloging method for Central African populations, following an encyclopedic criterion used later by Pliny the Elder.¹⁰⁶ Diodorus does provide information about the course of the Nile and the number of its rocky cataracts¹⁰⁷ and accurate information about gold-mines in the area.¹⁰⁸

Amongst the Byzantine historians who wrote especially about the conversion of Nubia to Christianity and the three related kingdoms were Procopius, John of Ephesus, John of Biclarum, in the sixth century and Michael the Syrian in the twelfth century.¹⁰⁹ Most of them never actually visited the area.

The Arab geographers and historians were aware of the three Christian kingdoms of Nobadia, Makuria and Alwa,¹¹⁰ as well as of a kingdom called Al Abwab. They were as well aware of the Christian religion and the Jacobite dogma, of the existence of Greek books and of the Nubian language, not forgetting the strict morals and impressive stature of the people. Some of these authors visited the area, and gave different accounts of the Nubian towns and their society, as

¹⁰³ Bongrani, 1991:13; De Simone, 1997: 112-124.

¹⁰⁴ The most famous example of this policy occurred in Egyptian reports on the outcome of the Battle of Kadesh, fought between the forces of Ramses II and the Hittites in or around 1247 BC. The Egyptians claimed victory in what has continued to be the subject of lively scholarly debate, as there is substantial evidence that either neither side won, or it was a clear defeat of the Egyptian forces.

¹⁰⁵ Diodorus of Sicily, *Histoire Universelle*. Book I.

¹⁰⁶ Pliny (the Elder), *Natural History*, VI, 35.

¹⁰⁷ Diodorus of Sicily, *Histoire Universelle*. Book I.

¹⁰⁸ Diodorus of Sicily, *Histoire Universelle*. Book I.

¹⁰⁹ Vantini, 1975: 308-320.

¹¹⁰ Cf. Chapter 1.

well as various aspects of their activities. The most reliable of these writers were : Ibn Selim el Aswani, Toth' al-Mas'udi (10th century), Abu Salih the Armenian (13th century), Al Umari and Ibn Khaldun(14th century) and Al Maqrizi (early 15th century).¹¹¹ Nevertheless, their descriptions of Nubia gave few details. For instance, one of the best descriptions, that of the traveler and philosopher Ibn Khaldun in the fourteenth century, is quite general:

With the Nubian's conversion to Islam, the payment of the *jizya* (capital tax) ceased. Then several clans of the Juhayna Arabs spread over their country and settled in it; they assumed power and filled the land with rapine and disorder. At first the kings of Nubia tried to repulse them by force but they failed in it; so they changed their tactics and tried to win them over by offering their daughters in marriage. Thus was their kingdom disintegrated, for it passed from the sons of the Juhayna from their Nubian mothers according to the non-Arab practice of inheritance by the sister and her sons. So their kingdom fell to pieces and their country was inherited by the nomad Arabs of the Juhayna. But their rule presented none of the marks of statesmanship, because of the essential weakness of a system that is opposed to discipline and the subordination of one man to another. Consequently, they have been divided until this day, and there is no vestige of central authority in their part of the country, but they remain as nomads following the rainfall like the Bedouin.¹¹²

Only with the travelers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries did the external world once again begin to hear information about the 'Land of the Unknown'.¹¹³ For example, the travels of the Swiss John L. Burkhardt in Lower and Upper Nubia in 1813 and his published account in 1819 excited the cupidity of Mohamed Ali Pasha al-Mas'ud ibn Agha, then ruler of the Ottoman Empire, who did not hesitate to expand his holdings to the south in 1820. Just to mention a few other travelers who, along with many others, followed their own fascination with the area: the British explorers Barnard Hanbury and George Waddington,¹¹⁴ the Frenchmen Pierre Letorzec and Frédéric Cailliaud,¹¹⁵ the Bostonians George Bethune English and John Lowell, the Italian Giuseppe Ferlini, and Linant de Bellefonds and his companion Alessandro Ricci.¹¹⁶

Many of the European travelers were attached to the army of Mohamed Ali. Their writings and information paved the way for future scientific research in the area and today many museums around the world are indebted to them. Hence it can be said that while the Napoleon Expedition contributed to the birth of archeology in Egypt, Mohamed Ali's expedition contributed to the birth of archeology in Sudan.

In comparison with the accounts of its ancient history, the sources of information about modern Nubians are very modest. As Dafalla observes:

Unlike their ancient history, which has been thoroughly studied, little has been recorded in English about the social and economic aspects of the existing Nubian tribes. This, perhaps, is partly because the countless ancient Egyptian remains in the locality are more attractive to the visitors than the cultural life of the inhabitants. The famous travelers of the

¹¹¹ Vantini, 1975: 308-320.

¹¹² Ibn Khaldun, *Kitab al-'ibar*, published in *The Cambridge History of Africa*, 1977.

¹¹³ Burkhardt, 1818.

¹¹⁴ Waddington and Hanbury, 1822.

¹¹⁵ Cailliaud, 1826-1827.

¹¹⁶ English, 1823; Ferlini, 1838.

eighteenth and nineteenth centuries mentioned only random details which they came across in passing through Nubia.¹¹⁷

The intensive archeological activity conducted in the area over almost a hundred years has led to a great deal of publishing activity, of which only a relatively small part has concerned modern Nubia. Worth mentioning is the important work produced by Robert Fernea, an American anthropologist and member of the Sociology and Anthropology Department of the American University in Cairo. In 1960, during the UNESCO Salvage Campaign, he carried out a research project that focused its study on the human implications of the planned social and economic changes and development, and he concentrated on the documentation of various aspects of the lives of the people in Egyptian Nubia.¹¹⁸ He explains the motivation presented to the local authority for such research as follows:

Ample scientific and pragmatic justification existed for salvage ethnography in Old Nubia. The project proposal stressed such issues as ecological adaptation and labor migration. We offered to be of help to those responsible for planning Nubian resettlement by providing information about the characteristics of Nubian society; we became a means of communication between administrators and administered. The more general humanistic issue - that a unique human culture should be described before it radically changed or disappeared - we perhaps less successfully communicated.¹¹⁹

Another significant study was conducted by Hassan Dafalla, during his three years spent among the Nubians of Wadi Halfa (Sudanese Nubia). Dafalla not only accomplished his work of Commissioner, but also complemented it with an in-depth study of the reactions, thoughts and perceptions of the local people during the difficult period of the 'Exodus', a term he uses in his publication.¹²⁰

If most of the ancient history of Nubia has been narrated by others, its modern history has mostly been narrated by the Nubians themselves. Many of their writings are in the form of petitions, that describe the spirit and feelings of the Nubians of today who find their identity more and more endangered. One of these petitions, presented in the form of a scientific paper on the occasion of the 12th *International Conference on Nubian Studies* held at the British Museum in 2010, discusses the construction of new dams in Sudan, the displacement of people and the disorientation of identity.¹²¹

A genre of popular Nubian literature is the novel. Those who speak of 'Nubian' literature in this respect have been criticized for the use of Arabic language in the texts. The critics, primarily non-Nubians, tend to consider Nubian texts as a part of the Arabic literary tradition. Ahmed Sokarno Abdel Hafiz, a professor at the University of South Valley at Aswan, argues that

¹¹⁷ Dafalla, 1975: 68.

¹¹⁸ Fernea, 1973: xii.

¹¹⁹ Fernea, Preface to Kennedy, 1978.

¹²⁰ Dafalla, 1975. During the *Merowe Dam Salvage Archeological Project*, researchers have paid more attention to the local communities. The Humboldt University of Berlin has conducted an anthropological study 'Manasir Cultural Research Project', designed to document the cultural landscape and local material and non-material traditions of the Manasir inhabitants of the flooded area called *Dar el Manasir* (Cf. <http://www2.hu-berlin.de/aknoa/hune/daralmanasir>)

(cf. also Kleinitz C. and C.Näser, 2011, 255-280; Kleinitz C. And C. Näser, 2012).

¹²¹ Nur Ad-Din Abdel Rahman: 'A plan to rescue Nubia from destruction'. Presented to the 12th *International Conference on Nubia Studies*. London: The British Museum, 2-6 August 2010 (in press).

it is possible to classify this literature as Nubian when the criteria of definition are based on content, taking account of the setting, characters, events, the names given to the characters, and even the language used in the dialogues, all of which are part of the Nubian world.¹²² In this context, a rich and textured view of the experience of contemporary Nubia is being created. Modern and contemporary Egyptian art has also found Nubia a subject of fascination (Fig. 20). Artists such as Gazbia Sirrey, Mohamed Sheeb and many others have attempted to locate the 'Nubian' in Egyptian contexts (Figs. 21, 22). Many portrayals of Nubians and even Nubian-focused folk and popular music have caught the attention not only of the Egyptian public, but of the wider global community as well.

The issues raised in the above discussion surrounding the identity of Nubia and Nubians has only begun to scratch the surface of the multitude of meanings associated with these terms that have been generated over the millennia. Adams has identified at least six of these perceptions: the Egyptians' Nubia, the Greco-Romans' Nubia, the Egyptologists' Nubia, the Nubians' Nubia and the Afrocentrists' Nubia.¹²³ To these six perceptions, I would add another three: the Black Pharaohs' Nubia, the Sudanologists' Nubia and the non-specialists' views of Nubia. Although it is impossible to 'unite' these ideas into one cohesive whole, the following sections will highlight the past and present main trends.



Fig. 20: Small statues of Nubians in a private house in Cairo

¹²² Sokarno, 2005. This discussion is not isolated and it is related to a more general issue surrounding African literatures in European Languages, cf. M. Schipper, 1999: 150-170. A similar issue concerns the use of Berber, Arabic, French, Italian and Dutch by native African Berber authors, cf. Merolla, 2006: 71-74.

¹²³ Adams, 1994:17-22.



Fig. 21: Nubians in a painting by Mohamed Sheeb displayed in a shop in Cairo



Fig. 22: Nubian woman in a painting by Mohamed Sheeb displayed in a shop in Cairo

The Egyptians' Nubia

For a long time, the literature of foreigners in Ancient Egypt has raised many questions. From the reports of the Ancient Egyptians to the present-day media, what was written by outsiders has left only fragmented peeks into the realities of Nubian history.

Adams, writing about the Egyptian concept of Nubia, remarks on the prejudicial views found in ancient reports and refers to the Edward Said concept of the creation of 'the Other' as having been common in Egyptian views of Nubians. He writes:

It is a common tendency of all peoples to measure themselves against some 'Other'-a kind of human yardstick by which one's own superiority or inferiority can be gauged. For Ancient Egyptians, the principal yardstick was the Nubians, who represented barbarity as opposed to Egyptian civilization. The endlessly repeated epithet, 'wretched Kush', surely had the same connotation for Egyptians as had 'darkest Africa' for Europeans and Americans of the last century. Yet there was not, as far as we can tell, any racial dimension to the Egyptian prejudice. The Nubians were not inferior because they were black, but simply because they were not Egyptians. In fact the Egyptian prejudice evidently disappeared during the New Kingdom, when the Nubians did become 'Egyptians' in the sense of being culturally Egyptianized.¹²⁴

If creating an own identity in opposition to others denotes a common cultural strategy, it is important to identify the specific way it took place by analyzing its ancient construction and amazing continuity over millennia. Hieroglyphic texts, like Akhenaten's solar *Hymn to the Aten*, tell us how aware the Egyptians were of the variety of humankind, whom they considered to be the offspring of Ra, the solar deity. The hymn says:

You made the earth as you wished, you alone, all people, herds, and flocks, all upon earth that walk on legs, all on high that fly on wings. The lands of Khor and Kush, the land of Egypt, you set every man in his place, you supply their needs; everyone has his food, his lifetime is counted. Their tongues differ in speech, their characters likewise; their skins are distinct, for you distinguished the peoples.¹²⁵

The inscriptions in two tombs in the Valley of the Kings at Thebes West, belonging to the Pharaohs Sety I (Fig. 23) and Rameses III, are not restricted to depicting the diversity of the population of the Nile Valley, but also show representations of people from neighboring countries.¹²⁶ The scenes depict Egyptians, *Rmt*; Kushites (Nubians), *Nhesyw*; Libyans, *Tjhnw*; and Syro-Palestinians, *Aamw*, with a hieroglyph indicating each ethnic name written between each pair of figures. Each ethnic type is depicted with a distinctive complexion and in representative dress. The skin of the Egyptians is regularly represented as reddish brown, distinctly lighter than the black *Nhesyw* (Kushites).¹²⁷ By and large, they established a canon applicable to each of these groups, distinguished by details customary to their place of origin.¹²⁸ Beside this acknowledgment of cultural diversity, another concept that stressed Egyptian superiority was brought into play to distinguish Egyptians from others. Predating Edward Said's analysis of the West's prejudicial and

¹²⁴ Adams, 1994:17-18.

¹²⁵ Lichteim, 1973.

¹²⁶ Yurco, 1996.

¹²⁷ Hornung, 1990.

¹²⁸ Donadoni, 1990: 221-253.

superficial 'Orientalism', the Ancient Egyptians identified specific characteristics that drew a firm line between the concepts of 'us' and 'them'. The Ancient Egyptians considered that they were normal humans, and non-Egyptians were something their inferior.

However, it seems as far as the Nubians were concerned, some differences appear to have been even more exaggerated. Nubia was not Egypt, and hence considered a barbaric country like the others. Nonetheless, unlike the other conquered areas, Nubia was the 'daughter' of the god Hapy (the Nile) as was Egypt. Therefore, it had become a twin of Egypt, its *alter ego*, but in a negative sense. In Egyptian representations and texts, although both countries are characterized by the two natural elements, the Nile and the desert, Egypt is always linked to the Nile and Nubia invariably to the desert: the one fertile, the other barren and dead.

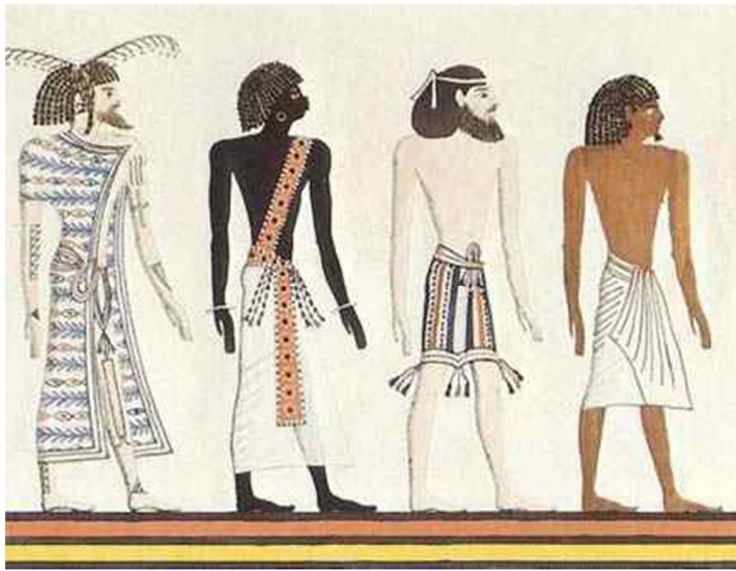


Fig. 23: Four peoples of the world: a Lybian, a Nubian, an Asiatic, and an Egyptian. An artistic rendering based on a mural from the tomb of Sety I, 1290-1279

The concept of dualism, which caused the Ancient Egyptians to conceive the world as composed of the opposition of two forces, is reflected in the political division of Ancient Egypt into two Lands. These two lands, Upper and Lower Egypt, were identified by various symbols of duality, as among them: the bee and the sedge, the White and Red Crowns, order and chaos. Nubia, in particular, was a yardstick in the sense used by Adams in his above quotation. Egyptian texts refer to 'wretched Kush', whereas the Asiatic people were only Asiatics.¹²⁹ The negative connotations of these symbols and such use of language, which went to great lengths to draw a stark, dramatic line between the two groups and areas, reveal the insecurities and the fears of instability which beset the Ancient Egyptians in their conquests of the southern lands (Fig. 24).

¹²⁹ Jackson, 2003.

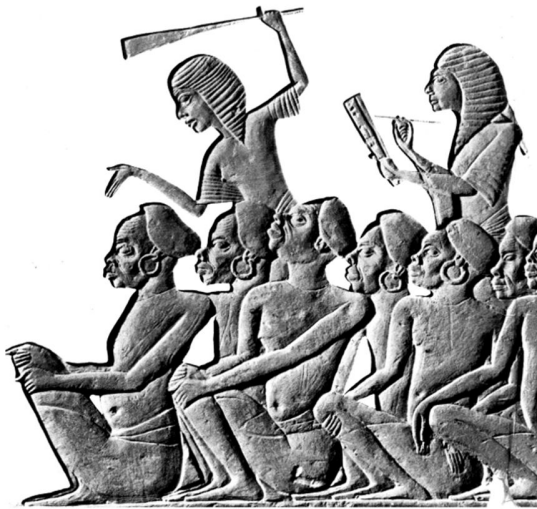


Fig. 24: Nubians depicted in the Memphite tomb of General Horemheb, about 1334 BC-18th Dynasty

There are other examples of this distinction between Egypt and Kush (Nubia). Egypt represents good and Kush represents its opposite. The anthropological opposition between Kush and Egypt contained in the ‘Myth of the Eye of the Sun’ provides yet another instance of the need of the Ancient Egyptian authorities to prove their strength and sovereignty over the land of Kush. In Ancient Egypt, where agriculture was very important, the color green became a positive symbol, represented in both vegetal greens and mineral greens. However, in the myth the author stresses the superiority of the vegetal green of the fertile Nile Valley to the mineral richness of the arid Nubian mountains. In popular mythology, the cat goddess, Tefnut, escaped to Nubia, only to return to Egypt and become again the Egyptian Hathor-Mut-Sekhmet:

[...] The desert of Kush has no products of the same value as the food that is found throughout Egypt, your country, more than mine! [...] Oh my Lady! This road which leads to Egypt is not the desert on which you had to walk for many days[...]¹³⁰

This geographical element was essential to maintaining the status of being an *Egyptian*. The story of *Sinuhe* who escaped, for reasons unclear, from Egypt when the ruler changed, tells how the hero lived among the Asiatics for a long period, until he felt the need to return to Egypt. He contacted the Egyptian king who welcomed his return: ‘You should not die in a foreign land. Take thought for your dead body and return.’¹³¹ When *Sinuhe* arrived in Egypt, he at first he seemed like an Asiatic to royal family and he says:

A load was given to the desert, and clothes to the sand-dwellers [...] I passed the night on a bed. I gave the sand to those who live on it and wood oil to those who rub themselves with it.¹³²

¹³⁰ Bresciani, 1994: 69-71.

¹³¹ Simpson, 1972: 68.

¹³² Simpson, 1972: 72.

And he became Egyptian again.

When the Egyptian pharaohs occupied Nubia, the geographical element that identified the land as 'alien' for Egyptian burials lost its relevance. Nubia, the 'Other', was a part of Egypt, and those who lived there, remained Egyptian and were not considered to inhabit a 'foreign' land. This is attested to by the large numbers of Egyptians lying in the cemeteries of the area, who do not appear to have lost their right to be Egyptians.

The Black Pharaohs' Nubia

The view of the Egyptians, particularly that of the pharaohs, reflected in the official character of the documents concerned illustrates the institutionalization of an inherent racism. Specifically, these documents reveal a form of 'racism' directed against those identified as Nubian and not as Egyptian, regardless of whether or not they lived in Nubia. Such a view had its roots in a dualistic ideology found at the basis of the ancient Egyptian self-construction.

The situation became more complicated when, in the 25th Dynasty, the pharaohs were no longer Egyptians but Nubians. What had been the 'black twin' had become essential and complementary to the other twin. The pharaohs of this dynasty variously called Egyptian, Nubian, or Ethiopic, lived in Egypt but their bodies were buried with all the honor due to a king in their homeland, Nubia, according to funerary customs which became more and more Egyptian. Some iconographic elements of these southern kings are Egyptian, some others are Nubian. The physical traits of the pharaohs in their representations vary according to their provenance. Art works produced in Egypt gradually became somewhat different from those produced in Kush, that are again different from those originating in the Kushite province. The kings' names are strictly Nubian. This case shows how Egypt and Nubia complemented each other (Fig. 25).

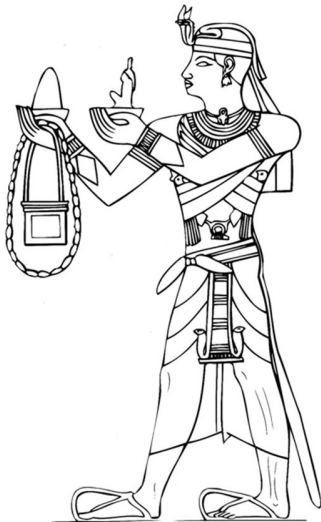


Fig. 25: King Taharqa - from the hypostyle hall of temple K at Kawa

The Greco-Romans' Nubia

At the opposite extreme from the Egyptian perspective was the admiring and romanticizing tendency of Greek and Roman writers, beginning already with Homer for whom 'Aethiopians' were the most righteous of men and beloved of the gods. A similar admiration is reflected in the romanticized descriptions of Meroe by Herodotus and Strabo, and in the popular 'Aethiopian' romances of the classical period. Here we can recognize another age-old propensity of human thought: the idea of a simpler and purer world, unpolluted by the complexities and failings of their present times. The 'other' imagined people become a yardstick by which we measure not our superiority but our fall from a condition of original purity. At an earlier age we find this idea expressed in the Garden of Eden myth and its numerous variants; at a later age it lives on in the 'noble savage' so dear to the imagination of Rousseau and other Enlightenment thinkers. The Graeco-Roman vision of Nubian life, no less than the Egyptian, arose out of ideological need of the viewer rather than from an attempt to understand its reality.¹³³

As stressed in Adams' earlier quotation, Greek and Roman authors seem to have created a mythic vision of *Aethiopia*. For the ancient Greeks, *Aethiopian* meant literally 'burnt-faced persons'. However, the Greeks of the seventh to sixth centuries saw in the *Aethiopes*, the people living south to the First Cataract as far as Meroe, heroic characteristics similar to those recalled in Homer's *Iliad*.¹³⁴

From the reign of Ptolemy II, writings on *Aethiopia* become available, with travelers in the area recording their observations. However, this picture provides only fragments of information, since most of the texts have unfortunately been lost. The Greco-Romans were the first Europeans to record the physical traits of people different from themselves. In their eyes, the *Aethiopes* were 'the yardstick by which they measured the color of people darker than themselves.'¹³⁵

The sources unequivocally show that they made a distinction between dark and less dark. Aristotle is known to have reported that *Aethiopes* were the darkest in the world.¹³⁶

Given modern and contemporary developments of racism, it is important to underline that in the Greco-Roman world a black skin color was not considered to be an element of inferiority. On the contrary, *Aethiopia* was regarded as an independent state of great military, political and cultural importance.¹³⁷

In classical science, philosophy, and religion, color was never the basis of a theory proclaiming the inferiority of blacks. When the Alexandrian theologian Origen declared that all whom God created He created equal and alike, whether Greek, Hebrew, Ethiopian, Scythian or Taurian, this declaration harked back to the unbiased attitude of the classical world toward Ethiopians.¹³⁸

On the other hand, the non-racist Greco-Roman views on skin color do highlight that the situation of Nubia during this period was different from that that had existed during the Pharaonic period. Nubia, in the Greco-Roman view, was no longer 'wretched Kush' and its situation benefited from the conditions that prevailed under the Hellenistic *oecumene* and the *Pax Romana*.

¹³³ Adams, 1994:19.

¹³⁴ De Romanis, 1999 : 84-87.

¹³⁵ Snowden, 1996: 106-108.

¹³⁶ Aristotele, *Problemata* 66: 898b.

¹³⁷ Snowden, 1970; Snowden, 1983.

¹³⁸ Origen, *De Principiis* 2, 9.5-6.

As seen in Chapter 1, the center of Nubian culture moved from Napata to Meroe farther south around 270 BC. Many innovations and developments occurred in the area and were admired by foreigners. For the first time Nubians expressed themselves in a local language, Meroitic, probably inspired by their knowledge of alphabetical writings, including Greek.¹³⁹

The respect of Greeks and Romans is also expressed, perhaps to an even higher degree, in the honor they had for the local religion. Diodorus informed us that the Meroites had instituted ‘the cult of the gods, festivals, solemn assemblies, sacrifices; in short, all the practices by which we honor the gods’.¹⁴⁰ Initially this respect was probably cultivated as a political instrument to obtain the sympathy and consensus of the local people, later it became a spiritual and ideal one.

Texts reveal that Egyptian religion was more advanced in pure theological speculation than that of the Greco-Romans who were fascinated by the Egyptian religious world. Consequently, Greco-Roman respect extended also to the south when Napata became the second house of the Egyptian god Amon.¹⁴¹ Many Egyptian deities were worshipped in the Greco-Roman world. Above all the cult of Isis left its imprint throughout the Roman world. During the Roman occupation, Egyptian temples were not commandeered in attempts to supplant the local religions, as happened in other countries, but continued to be active and vital parts of community life. Roman emperors were depicted in these temples as pharaohs worshiping local gods, examples of which are to be found in all temples of Classical period built in the Nile Valley from Egypt to Nubia.

These factors led to the formation of what today might be described as a political ‘condominium’ of Ptolemaic-Meroitic elements in a region behind the First Cataract where temples to Egyptian and Nubian gods were built and shared by both the Meroitic and Ptolemaic communities.

For their part, local Nubian kings were fascinated by Greek education and philosophy. Meroitic artists created works that clearly demonstrate external influences, including Egyptian and Hellenistic, but that simultaneously exhibit local elements that underline that the influence went far beyond copying. These works combined these Egyptian and Hellenistic elements with local themes of African/Nubian inspiration.¹⁴²

Meroe also excited the admiration of the Roman military world, when, in a tentative bid to occupy Nubia, they found themselves faced not a rude barbarian but an energetic queen. She astonished these erudite westerners when she did not hesitate to deface a statue of Emperor Augustus Caesar, taking the head back to Nubia as a prize and burying it in the doorway as a final act of disrespect (Fig. 26).

¹³⁹ Griffith, 1913.

¹⁴⁰ Diodorus of Sicily, *Histoire Universelle*, Book I.

¹⁴¹ Eide, Hagg, Pierce and Torok, 1994; Torok, 2002; Torok, 2008.

¹⁴² Wenig, 1970: 152; Eide, Hagg, Pierce and Torok, 1994; Torok, 2002; Torok, 2008; Edwards, 2004.



Fig. 26: The Candax- Queen of Meroe

This brief overview outlines how the ‘wretched Kush’ of the Egyptians developed into the fabled Meroe of the Greco-Romans. Visiting the archeological sites of Napata, Meroe and others in the area today, in particular during one of their magical sunsets, it is not difficult to image the splendor of this past.

The Egyptologists’ Nubia

Archeological explanations are no less shaped by archeologists’ assumptions than by the data they investigate.¹⁴³ The assumptions that have molded archeological interpretations of material evidence for Nubian history have been no less affected by the historical and social realities of the times in which the archeologists lived. Above all, these assumptions were complicated by colonial attitudes and activities in which the first researchers, most of them with an Egyptological background, operated.

The sheer number of the Egyptian monuments built in Nubia, that vary in their relative importance to those who researched them, offers an explanation of why, from the very beginning, Egyptologists have been so involved in this area. The volume of finds also explains why, for such a long time, the study of Nubia has been considered merely as an ‘appendix’ to Egyptology.

The work of the first Egyptologists, in both Egypt and Nubia, was fully immersed in the colonial period and inevitably absorbed its philosophy:

¹⁴³ Childe, 1939: 10-26.

[...] only light-skinned peoples could bring civilization to Africa and without their continued presence civilization would decline. If they compromised their racial purity, cultural deterioration was inevitable.¹⁴⁴

In this sense, Egypt posed a special problem. Recognized as one of the great civilizations of the ancient world, it was located on the African continent. The only solution was, therefore, to virtually detach it from the rest of Africa. As Leclant comments:

Such was the magnificence of pharaonic Egypt throughout the thirty-one dynasties of its pharaohs from the mythical king Menes (c. 3000 BC) to the Ptolemies (304-30 BC) and then the Roman Emperors (30 BC-395 A.D.) that for the longest time modern historians studied Egypt by itself. They did not pay attention to the fact that the Nile is a great African river and that in numerous details Egyptian civilization still bore many marks of its African origin.¹⁴⁵

Even the first specialists who to do scholarly work in Sudan with a real interest in the area had still not yet rid themselves of the aura of colonialism in which the superiority of Egypt over the Nubian culture pervaded the academic world. The publication of A. J. Arkell's *A History of the Sudan* in 1951¹⁴⁶ marked an important date in local historiography. It was the first book to attempt a summary of what was known about the early history of the Sudan in a form suitable for secondary schoolboys or first year undergraduates at Khartoum University. It has to be said that Arkell does not appear very sympathetic to the changes in the canons of art which occurred in Kush, and their gradual abandonment of Classic Egyptian art and language. He was inclined to dismiss all modifications as 'barbarization' rather than attempts to create a more indigenous art.¹⁴⁷

The massive presence in the area of such scholars greatly influenced the way in which it was interpreted. Increasingly, recognition that interpretations of the Nubian culture by Egyptologists lie at the basis of the prejudices that have accompanied Nubia since its culture became a serious field of study is now finally substantially revising the traditional perspectives and interpretations of Nubian history, its role and relationship to Egypt and its widespread impact on indigenous cultures. Although at present the attitude of the Egyptologists is changing, Adams observes:

While Egyptologist today are becoming more appreciative of the individuality of Nubia civilization than they once were, the tendency to regard Nubia still as 'their' territory seems to be as strong as ever.¹⁴⁸

Unfortunately, the area of Egyptian Nubia now immersed beneath the waters of Lake Nasser is no longer available for archeological investigation. The upshot is that research has been intensified in those areas of Nubia now found in what is considered to be modern Northern Sudan. The attitude of Egyptologists in the past, still not shed by some of them today, has subsequently produced the rise of a new generation of scholars who define themselves as scholars of 'Sudanology.' Their

¹⁴⁴ Trigger, 1994: 323-345.

¹⁴⁵ Leclant, 1997: 73-88.

¹⁴⁶ Arkell, 1961: 147, 176-177.

¹⁴⁷ Haycock, 2006: 58-80.

¹⁴⁸ Adams, 1994: 17-22.

approach to the country is largely from an Afro-centric rather than from an Egyptian or Middle-Eastern perspective.

The Nubiologists' Nubia

The International Campaign to Save the Monuments of Nubia, launched by UNESCO in 1960, at the request of Egypt and Sudan, represented the first large-scale cultural heritage salvation initiatives in the history of mankind. The Campaign won Nubia a prominent place in books, magazines and memoirs that told this story of an emerging conflict between culture and human development. The participation of almost fifty countries demonstrated that the conservation of the world's common heritage concerned all countries. Although this large work represented the last chapter in the history *in loco* of the people who had lived in the area for millennia, it is a bitter irony that it also allowed the entry of the history of Nubia into the Great Universal History (Fig. 27).

The involvement of a new generation of scholars contributed largely to this achievement. Coming from every corner of the world and free of the prejudices that in the past had massively conditioned interpretations of the history of the area, they can be considered the founders of 'Nubiology' as an independent scientific discipline.

It is no accident that most of them are not Egyptologists but anthropologists or archeologists without a specific interest in Egypt. Today Nubiology is a discipline that is internationally well recognized. At regular intervals, scholarly symposia are being organized on a global level. In these gatherings, Nubia is treated as an independent cultural entity and not as an appendix to Egyptology. Relations with and influences from neighboring countries, in particular Egypt, are treated as contributions to this culture and not necessarily considered as the main sources of its formation. In the framework of Nubiology, scholars can also devote themselves to specific branches such as Meroitic studies.

The International Society for Nubian Study, was formed in 1972, at the time of the first International Conference on Nubia held in Warsaw.¹⁴⁹ The interest of the Polish founders of the Society was primarily the study of Christian Nubia, a field in which they were the leading specialists. Almost immediately, the group embraced all branches and periods of Nubian history and archeology. The earliest members of the Society were chiefly the archeologists who were involved in the forty-eight international teams that had collaborated throughout the 1960s in the massive UNESCO Salvage Campaign. Their mission had been to rescue the monuments and to interpret the archeological record of Egyptian and Sudanese Nubia before the area was flooded forever by the newly constructed Aswan Dam. The Society, which is still very active, ensures the continuity of the organization of regular meetings of this scholarly community as well as the promotion of the new knowledge of Nubia ancient past.

¹⁴⁹ Michalowski, 1975.

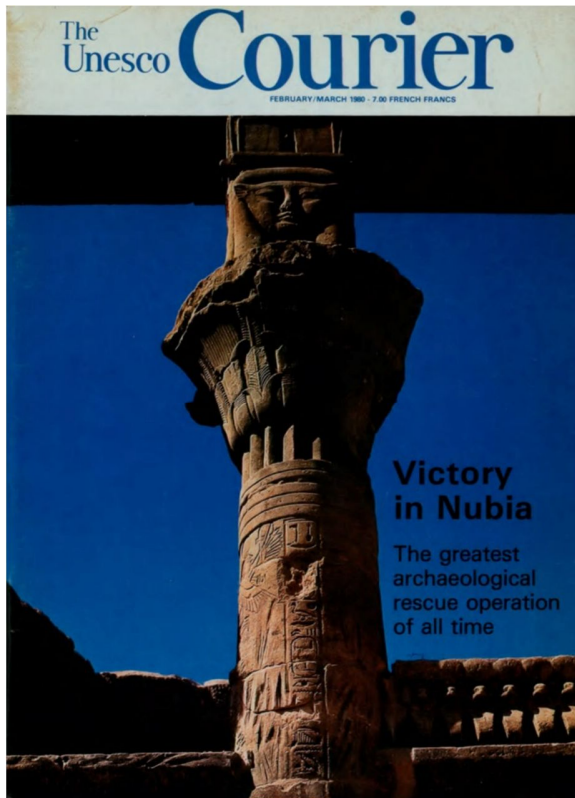


Fig. 27: Front- Cover of the UNESCO Courier February-March 1980

The Sudanologists' Nubia

The main perceptions of Nubia that govern the activity of modern scholars currently working in Sudan can be summarized as follows: Nubian territory, as interpreted from the historical records, spread from the First to the Sixth Cataracts for a specific and finite period of time. Such interpretations contract and expand the time span and the geographical extension of the millenarian history treated in Chapter 1. As can be seen from the previous discussions, they are just that, interpretations and, therefore, malleable, making consistent referencing problematic.

The construction of the High Dam at Aswan has hindered archeological research in Lower Nubia, and Upper Nubia is threatened. Therefore, Sudanology has been conditioned specifically by these modern circumstances. Nubiologists include anthropologists studying the Nubian people over time and space, in Egypt and Sudan. Nubiologists can also be museologists and are therefore blessed with being able to research all materials identified as Nubian, whereas archeologists who do fieldwork in Nubia can only work in the Sudan.

The *International Conference on Nubian Studies*, held every four years, involves scholars from around the world. 'Nubian' is still the designated area of concern but in more recent conferences the content might increasingly be better characterized as *The International Conferences on 'Sudanese' Studies*. Topics discussed are more frequently viewed by participants as appropriately 'Sudanese' in character. To this more academic aspect it is necessary to add a political one. The Sudanese Government tends to promote the archeology of Sudan as Sudanese archeology only, devoid of other appellations. Obviously, such a policy strongly influences new

museum displays and temporary exhibitions. However, if the current damming program announced by the Sudanese Government is implemented, I doubt that there will be a future for the new-born branch of 'Sudanology'.

The Nubians' Nubia

If the perception of Nubia in the past has been a complex issue, the situation is even more so when we look at the situation today. Contemporary Nubia does not exactly match its ancient configuration. As a territory, traditionally Ancient Nubia extended from the First to the Sixth Cataract. Present-day Nubia goes from the First to the Fourth, although the people at the Fourth Cataract are no longer perceived as being Nubians. Living between two centers of power, Egypt and Sudan, the perception that Nubians have of themselves is obviously conditioned by this geographical position. Hassan Dafalla¹⁵⁰ realized that there were great differences between the people of his Sudan and the people living in the borderline area of Wadi Halfa. Written from the perspective of a Sudanese official seeking to harmonize national internal differences, Dafalla's text indicates that Nubians from Wadi Halfa had much more in common with Egypt than with 'their' country Sudan. Furthermore, their self-perception reproduced a series of Egyptian stereotypes of the southern inhabitants (negroid, savage). The impaired power relationship between Wadi Halfa and the central government is hinted at the end of the quote, when they are said to encounter 'proud and respectable' Sudanese, that is, the officials who lead them to abandon their lands and to 'relocate' in an arid countryside far away from the Nile:

Until recently the common Nubian's knowledge of the Sudan in general was very scanty. When I first came to Wadi Halfa I was surprised to find that the Nubians were calling us Sudanese, and they talk about the railway express coming from Khartoum as 'the Sudan train'. The overwhelming majority of them had not seen the Sudan at all and they thought that rest of the country contained only negroid, savage inferior people. This should not be taken to mean that they considered themselves Egyptians, although a very big portion of them had seen Cairo many times, and had a better knowledge of Egypt than of their mother country. This was, first, because the city lights of Cairo were far more attracting and inviting for a holiday than Khartoum; secondly, and more important, the presence of their relatives working in Cairo would make their stay there easier; and thirdly, life was cheaper in Egypt than in the Sudan. In the meantime their contact with the Egyptians affected manners. They speak Arabic with a slight Egyptian accent and their greetings are full of the courteous verbosity for which the Egyptian are famous. Their rich men and notables wear *saidi jibbas*, and in their houses coffee is served in the Turkish *kanaka*, as the traditional *jabana* pot is unknown to them. Their definition of direction is typically Egyptian: they call the north Bahari and south gabli; and they are the only community in the Sudan who are in the habit of smoking the hookah, *shisha*. It was only when the question of their resettlement arose and we sent deputations from Nubia to visit the proposed resettlement areas, that they started to realize that their mother Sudan contained equally proud and respectable people and that its virgin land was full of good possibilities.¹⁵¹

Although land for relocation was offered to Nubians by the governments of both Egypt and Sudan, unquestionably the construction of the two dams in Aswan dealt a fatal blow to the continuation of

¹⁵⁰ Cf. Chapter 1.

¹⁵¹ Dafalla, 1975 :66.

a normal life for the Nubians living in the northern part of the area. The Kenzi and part of the Fedija lost their own homeland and had to move to alien tracts - in Egypt to the Kom Ombo region and in the Sudan to Khasma el-Girba in the Kassala region - far from the Nile Valley and had to adjust to a strange environments and a different way of life. Here they have developed a new sense of ethnic self-awareness as a result of the resettlement. Also those whose migration was not strictly linked to the resettlement but to job opportunities in the larger cities of Egypt or Sudan have developed a sense of ethnic self-awareness after losing their link to their native villages. Their traditions are kept, in particular in large metropolises such as Cairo and Khartoum, by the creation of clubs or *gama'iyya*.¹⁵² As Fernea says:

The Nubians 'gama'iyya', society, or social club, was the urban institution that, more than any other, played a key role in the Nubians struggle for a place in the city and in their upward mobility in the labor market. It was the *gama'iyya* that helped the migrants cope with the new problems of the city life and assisted them in the task of maintaining close contact with their rural communities [...] It was a meeting place where they could sit together and speak in their own language, about their own affair [...] The clubs were and still are also centers of communication and education.¹⁵³

Today there are differences between the 'resettled' Nubians and those who are still living in their own homeland. As for the latter, the Mahas and Sukkot groups which live in the area of the Third Cataract, although the barren and hostile cliffs of the Batn el Hagar have always represented a natural obstacle, share with the Fedija a language, domestic architectural styles and other cultural elements. They are proud to retain a definite sense of their special identity and history. Somehow, they represent the last refuge of a distinctly Nubian culture and tradition. In contrast, many of the Dongolawi living farther south, at the Fourth Cataract, no longer consider themselves to be Nubians and are much more involved in the context of the modern concept of Sudan.

In conclusion, in the modern area, the name Nubia has an ethno-linguistic rather than a geographical meaning, although the latter still continues to represent an important component of Nubian identity (Fig. 28).



Fig. 28: Nubians performing a Nubian traditional dance at Cairo Opera House

¹⁵² Geiser, 1989.

¹⁵³ Fernea, 1973: xii.

The Afrocentrists' Nubia

In the recent past, there has arisen a school of African and African American scholars who are bent on constructing an avowedly racist version of African history, in which all major cultural achievements on the continent are attributed to peoples who can be identified as 'black'. This development is of course a reaction against the unfavorable interpretations of European and American historians; an attempt to combat white racism with black racism. In the view of the black nationalists, the peoples of Sub-Saharan Africa were the originators of most of the institutions of higher civilization, which were subsequently transmitted to other, non-black populations in Europe and Asia. Since the Nubians are the first historically recognizable black African people, it is not surprising that Nubia plays a key symbolic role in the Afrocentric version of history: Umm al-Dunya ('Mother of the World'). The Nubians thus take the familiar mythological role of culture-giving heroes. In support of this view, the works of Herodotus and even Homer are recited as historically authoritative, while ancient Egyptian texts are conveniently ignored.¹⁵⁴

Adams's text is somehow critical of the work of Cheikh Anta Diop, the 'father' of Afrocentrism. However, to understand the birth of the Afrocentrist idea of Nubia we need to contextualize his work. Without discussing the merits of Afrocentrism, I think that the problem of Nubia 'biases' is rather linked to academic issues. The historiographical interpretations had their beginnings in an Egyptology that totally assimilated the study of Nubia, relegating the concept and field of Nubiology to being a sub-discipline or completely obsolete. As Egyptology became more refined and better documented, controversies arose that identified those scholars who viewed Egyptian history as including all events, artifacts and socio-cultural and political institutions related to Nubia. They found themselves facing a growing group of other scholars who were becoming more specialized in the particular histories of Nubia. As a result of these dedicated scholars, Nubiology is now a defined and respected independent field of study.

Out of these concerns and developments, coupled with further refinements in the histories of these areas as well as the impact of global issues related to modern Sudan, the field of Sudanology has emerged to cover the area of ancient Nubia situated in the geographical location of modern Sudan. In academic research, Sudanology has found itself in conflict with those still focused on a more traditional and generalized view of Egyptology that subsumes both Nubiology and Sudanology under its mandate. These controversial and somewhat politically motivated developments gained a new momentum when following the Salvage Campaign and the disappearance of Egyptian Nubia, research moved to the Sudan.

Afrocentrism became caught up in the tentative new studies by African scholars, of which Cheikh Anta Diop is the promoter. These studies use Egypt (and in particular Nubia where faces are 'clearly' black) to show that Africa is the continent containing some of the most ancient and illustrious cultures of the world.

Cheikh Anta Diop was the leading Senegalese scientist on the subject of the origins of the human race and pre-colonial African culture. His background covers several disciplines including History, Egyptology, Physics, Linguistics, Anthropology, Economics and Sociology, all of which he combined in his efforts to combat racist theories. He strongly opposed those who developed the idea of a separate evolution of various types of humankind, thereby denying the African origin of *homo sapiens*. He also tried to prove by any means he could find the validity of a theory which

¹⁵⁴ Adams, 1994: 17-22.

claims Ancient Egyptians were black.¹⁵⁵ He was convinced that as European culture had been built on the legacies of Ancient Greco-Roman culture, Africans had likewise built their own on that of Egypt. Therefore, he focused on racial characteristics, particularly skin color, allowing him to outline the ethnic affiliations of the Ancient Egyptians through microscopic analysis in the laboratory.¹⁵⁶

Even though the racial theories of Anta Diop were supported by some and rejected by others,¹⁵⁷ he surely succeeded in establishing the foundations of American Afrocentric Nubiology and Egyptology. This area is more than a scholarly field, it is also a political and educational movement. As such, it is advocated in popular books, often with humorous content, textbooks, and even educational posters sponsored by major breweries. Apparently, thus far, it has enjoyed considerable success in its educational aims.

In recent years, the results of these efforts have become increasingly part of the international *milieu* of Egyptological and Nubiological studies.¹⁵⁸ The Museum of Fine Arts in Boston holds one of the most important collections belonging to the 25th Dynasty of the 'Black Pharaohs'. Indeed this museum that has become one of the most significant for Afro-American scholars. It is no accident that the Museum and Center for Afro-American Artists in Roxbury has a semi-permanent loan of objects from the royal pyramids of Nuri and a cast of the tomb of the Kushite King Aspelta, including his 12-ton sarcophagus, still in storage at the Museum of Fine Arts. Ronald W. Bailey, an African-American professor from the Northeastern University of Boston, admits in his introduction to the *Proceedings of the Ninth International Conference for Nubian Studies* (held in Boston in 1998) that:

Academic opportunities were given to the Afro-American scholars only recently. This missing of opportunity has produced in the past the production, by such scholars, of writing on Nubia greatly exaggerated or misunderstood its significance.¹⁵⁹

The foreword and afterword of the catalogue *Nubia: Ancient Kingdoms of Africa* are significant.¹⁶⁰ Rita Freed, curator of the Department of Egyptian and Ancient Near Eastern Art begins the foreword clearly stressing the African dimension of Nubian culture:

¹⁵⁵ Diop supported his arguments with references to such Classical authors as Herodotus and Strabo. In particular he used the theory of Herodotus according which the Colchian (Georgian) people were related to the Egyptians and that they were 'black, with curly hair' (Herodotus, *History*, Book II.). He interpreted anthropological data (such as the role of matrilineality to conclude that Egyptian culture was a Black African culture. Linguistically he believed that the Wolof language of contemporary West Africa is related to Ancient Egyptian (Diop 1977; Diop 1978; Diop 1981: 86-110. Diop 1991; Moitt 1989).

¹⁵⁶ He tried to determine the melanin content of the Egyptian mummies. This method was criticized as the test was considered inappropriate for application to ancient Egyptian mummies, as a consequence of the effects of embalming and deterioration over time.

¹⁵⁷ Anthropologists and DNA specialists in general confirm the genetic linkages of Nile Valley peoples with other African groups, including some in East Africa, the Sahara and the Sudan, supporting the criticism made by Diop of the arbitrary classifications and splitting up of African people. However, they do not share other aspects of Diop's work, such as his ideas of a worldwide black phenotype (Keita, 1981).

¹⁵⁸ Beside the most famous works of Cheikh Anta Diop, Necia Desiree Harkless' *Nubian Pharaohs and Meroitic Kings: The Kingdom of Kush* (2006) gives sharp insight into the feelings of Afro-American scholars on the issue.

¹⁵⁹ Bailey, Preface to *Nubian Studies 1998*, (ed. Kendall, T. 2004).

¹⁶⁰ Haynes, 1992.

With the opening of the Nubia gallery at the Museum of Fine Arts of Boston, in May 1992, unique and wonderful ancient African cultures will be available to the public for the first time in this country in a permanent and comprehensive installation. Realizing the significance of Nubia, Boston City Councilor David Scondras pointed to the need for an introductory guide to these cultures and offered to assist in its publication.¹⁶¹

The Afterword of the catalogue to the exhibition, *Nubia: A Black Legacy* by Edmund Barry Gaither (director and curator of the Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists, Roxbury) also provides insight into the development in this area. The catalogue for one of the most important museums in the world makes the Afterword valuable not so much because of its content, that is typical of most papers produced by Afrocentrists, but because of its presence in the publication emphasizing the importance of the Afrocentrist theories:

Due to slavery and its aftermath in the Americas, African history has not been fully or fairly presented. As a result, African Americans and many others throughout the 'New World' feel that Africa's contributions to history and culture have been devaluated, misrepresented, or denied. Examining Nubia will, therefore, contribute to an overdue reassessment of Ancient Africa [...] For Africans and their descendants throughout the Americas, the civilization of Ancient Nubia is a symbolical legacy. They consider Nubia part of their own, broad heritage and view Africa as the source of their own, as well as many other diverse cultures that have had an impact globally [...] Symbols from ancient Egypt were embraced by popular culture. Pyramids, images of pharaohs or their queens, and other similar designs proliferated. The most widespread was the Egyptian ankh, which appeared on necklaces and jewelry. Lectures and numerous other presentations re-interpreting the history of ancient Africa assumed increased importance and popularity. Much of the discussion of ancient Egypt focused on the physical traits of early Egyptians. Frequently these discussions did not distinguish between Egyptians and Nubians. In both cases, figurative works with facial features, hair textures, and style associated with black people often occur. African-Americans could be aspects of themselves in ancient Nubian Egyptian art. Over the last three decades, important new perspectives on ancient Africa have emerged. These perspectives assert that Egyptian civilization was indebted to Africa to the south, including Nubia, for some its formative ideas and that Egyptian civilization provided much of the foundation of Greco-Roman civilization. Proceeding from this approach, Africa became not just the home of the earliest humans, but also the birthplace of civilization. Inspired by an increased appreciation of early African heritage, many African-Americans adopted or gave to their children names such as Nefertiti or Candace. Others probed ancient texts, including *The Book of the Dead*, seeking to gain greater personal knowledge of Egypt and Kush. Greater knowledge of Nubia will enhance our understanding of black heritage while assisting in the restoration of Africa to her place in world cultural history. Additionally, it will inspire and challenge young people of African descent everywhere.¹⁶²

The merits of Afrocentrism related to Black or White Racism is not the topic of my study. None the less, in the context of this work it is important to stress that Afrocentrism does not want to create a new paradigm of Egypt or Nubia on the basis of a self-constructed Afrocentric view. Afrocentrism reminds - perhaps in an exaggerated, but possibly understandable way - what the reality is: that Egypt and Nubia are both part of the African continent and that both are among the

¹⁶¹ Freed in Haynes, 1992: Foreword.

¹⁶² Gaither, 1992: 58-59.

most ancient cultures in the world. That Egypt, as an African country, was directly involved in the cultural dynamics of its continent has been broadly accepted. The many essays published in a volume edited by David O'Connor and Andrew Reid in 2003,¹⁶³ and those in the volume *Egypt in its African Context* edited by Karen Exell in 2011,¹⁶⁴ have enriched the debate and increased knowledge of the issue over the course of the last decade. Today, support for the Egypt-Africa connection is coming from different fields of research, mainly archeological, linguistic and genetic, but to what extent and in what way Egypt interacted with the African world still remains to be clarified. What the archeological work is bringing to light is the irrelevance of the race-based theory, as cultural identities do not necessarily match or relate to race.¹⁶⁵ As scientific research is gradually proving, Nubia strongly influenced the Egyptian culture at its formative stage during the fifth and fourth millennia BC. The nomadic pastoral way of life, first developed in Nubia, was adopted by most northern African cultures. This pastoral background in this geographical, linguistic, ethnic area is what links Egypt to Africa.¹⁶⁶

In conclusion, as we have seen, ancient people, modern different disciplinary trends, and Nubians themselves have perceived the area we call Nubia and the people who lived in it in different ways, and this has resulted in the creation of different paradigms. All these different paradigms lead to two realities: that of an 'Ancient Nubia' rich in history and archeological remains that deserves, if it is to be better understood and not belittled, to be approached in all its individuality; and that of a 'Modern Nubia', territorially restricted but inhabited by people who consider themselves the heirs and descendants of this history. It is clear that the two realities must be analytically distinguished, as everything else that pertains to the past and the present should be. What must be remembered is that distinguish does not always mean strictly separate. However important it is for the Nubians of today to know their past, it is often also important for the past to find verifications and responses in the present.

¹⁶³ O'Connor and Reid, 2003.

¹⁶⁴ Exell, 2011.

¹⁶⁵ Gatto, 2011: 21-29.

¹⁶⁶ Gatto, 2011: 21-29.