

The Confluence of History and Archaeology in Lower Nubia: Scales of Continuity and Change

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Flowing together, the Blue and White Nile merge, but not merely as water for each carries with it a load of sediment. One, the swifter, bears a coarser sediment; the other, finer. When mixed together, these sediments form the alluvial silts of Nubia and Egypt. Like the merging of sediments between the two Niles, the layers of Nubian history combine evidence from written sources and archaeological sources, providing data of different scales, from the coarse-grained matrix of cultural evolution to the fine scale of recorded events. By considering the temporal scales of data in contrast and conjunction to the corresponding scales of social processes, it should be possible to understand aspects of social change in the Late Meroitic to Post-Meroitic periods (ca. 200-500 AD).

Historical and archaeological data provide information on separate aspects of the past,

and, ideally one supplements the other. Trigger (1965: 1) argued that historical records "although often scanty, provide details about political history and about the social and economic organisation in different periods that would be very difficult, if not impossible, to infer from archaeological evidence alone." Unfortunately there are apparent conflicts, as has been the case in discussions of the extent of settlement in Lower Nubia (Fig. 1) during the first millennium BC, the nature of the relationship between Lower Nubia and the central Sudan during the first three centuries AD, and the nature of change in Lower Nubia during the fourth century. The divergence between archaeological views and views driven by textual evidence may have more to do with differences in conceptual frameworks for organising the information on the past than on outright contradictions.

Background to Conflict: Egyptological and Archaeological Traditions

Nubia has served as a testing ground for methods of historical and archaeological inquiry since its first explorations early this century. Early excavators drew on history both in terms of assigning significance to remains as well as in the conceptual framework through which the evidence was organised. Reisner and the early generations of Nubian archaeologists used his archaeological chronology to tell a story of peoples, who flourished and declined in relation to the influxes of different "racial" groups (Reisner 1910; Emery 1965). Thus Nubian "Ethnic Prehistory" (Trigger 1982; Török 1987) described meta-individuals, such as the "X-group people," which acted uniformly and in unison. The archaeology could not provide historical individuals but the archaeological evidence was generalised into processes analogous to individual actions. Changes were related to invasions, singular historical events, which were equivalent to actions that might be recorded for individuals. Ready examples of such events were available from Egyptological sources, such as the military campaigns of kings and their armies, whether King Djer of the First dynasty or Kamose of the 18th (Emery 1965; Trigger 1976; Adams 1977). Egyptian forays into Nubia had left clear indications in the archaeological record in the form of Egyptian military fortresses (of the Old and Middle Kingdom) and temples (of the New Kingdom), often with deposits of Egyptian style artefacts such as pottery and hieroglyphic inscriptions, as well as Egyptian burials. History and archaeology both attested to invasions and colonisation. It was fairly straight forward to assume that similar events which were unrecorded in illiterate Nubia could account for other changes in the archaeological record.

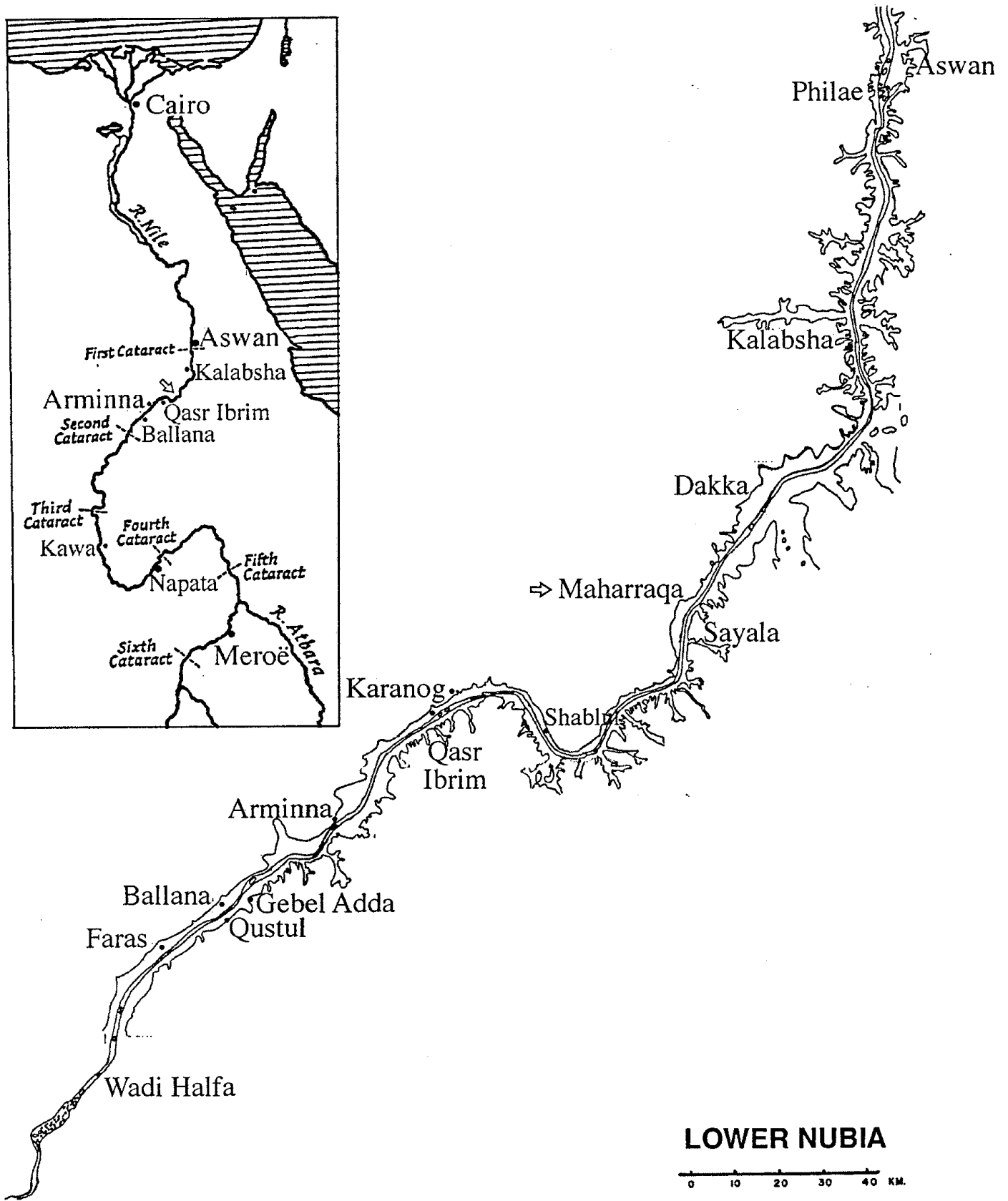


Figure 1. Map of Lower Nubia showing sites mentioned in text.
Inset: Map of greater Nile valley showing Lower Nubia in relation to Roman Egypt and Meroitic central Sudan. Arrow indicates official frontier between Roman territory (Dodekaschoenos) and Meroitic Nubia.

The tendency towards "historical" explanations of change such as invasions was encouraged by the manner in which archaeological data was generalised into a sequence of cultures. Since archaeological chronology was developed on the basis of shared artefact types and similar grave types, the periods themselves become reified as these ideal types. Thus the Meroitic period is represented by square pyramidal tombs, with extended, east-west burials as well as figuratively decorated cups and large jars (Emery 1965). The Post-Meroitic period ("X-Group") is characterised by round, sand and stone tumuli over north-south burials; ceramics are characterised by footed cups (goblets) and broader-shouldered jars, both with line and blotch decoration. While this distinction is true for the most part, it in fact relies on a comparison of material from the middle of each period (Chronology modified from Williams 1991a, 1991b), i.e. the first-second century AD (the Classic Meroitic period) and the mid-fifth century (Classic X-Group). Material from the late third and fourth century is in fact quite different from either of the above and suggests some degree of transition in ceramic forms (the Kalabsha Phase X-Group of Williams 1991b; the Post-Roman assemblage of Rose 1993). However, prior to the refinements of chronology within the Meroitic and Post-Meroitic periods achieved in recent years, the difference between the two cultural phases seemed more extreme and thus promoted the explanation of the difference by a sudden change like a migration.

Since Egyptology (or for later periods classical historians) provided the only written evidence that could be related to the material finds, it was the connections with Egypt (or lack thereof) which were emphasised in descriptions of ancient Nubian culture (e.g. Woolley 1937: 106; Emery 1965). Thus Meroitic temples and the highly organised Meroitic society itself were seen as imports from the developed civilisation of Egypt while periods like the C-Group or X-Group were viewed in terms of "cultural impoverishment" for the Egyptian borrowings they lacked. The racist biases in these early views have been thoroughly reviewed (Trigger 1982; Adams 1977; Török 1987). In addition, the over-emphasis on Egyptian connections, has led to inferences about Nubian social organisation inevitably being made through an Egyptian framework.

For example, the Meroitic state, has been viewed as a spatially continuous, uniformly controlled and bureaucratic entity like that of Egypt (cf. Fuller 1996). The assumption that this is the way states are organised, implying territorial sovereignty and military as well as administrative integration has been in part responsible for the continuing debate about the extent of autonomy of Lower Nubia in

the Meroitic period (300 BC-350 AD) with respect to the central Sudanese monarchy (e.g. Adams 1976, with accompanying commentaries; Török 1987a; O'Connor 1993: 87). By reconceptualising the nature of power in the Sudan without using an Egyptian model (Edwards 1996a; 1996b), the discrepancy becomes less stark.

One of the major controversies in Meroitic studies has been the degree of integration of Lower Nubia with the kingdom as a whole. Adams argued for a northern secular polity, associated with a rising "middle class" which was largely autonomous from state-run trade in the south; this polity looked northward to the Hellenistic world for influences while the Central Sudan remained more conservative of ancient "Pharaonic" traditions (Adams 1974; Adams 1976). This argument is based on contrasts in the nature of archaeological material, large temples and palaces in the south compared to small villages and common cemeteries in the north. Others critiqued this notion on the basis of inscriptional evidence for administrative integration, or more precisely Lower Nubians with titles referring to the king or queen at Meroe (e.g. Haycock 1976; Török 1977; 1979; 1980; Millet 1968; 1981). This second argument assumes that the existence of administrative titles, in the style of those used in the Egyptian state and Egyptian priesthoods, implied the same kind of bureaucratic power structure (e.g. Török 1977; 1979; 1987; Welsby 1996: 35-37).

Although an Egyptian symbolic grammar was employed by the Meroitic Sudan, it was recast in a distinctively Nubian mode (O'Connor 1993; Dafa'alla 1993). Thus the use of Egyptian style priestly and administrative titles (Millet 1968; 1981; Haycock 1976; Török 1977; 1979; 1987), need not imply a fully functioning and integrated Pharaonic state. Indeed, Edwards (1996a; 1996b) has plausibly shown that the Meroitic state was organised along segmentary lines, like others recorded historically in the Sudan and savannah Africa. Such states, although the sources of widespread influence through the recognition of authority, may only exercise administrative and military hegemony over a limited core area. Within this conceptual framework, the use of an Egyptian state model to interpret the textual evidence can be seen to exaggerate the extent of likely integration. Meanwhile, an expectation that integration would lead to a greater degree of uniformity in material culture allowed archaeological differences, which may derive from cultural ecology and archaeological sampling (cf. Edwards 1996b; Welsby 1996: 36), to be overstated. As this example illustrates, the assumptions through which we conceptualise our different datasets may make synthesis difficult.

During a flush of archaeological activity in Nubia during the 1960's, a more anthropological and gradualist approach to ancient Nubia developed as those trained in American Anthropological Archaeology came to excavate in Nubia (e.g. Adams 1964, 1965; Trigger 1965; 1967; Lister 1967; Weeks 1967). This work emphasised continuity, especially in settlement sites (Trigger 1965: 133; 1967; Adams 1968; 1977: 392). However, there was a certain naïve overemphasis on gradualism, leading to the interpretation of secondarily mixed settlement fills containing Classic X-Group and Late Meroitic ceramics to be interpreted as transitional assemblages (e.g. Trigger 1967: 80-82). While these assemblages have since been recognised as mixed material (Trigger 1986: 414; Williams 1991a: 4, n.31; 1991b: 18, n.57), there remains a broad regional pattern of continuity. Thus a problem of interest becomes one of delineating the nature and scale of changes while recognising aspects of continuity (cf. Török 1988: 121; 1992). I will suggest some possibilities below through a combination of historical and archaeological evidence.

Recently, with the proposal of a hiatus in settlement in the fourth century, on the basis of material from one large cemetery site, an X-Group migration has been revived (Williams 1991a: 20; 1991b: 157). To some extent this debate is exacerbated by misconstruals of scale. While supposed regional patterns had been sought in particular sites to support continuity, now a single site's apparent break has been imposed upon an entire region. But how many sites show evidence for a break or immigration? How large are the populations we are talking about? Historical support is sought in the account of Diocletian's invitation to the "Noubades" of a Western desert oasis to occupy the land being vacated by the retreat of Roman garrisons (Dafa'alla 1989; Williams 1991b; Török 1980: 85; 1988: 29). If we accept this source as accurate (for reservations, see Török 1980; 1988; Welsby 1996: 71), then what social scale does this account imply, an entire tribe or a few elite? In order to assess supposed discrepancies or agreements between historical sources and archaeological evidence it is crucial to first understand the scales of processes to which they relate.

Towards comparison: Time scales and social process

The differences between inscriptional and archaeological data are ones of scale and precision. Three kinds of scale are particularly pertinent: geographical, temporal and social. One must be aware of the extent of the area referred to in textual evidence in order to decide which archaeological data are relevant for comparison. It can

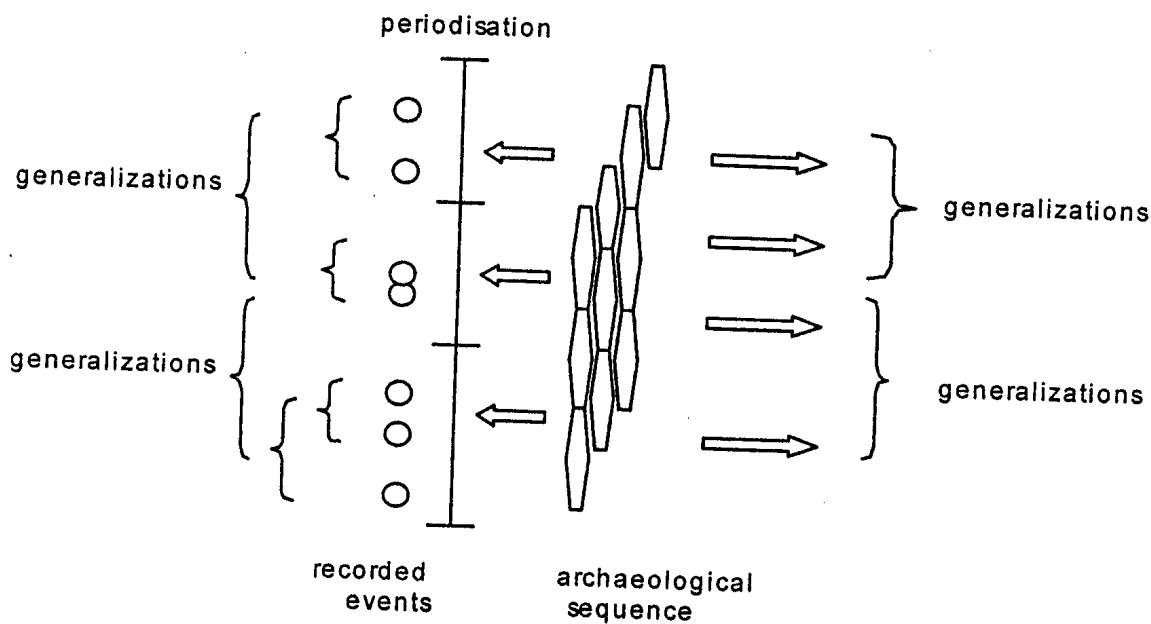


Figure 2. Schematic representation of relationship between temporality of archaeological and inscriptional data

be particularly difficult to relate texts that give names to regions and their inhabitants with actual archaeological assemblages supposedly made by those people (Jones 1997: 122ff.). For example, in Meroitic and Post-Meroitic studies, arguments still rage over where and how large was the territory of the Blemmyes or Noba (e.g. Dafa'alla 1987; Török 1988; Strouhal 1986). This is due in part to ambiguities in the place names given by Olympiodorus, who visited the Blemmyes in Nubia, ca. 420 AD (Török 1988: 49-51), as well as whether a distinctive handmade ware can be associated with a distinct cultural tradition from the rest of Lower Nubia (Ricke 1967 and Williams 1991b identify the pottery as Blemmyan, with support from Rose 1993; 1995; while Strouhal 1986 and Török 1988 see it as a variant of other Lower Nubian traditions).

The differences between the temporality of recorded events and the periods derived from archaeological material, is like that between points and lines (Figure 2). Textual evidence, like points, often has a great degree of precision in terms of date. Archaeological evidence usually lacks such precision and must be generalized to broader periods. In other words, historical data generally refer to smaller temporal scales, while archaeological data span longer scales. This raises the question of the scale of interest, whether short term or long term. As theoretical considerations of time have stressed, one scale of time is not necessarily more important than any other and some processes operating at different rates may be independent of each other (Bailey 1983; 1987; Gosden 1984: 17, 133ff.). In the long term of millennia, the archaeological record of Nubia clearly

indicates continuity in zones and extent of settlement as well as shifts of economic or political focus (Trigger 1965). This scale of information may provide little insight into the nature of change in the fourth century AD. Indeed, as pointed out by Edwards (1996b: 56), the lack of chronological resolution available when synthesizing the Nubian archaeological data in the 1960's helped to inflate estimates of population as well as site continuity. On the other extreme, single events, such as the giving of a votive gift that might be recorded on a funerary stela (e.g. Millet 1982), performed by individuals during the third or fourth century within Nubia, may provide equally little insight into the nature of social change in the early Post-Meroitic period.

Historical evidence may need to be abstracted to more general, periodic trends and tendencies (Fig. 2). The point-like events must be symptomatic of the same social processes as the archaeological evidence. A periodisation should combine historical and archaeological data by being generalised at a scale sufficient for showing the kinds of processes of interest. Therefore the chronological framework used must be appropriate to the problems of interest. In the case of the Post-Meroitic transition, social and political change occurred over the course of a few generations. Thus textual data should be considered in generational or inter-generational comparisons. Luckily, recent refinements in archaeological chronology approach divisions on the order of 50-70 years (Török 1987; 1988; Williams 1991a; 1991b; Rose 1993; Fuller, forthcoming).

Both chronological and geographical scale are tied to the kinds of social processes one can examine. Social relations and practices are expressed in both space and time and thus structure these dimensions (Gosden 1994: 78). Processes occurring over larger areas will usually take longer than more local changes. It may thus be worthwhile to distinguish potential social-spatial scales for analysis. A useful starting point conceptually is Trigger's (1968a) scheme of three levels of settlement pattern. First, the individual structure may be compared in social terms to an inter-individual but infra-community scale of social interaction. Next, the layout of structures within communities can be a window onto community-wide processes which occur within and between generations. The inter-community settlement pattern reflects larger and somewhat longer term social processes. To these three levels of social-spatial scale, one might add an inter-regional or geopolitical level which addresses the outcomes of social processes for large complex societies, or the interaction between states.

Archaeologising History: The potentials of Nubian sources

The historical evidence for Nubia can be divided into six groups on the basis of its potential to address processes at some of the scales outlined above. 1. First, there are *external sources*, such as classical historians. While these often allow a great deal of chronological precision, since they can be dated by reference to Roman calendrical dates, they are much less reliable in geographic and social terms. Often the regions referred to are only vaguely, if at all, defined and they are very often muddled. In terms of social scale, these sources tend to refer to regional or geo-political practices. However, one must be cautious with these data since regional they patterns describe may be exaggerated from local practices or hearsay. 2. *Votive graffiti* of visiting Nubians, especially at Philae (Griffith 1912; Török 1980), shares a high chronological precision and also tends to relate to regional or even geo-political situations. These inscriptions are often those of Lower Nubian elites who employ titles suggesting that they are on official business as envoys of the central Sudan's Meroitic state. 3. *Meroitic monumental inscriptions in Lower Nubia*, erected usually by kings or other prominent leaders at important sites, such as inscribed architectural fragments found at Qasr Ibrim (e.g. Edwards 1994; Plumley 1966), or inscriptions made on major temples, like Kalabsha or Dakka (Griffith 1912; Millet 1973). These tend to be less easy to date precisely than classical sources but may deal more accurately with regional and inter-community scales. For example, the very late Meroitic Kharamadoye inscription seems to describe a military campaign uniting (or subduing) much of Lower Nubia (Millet 1973; Török 1979: 86-88). 4. In addition, there are *monumental inscriptions from the Central Sudan*. Many of these come from the pyramid chapels of royal cemeteries or southern temples (e.g. Kawa, Napata, Meroe). These inscriptions record major military campaigns and refer to Lower Nubia within a geo-political context. 5. *Funerary inscriptions* are the most spatially localised textual source. When considered as an assemblage from a particular site, they can provide a window on individual, community and inter-community social relationships. However, funerary inscriptions are often more difficult to date except when individuals can be cross dated (Millet 1968; 1981). Often they must be dated on the basis of archaeological association, which therefore puts these sources on par with archaeological data. 6. *Ostraca* are short inscriptions often on potsherds, generally found in contexts of settlement refuse (e.g. Trigger 1967: 72-77; Millet 1977). These presumably relate to intra-community interactions, although the incomplete decipherment of the Meroitic script allows relatively little to be gleaned from them.

External Sources	Votive Grafitti	Funerary Inscriptions	Monumental Inscriptions	Central Sudan
ca. 200 pestilence reported in Nubia.				
ca. 250 Plague in Nubia end of Roman exploitation of Nubian quarries; no refs. to military activity in Dodekaschoenos		ca. 250- Wayekiye clan of <i>Pelmos</i> active, Lower Nubia to Philae		
Blemmyes raiding upper Egypt		Arminna inscriptions: power networks w/ Adda, Philae, Derr, Kalabsha.		
ca.298 Diocletian withdraws from Dodekaschoenos	ca. 280-300, Meroitic King Yesbokhemani, grafitto Philae	?? Wars against Noba	ca. 280-300 Meroitic King Yesbokhemani, Qasr Ibrim	
ca. 324 Alexandria Mint stops issuing gold or silver (Gold supplied by Meroe ?)		funerary texts end (?)		
	371-373 Nwbe.w and Blemmyes fighting in Nubia		ca.370(?) Kalabsha inscription, of King Kharamadoye: Unification of Nubia	ca.360 Axumite Ezana fights Noba & Kasu in Meroitic heartland, Implies Meroe already fallen
ca. 400 Kalabsha under Blemmye control		[ca. 380 Royal Burials at Qustul, Lower Nubia]		
ca. 420 Qasr Ibrim(?) under Blemmye control				
ca. 430 Plague in Nubia			ca.450 Kalabsha: Nubian king Silko reunites Nubia	

Table 1. Selective tabulation of historical evidence divided by source type.

In order to combine these historical data with archaeological data, I would suggest that inscriptional evidence needs to be considered in terms of three kinds of basic information which would be expected of any archaeological evidence: provenience, by which I would distinguish the categories enumerated above, date of production, and what might be called relational evidence. This basic information can be tabulated in a time-space chart, much as one might summarise stratigraphic archaeological data (Table 1). For artefacts, "relational evidence" is what would normally be called style, since it implicates relationships with other assemblages and provides the evidence from which social inferences are then made (cf. Hodder 1990). The equivalent for texts is any suggestion about relationships between social groups or regions imparted by the inscription. The evidence can then be compared to archaeological data relating to an equivalent scale.

Meroitic in Nubia: A trend

One controversy has been the extent of population in Lower Nubia during the late first millennium BC and whether there was a large population boom in the first century AD. Adams (1964; 1976; 1977) has argued strongly for a depopulated Nubia being resettled by Meroitic policy in the first century, when settlements and cemeteries with the distinctive Meroitic fine wares and inscriptions become widespread. On the other hand, Ptolemaic Egyptian sources and some monumental inscriptions from the Central Sudan suggest population in Lower Nubia from at least the third century BC (Trigger 1965: 120; Emery 1965; Török 1987). This historical evidence led Török (1987) to reconsider the chronology for Meroitic fine wares, finding evidence for dating them to the late second century BC. While it has been shown that there was at least some population present in Lower Nubia throughout the first millennium BC (Williams 1990; Horton 1991; Edwards 1996b), a qualitative change occurred in the last century BC with the first attestation of a *Peshto* (Nubian viceroy) at Faras. Archaeologically this period is marked by the growth of sites with pyramidal tombs and funerary inscriptions (cf. Trigger 1965: 122; Millet 1981; Török 1980; 1987).

While there has been a traditional archaeological suggestion of a population explosion and immigration at this time (e.g. Trigger 1965; Adams 1964; 1977), this may have as much to do with new structures of power as new population. Meroitic inscriptions of officials suggest control of the local population was considered important enough to warrant title-holding elites. This is a noteworthy change since Meroe and Egypt had both been content previously to express their presence and power in Nubia through dedications at a few key temples (cf. Burstein 1986; Török 1987; Adams 1977: 334-6). The rise of local title holders implies a new policy. Whether these title-holders were actually sent from the Meroitic south or recruited from local population is not certain but it indicates that the ties between North and South were altered through the heightened expression of loyalty. For a period of time there may have been more integration and direct control of Lower Nubia by the south since a crown prince from the south was *Peshto* for a time (Millet 1981; Welsby 1996: 35)

This relationship between Northern elites and the central Sudan was also expressed through material symbols such as the production of elite pyramidal tombs which evoked the royal tombs of the south as well as the production of ba-statues and stelae inscribed in the script of the central Sudan. In addition to the consumption of

ceramic fine ware products of the central Sudan, some workshop(s) in Lower Nubia began to produce this locally, as is indicated by mineralogical studies suggesting that use of clay sources attributable to both Lower Nubia and the central Sudan (Smith 1996), and the fact that almost all the very early examples of these fine wares come from the central Sudan (Török 1987). With the proliferation of Meroitic fine wares other exchange goods, such as Aswani vessels, also became widespread. These trade goods suggest that more of the Northern Nubian population was being integrated into the Meroitic luxury-goods/power network. This could perhaps be contrasted to the Early Meroitic period, when Aswani wares were present at the fortress site of Qasr Ibrim (Adams 1985), while they were lacking on a representative(?) common settlement at Wadi Halfa (Lister 1967: 61-64).

Late Meroitic power networks at Arminna West

The funerary inscriptions highlight an emphasis on kin, and the organisation of regional power through kinship networks. The bulk of most funerary inscriptions consists of a list of relatives and their titles implying transferable honour (Griffith 1912; Millet 1968; 1981; Trigger 1970a). The late Meroitic inscriptions from the mid-third century on, such as those from Arminna West, suggest a proliferation of local elites. A tabulation of the range of titles employed in the small corpus of inscriptions from Arminna is significantly greater than that from the larger corpora at the more important but earlier Faras and Shablul (cf. Trigger 1970a: Table 8; sites redated archaeologically after Williams 1991a).

Arminna elites emphasised connections to powerful families at Gebel Adda, Philae and perhaps also Kalabsha, although earlier provincial centres of Faras and Karanog are mentioned (cf. Trigger 1970a: 46). A stela (Trigger 1970a: AW1), found reused as a covering slab in an early-mid fourth century grave in the south-central cluster at Arminna (and thus probably originating at one of the earlier "Meroitic" structures in this cluster), commemorates one *Patsnoye*, a "great *Temey* in Arminna," who was related to an official at Philae and may have left a graffito at Philae (Trigger 1970a: 23-25). *Temey* is suggested to be an ethnic designation (Millet 1973; 1981: 132), and is also known from Gebel Adda and listed amongst the conquered peoples in the Kharamadoye inscription of the mid(?) fourth century (Griffith 1912: 32ff; Millet 1968: 269ff.). Other inscriptions at Arminna also attest relationships with the powerful Wayekiye family of Gebel Adda which was active in the Dodekaschoinos, such as two texts mentioning relationships to

Adoye, an envoy to Rome as well a figure called *Malekaye* (Trigger 1970a: 31, 38). *Mlekye* has been argued to be a title, also referred to by inscriptions from Ibrim and Adda (Millet 1982: 80). This stela (AW4), found outside a late third century tomb which had probably been reused in the fourth century (Fuller, forthcoming), suggests that *Malekaye* was in Kalabsha (*kelmeshi-te-li*) and sent to *tmñ*, a place near Karanog (Millet 1982, transliteration altered from that of Trigger 1970a). In the other inscription (AW3a), *Malekaye* is connected (in a relationship of alliance?) to both the Lower Nubian viceroy (*Peshto*) and the *Pelmos* ("general"), a title born often by the elite from Gebel Adda (Trigger 1970a: 34; Millet 1982). One of the individuals commemorated in this stela may have been involved in a Military campaign against the *Noba* (Millet 1996). Only one inscription (AW2; Trigger 1970a: 28-30) mentions the central Sudanese royalty: this inscription commemorates siblings related to *ttñ qori-towi* (*ttñ* of the king) and *mreperi ktkes dor-te-lewi* (*mareperi* of the Candace, i.e. Queen mother, in Derr). While this indicates the lasting significance of the Meroitic state, the relationship actually referred to is one within Lower Nubia, with a dignitary at Derr. As the above examples illustrate, some of the persons at Arminna were well connected to regional networks of power and involved in Nubian politics and struggles of late third and fourth century.

Historicising Archaeology

One of the lingering difficulties with archaeological evidence has been its phasing into normative cultural periods, which are read in terms of cultural homogeneity of one form or another. The uniformity of a given archaeological culture can no longer be assumed to result directly from ethnic or racial unity, nor a set of shared subconscious norms over a wide area (Trigger 1968b: 23-25; Jones 1997: 112-116). The designation of a "culture" is still useful for indicating recognisable similarities in archaeological finds from a particular region during some particular period. It serves to relate materials from different areas of an excavation and from different sites. However, these normative differences should not be used in comparison to investigate change. It is such comparisons of essentially anecdotal descriptions of ceramics or burial customs which provided the invasionist narratives of ethnic prehistory (cf. Trigger 1982; Török 1987: 142ff.). Adams (1976) suggested an alternative in which Nubian speaking lower classes threw off the yoke of Meroitic-speaking elite. Unfortunately, such a description replaces the ethnic meta-individuals with economic classes and does little to examine the negotiation of social and political change.

Approaches to archaeology emphasising historical contingency and social practice as a medium for change may offer other ways of discussing the archaeological data more conducive to examining change (Gosden 1994; Last 1994). Approaches to artefact comparison like the *chaine operateire* (e.g. Lemonnier 1990; Dietler and Herbich 1994) allow the production of material culture to be viewed as a temporal process rather than an instantaneous act. In terms of time scales, this is the very short term, but it incorporates dispositions which are developed within a social milieu and potentially shared between individuals on the scale of communities and over the course of generations (i.e. the *habitus* of Bourdieu, 1977). The dynamics of change can thus be examined by considering the partial and substitutional changes to the generative formula by which artefacts or even burials were produced. Since burials are likely on some level to be a medium for the expression or negotiation of social relations (cf. Pearson 1984; Morris 1987; 1992), an examination of substitutional change in burial customs over the course of a few generations during the Late Meroitic period should provide insight into the nature of changing social relationships.

It has been possible to examine the dynamics of mortuary variability at the Lower Nubian site of Arminna West (Fuller, forthcoming; for preliminary reports, Simpson 1964; 1965; Trigger 1970b). In the late Meroitic period, from ca. 200 AD, a small community flourished with its elite being buried west of the settlement in pyramidal tombs. These tombs were distributed in five contemporary clusters, which all continued in use along side each other until the Early X-Group, ca. 400 (Fig. 3). Each cluster includes male, female and some child burials. The continuity of use of these clusters as well as their general equivalence in terms of size and elaboration of structures and grave goods suggests that they were used by different kinship groups within the community. Meanwhile the use of pyramids, ba-statues, as well as stelae inscribed in Meroitic indicate that elites within the Arminna community were involved in regional power networks.

In addition to continued use of familial clusters, individual tombs and graves were reused during the course of the late third and fourth century, suggesting that symbolic connections were sought between generations. However, an implication of the reuse of these tombs, which probably started in the later third century is that the superstructures could no longer have been full pyramids, as is thought typical of classic Meroitic graves (Woolley and MacIver 1910; Emery 1965: 227-229; Trigger 1965: 127; Adams 1977: 374). During this era of reuse, other elements of Meroitic elite repertoire go out of use such as ba-statues, inscribed stelae, and other

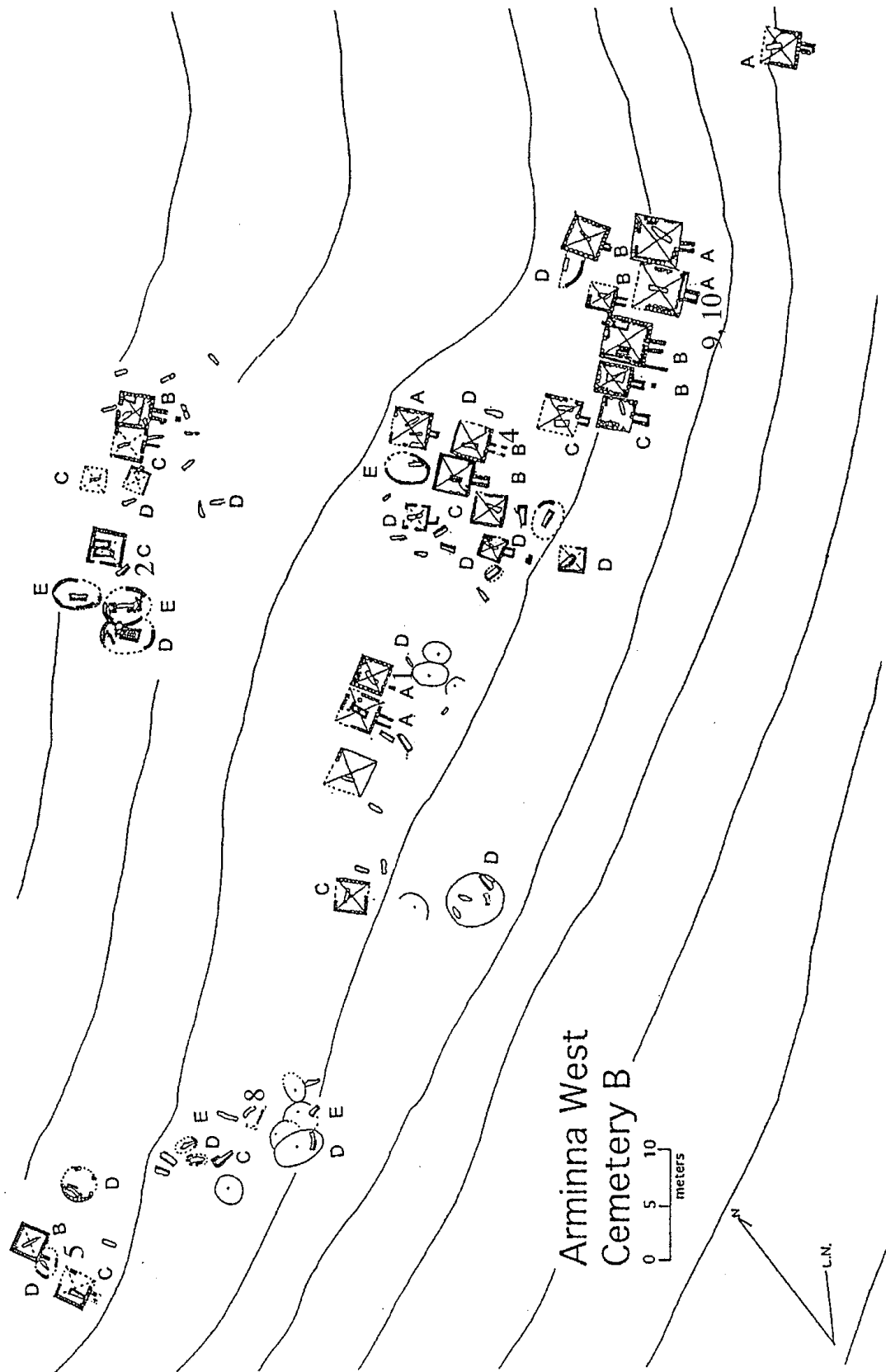


Figure 3. Plan of Arminna West Cemetery (Late Meroitic-Early Post Meroitic), showing family tomb clusters which continued in use through transformations in burial customs and ceramic repertoires. Letters by tombs represent period of earliest burial in tomb. A= late second century to ca. 240 AD; B= 240-300 AD; C= 300 to 340?; D= Mid-Fourth Century; E= 370-400 AD. Letters equal find sites of funerary inscriptions discussed in text.

sculptured sandstone elements (such as windows and doors which had probably been fitted on the classic Meroitic pyramidal tombs as miniature offering chapels). While this might suggest a drop in supply (if, for example, artisans were in the employ of more important regional elites), there must have been some drop in demand since many of these items get reused in covering and filling later graves. The end of the use of Meroitic inscriptions in funerary contexts is a significant chronological trend in and of itself when compared with the florescence of these cultural productions in Lower Nubia over the preceding centuries. There is also a decrease in imported, luxury commodities, such as bronze vessels, which, as Edwards (1996b: 39ff.) has argued, were probably distributed through power networks from central to local elites. A likely interpretation is that the regional and inter-regional political and economic power networks were changing, while within the community there was continuity in social relations such as kin-groupings. Taken together, the archaeological and historical evidence both suggest that the influence of the central Sudanese royalty both symbolic and real was waning.

Despite claims that the Meroitic state persisted until 370 AD (e.g. Török 1988: 45-46; Haycock 1976), there is little direct evidence for this. The last occurrence of a Meroitic ruler's name at Philae dates between 280 and 300 AD (Welsby 1996: 71). A monument in his name was also erected at Qasr Ibrim (Plumley 1966; Welsby 1996: 197). This may have been the last attempt to re-assert Meroitic power in Lower Nubia. Meanwhile, there are hints at instability in Lower Nubia, such as Millet's (1996) suggestion of Meroitic inscription references to military actions against the Noba, as well as the poorly dated but perhaps mid-fourth century Kharamadoye inscription at Ballana recording a military pacification of Northern Nubia (Griffith 1912: 27ff.; Millet 1973; Török 1979: 86-88). By the mid-fourth century the central Sudan underwent more local collapse in power networks and perhaps environmental degradation (Edwards 1996b: 92) as well as conquest by the Axumite kingdom (Török 1988: 33ff.; Welsby 1996: 198ff.). The continuing presence of Aswani manufactured pottery and the adoption of vessel forms from the Egyptian repertoire (such as the goblet) indicates that there was no decrease in cultural contact between Nubia and Egypt at this time. Thus the lack of inscriptions at Philae from Nubians declaring themselves as representatives of the Meroitic king suggests that the elites in Lower Nubia were less concerned with international relations between states. This might suggest a focus on more local social relations.

It is under such circumstances in which we might expect to see the development of more local cultural styles as appears to be the case in burial customs at Arminna West. During the middle to late part of the fourth century a new kind of burial structure appears at Arminna unattested anywhere else. These tombs consist of an ovoid tumulus paved with mud-bricks on the sloping surface around its circumference. The grave pit, the placement of the body and the range of grave goods, including liquid containers and drinking vessels, remained consistent with earlier Meroitic practices. These tombs were constructed within or as continuations of the earlier tomb clusters and some of them were also reused. Some of the inspiration for the form of these mounds is suggested by an outlying cluster of seven tumuli north of the main cemetery which were ovoid heaps of stone with occasional sections of mortared mud-brick. These have some structural similarities to tombs constructed further North in the Dodekaschoenos in the late third and fourth centuries, especially at Sayala and to a lesser degree Kalabsha (Ricke 1967; Strouhal 1986; Török 1988: 181). The ceramic assemblages from these northern areas include types similar to some of those current at Arminna and elsewhere in the southern, traditionally Meroitic, half of Lower Nubia. It is the ceramic tradition from this northern source and Aswan which provided the source for the decoration for X-Group ceramics and well as several forms (cf. Rose 1993). Thus inspiration for both burial customs and ceramic style shifted to a less distant Northern source replacing the prior influence of the central Sudan. As an emergent power centre, Kalabsha provided a new repertoire for local elites to draw on.

Conclusion

Material culture is a medium for the expression and negotiation of social relations even if less explicit than written texts (Hodder 1990; Morris 1992; Dietler and Herbich 1994; Gosden 1994). By suggesting some of the ways in which material culture may have been manipulated to symbolise political relationships within Nubia as well as between Nubia and the Meroitic rulers, I have highlighted some potential explanations for apparent contradictions between traditional archaeological and historical interpretations. At the height of Meroitic power, Lower Nubian elite positioned themselves within the Meroitic power structure through inscriptions in Meroitic, employing Meroitic office titles. Meanwhile they constructed tombs which emulated Meroitic royal burials and consumed prestige commodities, such as decorated fine wares, bronze vessels, and various long-distance imports which were redistributed through Meroitic power networks. In the late

third and fourth centuries, many of these explicitly Meroitic power connections disappeared. Burial customs diversified in some communities and inscriptional evidence hints at a diversification in titles and power networks. Despite continuity on the level of individual communities, such as Arminna West, stylistic practices on a regional level underwent drastic change during the Post-Meroitic transition, in burials, ceramics and the contexts of literacy. This period of instability and change is hinted at in other historical sources from the classical world and the Abyssinian inscriptions referring to the central Sudan.

Leonard Woolley, a representative of the first generation of Nubian archaeologists, declared that "Between archaeology and history there is no fenced frontier, and the digger who will best observe and record his discoveries is precisely he who sees them as historical material" (Woolley 1937: 119). However, Woolley's vision of the archaeologist finding "relics" to illustrate history was limited in its grasp of what would today be termed social theory or cultural history (in the sense of Morris, this volume). In the intervening sixty years, a concern for the complexity of social processes has come to both history and archaeology. But Woolley's metaphor aptly alludes to the division between history and archaeology as maintained through academic disciplinary territoriality. What I have tried to offer in this paper are some ways in which archaeological and historical data can be manipulated by an attention to matters of provenience and social scale to produce both a more archaeological historical record and a more historical archaeological record. History and archaeology are like the sediments of a single river, laid down continuously if unevenly by the flow of time.

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