



CHAPTER 12

PHARAONIC OR SUDANIC? MODELS FOR MEROITIC SOCIETY AND CHANGE

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Introduction: pharaonic and Sudanic models

In the eighth century BC a new kingdom emerged onto the historical scene, when its ruler led his military forces to the conquest of Egypt. This was the king Piye, known to later Egyptian historians as the founder of the twenty-fifth Dynasty of Egypt (which lasted roughly 80 years). He came to Egypt, and ruled Egypt, from far to the south at ancient Napata (modern Gebel Barkal). This remained the centre of a kingdom even after his successors lost control of Egypt to the Assyrians (for a discussion of the still enigmatic process of the emergence of this kingdom see Morkot Chapter 11, this volume). This Kingdom of Napata, generally known as the Meroitic Kingdom in its later phases (fourth century BC to fourth century AD) when its capital was located at the city of Meroe, was an important regional power, often referred to as an empire, for more than a thousand years. The core region of this kingdom was focused along the Middle and Upper Nile from the Khartoum area, where the Blue and White Niles merge, to the Third Cataract of the Nile (Figure 12:1). In this region a number of important temple and city sites are known from this kingdom. Further north, beyond the Third Cataract, Meroitic control of the region was not continuous, and particularly north of the Second Cataract there is evidence that Persian rulers of Egypt and the Ptolemaic (Greek) rulers of Egypt controlled the region for at least some periods, interspersed with periods of Meroitic dominance, indicated by temple inscriptions and building in the region, especially at the important fortress and temple site of Qasr Ibrim. After the Romans had established control of Egypt and failed in a conquest attempt of Nubia in 23 BC, an official frontier of Roman control was established at Maharaqqa, with the region to the north, under Roman control, known as the Dodekaschoenos, whereas south of this frontier was acknowledged as Meroitic (or 'Aithiopian' in the ancient classical sources).

The wealth of evidence on the archaeology and history of the Meroitic Kingdom provides a unique opportunity to examine the interactions, cultural similarities and differences between Egypt and another region of the African continent. As an adjacent region to Egypt, Nubia has long been discussed as an 'African' hinterland of Egypt. It has been variously termed a "corridor to Africa" (Adams 1977) or an African "rival" (O'Connor 1993). The Meroitic Kingdom has been credited as a land in which ancient

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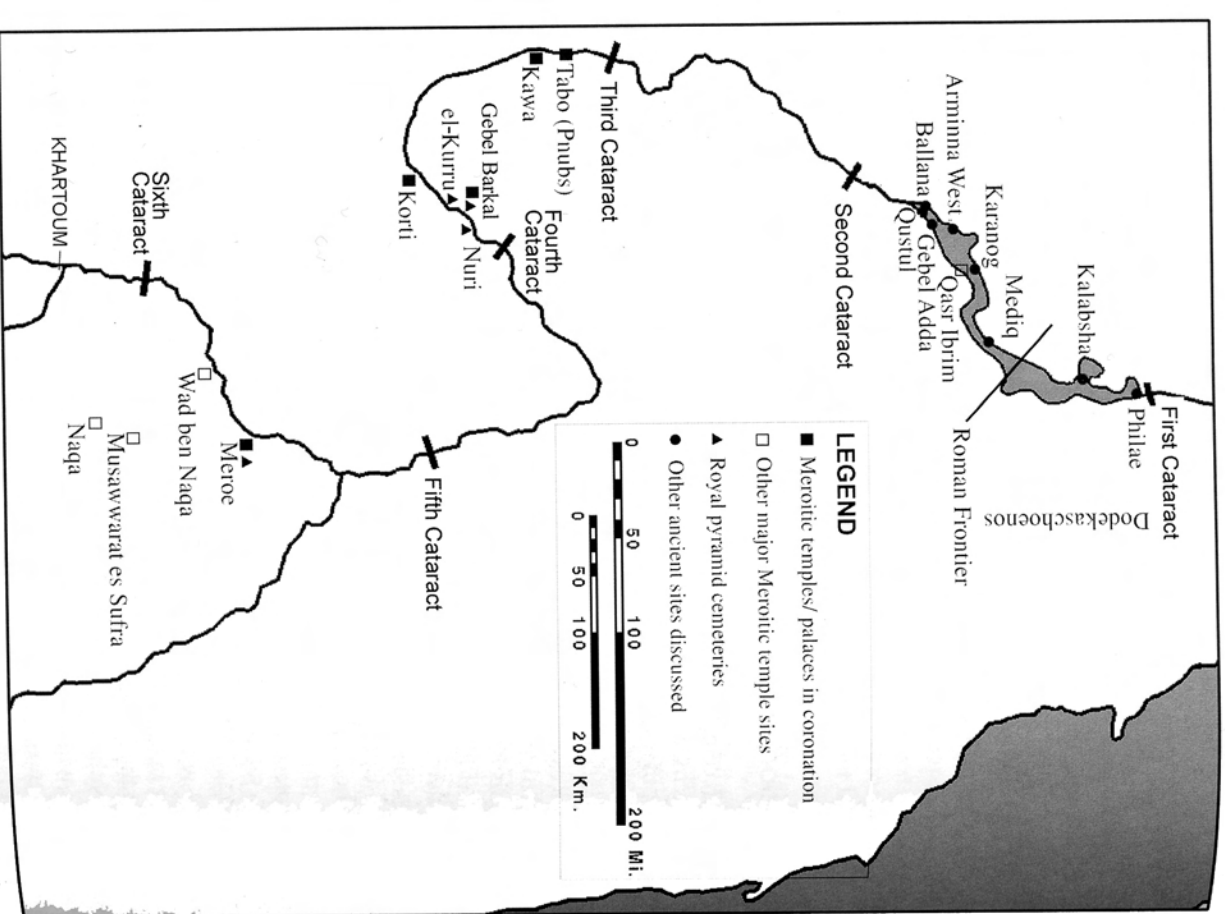


Figure 12.1 Map of greater Nubia including sites mentioned in the text, and the ancient frontier between the Roman and Meroitic empires.

Egyptian artistic forms and religious beliefs persisted after they had been largely eradicated in Egypt through Romanization and eventual Christianization (e.g. Edwards 1961; Shinnie 1967; Smith and Simpson 1981),¹ and the use of Egyptian iconographic elements (see Figure 12.2), including Egyptian deities and a script derived from Egyptian hieroglyphics, attests to the importance of borrowings of

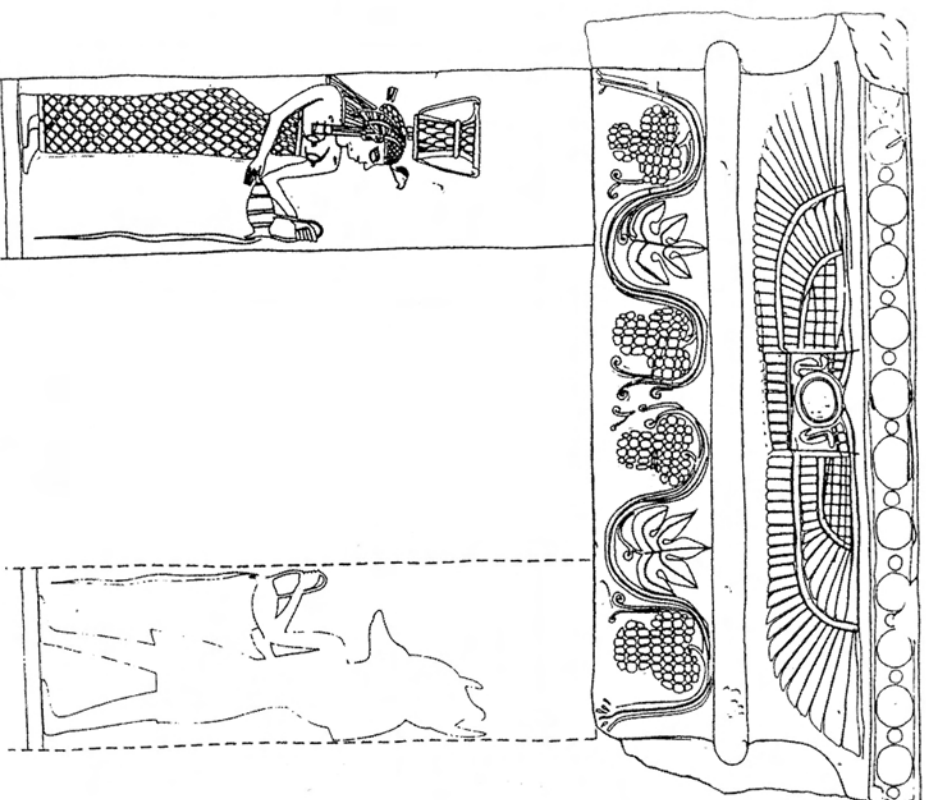


Figure 12.2 Sandstone lintel and door jamb from Armina West Cemetery B, Tomb 23, with representations of goddess Nephthys, winged sundisk and uraei (Fuller forthcoming, Pennsylvania Yale Expedition to Egypt 1963).

Egyptian culture in Meroitic Nubia. In this chapter, I move beyond cataloguing Egyptian borrowings in terms of material styles and motifs, and focus instead on the issues of the underlying social and political organization of the Meroitic Kingdom, and how it may have been quite different from that of Ancient Egypt. Indeed, I suggest that because of its closeness to Ancient Egypt, and obvious interaction and borrowings, Nubia's divergent system of social organization has often been overlooked in favour of viewing it as essentially an Egyptian society (Edwards Chapter 10, this volume). The conventional Egyptian model for the organization of the Meroitic state and its society is in part responsible for debates about apparently contradictory historical and archaeological evidence about control of northern Nubia. In addition, this understanding of Meroitic political power is linked to a broader misconception of the organization of Nubian communities. I argue for an alternative perspective, which I term Sudanic, of political and social organization at the regional, interregional and community levels. I discuss some historical and archaeological

evidence from the northern Meroitic region and adjacent Roman Dodekaskhones. Also, I consider how the Sudanic model is demonstrated in the archaeological evidence of a particular community, that of Arminna West, from which I have been studying the excavated material in recent years (Fuller 1997, 1999). This perspective provides us with new insights into the processes of social change in the fourth century AD, when the Meroitic Kingdom is conventionally seen as ending.

The history of archaeological research in Nubia is inextricably linked to that of Egypt, with many of the same prominent figures carrying out archaeology in both regions (Adams 1977, Morkot 2000, Trigger 1982). Thus, understandably, concepts employed in interpreting Ancient Egypt have also been found useful in discussing ancient Nubia, and among them has been the assumption that the Meroitic Kingdom was a pharaonic state, organized like that in Ancient Egypt. I suggest that accompanying this pharaonic model are simplistic assumptions about the nature of trade, mortuary ritual and social identity which fail to provide an understanding of how human communities in ancient Nubia were structured and how they changed, especially during the crucial historical juncture that has been termed the "fall of Meroë" (e.g. Kirwan 1960; Shimnie 1967; Welsby 1996). In recent years, a growing body of archaeological and historical research, and models drawn from African ethnography and history, favour an alternative 'Sudanic' model (especially Edwards 1996a, 1996b, 1998a). This latter model provides an insight into some of the nuances of late Meroitic archaeology and the nature of social changes which have proved problematic within a pharaonic framework of analysis.

The pharaonic model of sociopolitical organization represents the classic definition of the state in anthropological evolutionism and comparative sociology. The state has a centralized power structure deployed across a boundary-delimited territory by means of a bureaucratic infrastructure and with significant state control in the economy (Edwards 1996b: 8 ff; in general see Earle 1994; Mann 1986, 1988; Trigger 1993). The development of this classic state model of the Meroitic Kingdom may seem the obvious extension of two observations in Nubian history. First, there is a long-recognized influence of Egyptian institutions on the symbolic expression (both monumental and textual) produced by the earliest documented Kushite rulers, the founders of Egypt's twenty-fifth Dynasty, Kashta, Piye and their successors (e.g. Shimnie 1996: 100–101; Török 1997b: 131 ff; Trigger 1976a). The twenty-fifth Dynasty is conventionally seen as taking over and implementing the Egyptian state apparatus, as exemplified in the following synopsis:

This period saw the development of a state-controlled economy modeled along Egyptian lines and no doubt administered by Egyptian or Egyptian-trained bureaucrats. Similar craftsman produced luxury goods for the enjoyment of the upper classes, while large amounts of standardized wheel-made pottery suggest that centralized control was exercised over the surpluses of many basic commodities ... The Kushite rulers succeeded in imposing significant elements of Egyptian style political organization upon their homeland by implanting there the religious cults and other cultural values of Dynastic Egypt.

(Trigger 1978a: 226–227)

The means by which Egyptian institutions were transferred more or less wholesale to Nubia has been assumed to have been a top-down imposition by local rulers (the

rulers buried at el-Kurru who founded the Napatan Kingdom), and is generally connected to concepts of a territorial state with a centrally controlled economy.² This view tends to see the pharaonic institutions in an essentialist fashion rather than as symbols that might be employed and reinterpreted by Nubian agents. A second observation, although less explicitly discussed, seems to underlie the assumption that an Egyptian-style state apparatus continued until the end of the Meroitic Kingdom: in Meroitic texts of the late period (i.e. 100 BC–350 AD) numerous titles of state 'officials' are recorded which can be translated because they are borrowings from ancient Egyptian titles (known especially from demotic, the late period Egyptian script). This latter observation is particularly problematic as our very incomplete understanding of the Meroitic language relies on loanwords from Egyptian and guesswork on other terms for titles and affiliation (see Griffith 1911, 1912; Haycock 1976; Millet 1968, 1981; Török 1979; Trigger and Heyler 1970). In the case of both of these observations the similarity with ancient Egyptian state structures may be more apparent than real. As others have noted in the realm of iconography, Egyptian symbols provided a "vocabulary through which Nubians could express their world view" (O'Connor 1993: 83). As I argue below, the Sudanic state model entails that these Egyptian adoptions became Nubianized through their use within the very different organization of the Meroitic Kingdom.

The Sudanic model has been proposed as an alternative system for understanding the Meroitic Kingdom (Edwards 1996a, b, 1998a), deriving in large part from Southall's (1956, 1988) concept of a segmentary state, together with reference to later historic kingdoms of the Sudan, such as the Funj sultanate. The segmentary state is defined by four key aspects (Southall 1956: 248–249; Stein 1998: 20). First, it is made up of numerous centres of political power. Second, political power is differentiated between royal suzerainty (held by a single king and recognized by all, often through ritual form) and practical power held by local elites, which we might term local sovereignty. The power of the king shades off as one moves away from his centre. Third, while the royal centre is organized through an administrative system and coercive (military) force, other locales of power repeat such administrative capabilities backed up by force, normally on a reduced scale. Thus, political centres reflect the same model as the central power and may be further divided into more local power foci. Finally, the segmentary state is prone to fluctuation in size, especially at its spatial extremes because "the more peripheral a subordinate authority is the more chance it has to change its allegiance from one power pyramid to another" (Southall 1956: 249). These features together differentiate the segmentary state from ancient territorial states, of which pharaonic Egypt was one, and ancient city states, such as Old Babylonia or the Yoruba civilization of West Africa, as defined by Trigger (1993). While city-state systems share some characteristics with the segmentary state, such as multiple local centres of administration and military power, the segmentary state clearly differs in the wide spatial reach of ritual power of the king, as well as tendencies towards more dispersed agrarian and pastoral settlement with less importance given to any central city.

The importance of the segmentary state model lies in the processes it envisions. It must be noted that the segmentary state is a controversial category, and one that was rejected outright by one recent conference on the archaeology of early states (Marcus and Feinman 1998), but which has gained currency within African archaeological

circles (e.g. McIntosh 1999b) in addition to other historical contexts such as South Asia (Stein 1998; Southall 1988, 1999). While it certainly is the case that Alur society described by Southall (1956) was nothing like a state in terms of hierarchical complexity, this defining example nevertheless highlights recurrent patterns that fit predictions of the segmentary state model (Edwards 1996a, b, 1998a), most particularly, that territorial sovereignty (direct control through military and/or bureaucracy) is limited while suzerainty (symbolic authority) is more extensive, and central government has reduced control over the peripheries of suzerainty. The use of armed force may have been equally limited, with local 'officials' with military-like titles representing local warlords. Most of the time force may be used for raiding, a source for acquiring wealth in such things as cattle and slaves, rather than for territorial acquisition. Within this model, legitimation is achieved through religious symbols and through the redistribution of prestige goods to local elites. Edwards (1996a, b: 12–13) combined the segmentary state with Mann's (1986: 22–28) idea of four different, and potentially not unified, sources of social power: political, economic, ideological and military (see also Earle 1994). While the pharaonic model had generally assumed these sources of power to be largely coterminous, the Sudanic model allowed for these sources to be overlapping but differing in their territorial extent and their degree of intensiveness at a distance from centralized authority.

The most archaeologically evident implication of the Sudanic model is the interpretation of Nubian trade as part of a prestige goods economy that played a crucial role in the creation and maintenance of Meroitic ideological power. While the evidence for long-distance trade with Egypt and elsewhere has long been obvious, it has often been conceived in a fairly simplistic and capitalist vein, in which the economic benefits of trade were implicitly self-evident (cf. W. Y. Adams 1977, 1981, 1988; Török 1984). Edwards' (1996b: chs. 3 and 4) analysis of the distribution of imported trade goods indicate that most were limited in quantity and focused on regional centres of elites, with most rare exotic items being focused in the royal cemetery at Meroe, implying that the exchange of these items was likely a royal monopoly. Some of the luxury goods, as well as centralized manufactures (probably including some Meroitic fine wares) were then distributed to local elites, who in turn gave tribute and showed allegiance to the Meroitic king through the giving of local wealth objects and probably some services in warfare or raiding. A similar pattern of tribute and elite gift-giving may have been carried out between regional elites and more local elites on an increasingly restricted scale. This form of maintaining relationships of power through exchange can be considered through the broader anthropology of gift-giving (Gregory 1982; Mauss [1950] 1990) and substantivist views of the economy as inherently embedded within social systems in pre-modern times (Polanyi 1968). To quote from Guyer (1995: 87): "the history of exchange and the history of relationships must permeate one another." And indeed the prestige-goods economy and Meroitic trade can be understood as an example of a phenomenon well documented in African history and ethnography, in which material wealth is exchanged for social influence or 'wealth-in-people' (Guyer 1995; Guyer and Eno Belinga 1995; McIntosh 1999b). Our very ethnocentric conception of wealth as material goes hand-in-hand with seeing states as territorial (i.e. possessing strictly defined lands), whereas if we accept that the Meroitic Kingdom worked within a different framework in which the brokering of influence and social power were

primary, it becomes necessary to re-conceive a number of issues and debates in Meroitic studies.

The power of the Sudanic model: dissolving debates

The conceptualization of power in the Sudanic model is fundamentally different from that of the centralized pharaonic state, and this alternative understanding of authority and sovereignty is a powerful tool for understanding the archaeological and historical evidence available for the Meroitic Kingdom (cf. Edwards 1996b; Fuller 1997). A key difference in the segmentary Sudanic model is that power focuses on the gaining of influence over people, for example, through the formation of alliances and situations of social debt, rather than on the absolute rulership over territory, administered through bureaucratic officials, and ownership of material goods (McIntosh 1999b: 16; and see also Guyer 1995; Guyer and Eno Belinga 1995; Southall 1999). This notion of 'wealth-in-people' and indeed power in terms of influence through social networks provides an important contrast with our conventional notion of the centralized nation state with territorial hegemony (see e.g. Mann 1986, 1988; and for Egypt, Kemp 1989). In the context of the Meroitic Kingdom therefore we might ask whether conceptions of state boundaries are of particular relevance and need have any correlation with power networks defined on the basis of honourific titles.

Considering the Meroitic evidence in terms of Mann's dimensions of social power makes it clear that we are dealing with networks of differing extents. As argued by Edwards (1996b), central control of subsistence produce was probably limited to river basin agriculture near Meroe and surrounding savannah agro-pastoral production in the Western Butana which could have been 'taxed' through the temple and reservoir complexes in that region (cf. Török 1997a: 470). Within this region fairly intensive economic power, presumably backed up by intensive military power, and the ideological power expressed in temple monuments formed the basis of political authority. It is also likely that agricultural produce was obtained by other royal palace-temple establishments from local basin agriculture in such regions as Napata, Kawa and Pnubs (in the basins of the Fourth to Third Cataracts), but the generally low agricultural productivity that is likely to have been the case during this period would have prevented the kind of large scale centralized storage of agricultural surpluses which characterized Ancient Egypt (and can be attributed more generally to many Eurasian complex societies, cf. Goody 1976; McIntosh 1999b; Southall 1999). A measure of centralized control at these centres would seem to be implied by textual evidence, all from the earlier Napatan period (up to ca. 315 BC), for successive enthronement ceremonies carried out at each of these places as part of what Török (1992, 1997b) has referred to as 'ambulatory kingship'. As discussed by Török, these ceremonies imply a tradition in which these separate centres of ideological power (and perhaps previously separate political powers) are symbolically unified by the accession of the Meroitic king, but they may also imply that some ideological power remained focused on the temple at each of these locales. This need for sequential movement of the king to legitimate his authority has parallels in the later Funj sultanate (cf. Edwards 1998a; Spaulding 1979).

That this itinerary did not include regions further north, such as Lower Nubia, suggests that it lay outside the regions of direct sovereignty united under the king. Certainly evidence from further north (and the later Meroitic period) implies that ideological power associated with other temples was drawn upon by Meroitic kings and other elites for legitimization but that the influence of these temples was extensive, perhaps diffuse, and extended across territorial boundaries. Thus Philae, a site for which there is no reason to believe it was ever not part of Roman Egypt, contains numerous inscriptions of Meroitic Nubian elites, and some Meroitic kings, implying that visits to this temple and participation in its rituals aided legitimization in terms of ideological power at a place where actual military or political control was clearly held by others (i.e. the Roman Empire). In addition, within Lower Nubia, the temple site of Qasr Ibrim provides ample evidence for Meroites (i.e. individuals fluent in the Meroitic script) and Egyptians (leaving inscriptions in demotic) actually making pilgrimages to the site (as attested by their inscribed footprints of pilgrimage – Wilson 1996), as well as apparently epistle-like ostraca and dockets that may have been addressed to oracles from Meroitic as well as Egyptian individuals (Edwards and Fuller 2000; Rilly 2000; Zauzich 1999). This evidence clearly attests to the cross-cutting extent of ritual (ideological) powers at these temples and indicates the non-equivalence of the different sources of power in the Middle Nile region.

By seeing the Meroitic Kingdom as a segmentary state with differing degrees of involvement in the sources of power in different regions, it is possible to dissolve some areas of long-standing debate in Meroitic studies. Three particular areas of controversy can be seen to be unproblematic, perhaps even predictable, when all of the implications of the Sudanic model are taken on board: the issue of a Meroitic-Prolemaic 'condominium' in the Dodekaschoenos, the involvement of the Meroitic Wayekiye clan in the Dodekaschoenos in the third century AD prior to Roman withdrawal from Nubia, and the issue of Meroitic north-south contrasts as well as northern 'autonomy'. Of crucial importance is to assess these issues in terms of the political worldview implied by the Sudanic model, in which social power predicated on ritual legitimization and reinforced through sumptuary gift-giving was primarily to do with influencing people rather than controlling territory. This provides an important contrast with the pharaonic situation, or that of imperial Roman Egypt, in which centralized military control of territory was paramount.

The possibility of a joint rulership of the Dodekaschoenos between Ptolemy IV and Argamani during the third century BC becomes something of a non-issue within a Sudanic view of the Meroitic Kingdom. The coexistence of temple inscriptions and evidence for building activity sponsored by both Ptolemy from Egypt and the Meroitic king Argamani at Pselchis and Philae (and similar evidence for Ptolemy VIII and Adkeramon) has often been interpreted as a form of condominium or joint rule of Lower Nubia, or at least the northern part (Dodekaschoenos) by Ptolemies and Meroites (e.g. Adams 1977: 334–335; Shimme 1967: 41). Interestingly, the motive for Meroitic involvement suggested by Adams (1977) is purely commercial, namely the control of the northern access to Wadi Allaqi gold mines. As discussed by Török (1997b: 427–430), it makes far more sense to see these building activities as sequential during periods of Ptolemaic followed by Meroitic and then again Ptolemaic control of the region, with the Meroitic interlude perhaps relating to an Upper Egyptian revolt by Hor-weneter. Nevertheless, the sequentiality of these building episodes and their

correlation with absolute chronology remains guesswork predicated on the assumption that both the Ptolemies and the Argamani were after the same thing: territorial control. In contrast, we can suggest that the building activities by Argamani (and the problematic Adkeramon) need not be seen as territorial claims but only as efforts at ritual legitimization, especially amongst populations within Lower Nubia, through giving architectural gifts to the local temples. While the Ptolemaic building was doubtless directed towards asserting sovereignty over the region, the Meroitic building should be seen perhaps through a rather different worldview, even if facilitated by a period of weak Ptolemaic defence of the region.

A similar perspective makes sense of the activities of the Wayekiye family in Meroitic Lower Nubia, the Roman Egyptian Dodekaschoenos and at Philae. This family is attested by funerary inscriptions from Gebel Adda, Madiq near the southern border of the Dodekaschoenos (the historically attested southern Roman frontier) and from inscriptions at the temple at Philae (clearly within Roman Egyptian territory) dating in general to the mid-third century AD. This family included title-holding elites within the Meroitic 'officer' system of Lower Nubia, as well as the title *Pelimos* which has been connected to the Ptolemaic Greek title *strategos*, or 'general' (Griffith 1912: 18; Haycock 1976; Millet 1968: 43–45, *passim*; 1981; Török 1979: 93 ff, 1980, 1987: 172–174). This family was clearly active within officially Roman territory, possessing titles referring to Philae, and probably were also active within the Dodekaschoenos, such as at Kalabsha (cf. Fuller 1997: 117, based on AW4 of Trigger and Heyler 1970) while also being prominent figures at the Meroitic Nubian site of Gebel Adda and clearly being well intermarried with elite families in Lower Nubia (Millet 1968, 1981), including those of Arminna West (Fuller 1997; Trigger and Heyler 1970), as well as apparent relatives of the central Meroitic royalty. The apparently elite status enjoyed by this family within the Meroitic domain as well as within the Dodekaschoenos need not imply weak Roman control of the latter territory as some have assumed (Török 1988: 26), but only that the Wayekiyas and indeed other Lower Nubian elites were focused on ritual legitimization and social relationships within Roman territory, rather than territorial control as such. While numerous Meroitic Nubians presented themselves in the Philae temple as envoys of the Meroitic king to the Roman world (Griffith 1912; Török 1978, 1979, 1980), the suggestion that these pilgrimages were "nothing else than embassies" (Török 1989: 63) must surely downplay the importance of their ritual legitimization both of their own elite status and of their role in both recognizing and maintaining the symbolic hegemony of the central Meroitic king. That their power within Lower Nubia may have been facilitated by some weakening of Roman authority, or indeed of Meroitic authority (cf. Fuller 1997, 1999), does not escape the likelihood that their trans-territorial power derived from the active pursuit of ritual legitimization and social influence without clear military or territorial control.

The power of the Wayekiye family is often discussed in relation to the contentious issue of the extent of integration of the Lower Nubian province, known as *Akin*, and the central Meroitic monarchy during the later period. As suggested by Millet (1968) on the basis of texts such as those of the Wayekiye family, and as argued by Adams (1976, 1977) on the basis of archaeological contrasts between the archaeologically 'secular' North and 'sacred' South, the Lower Nubian province may have been largely autonomous from the central Meroitic monarchy. The problematic secular-sacred distinction aside, this separation has been critiqued largely on the basis of the presence

of Meroitic officials in Lower Nubia attested to by funerary inscriptions with references to the Meroitic royal family (but not to specific kings) (e.g. Haycock 1976; Török 1976, 1979, 1987). The close integration of Lower Nubia with Central Sudan makes sense if we assume that the Meroitic titles indeed represent economic officers on the pharaonic model. But if we see these titles as honorific epithets that were employed by regional elites for their legitimization by reference to the symbolic central authority, then their use implies strategies for coping with circumstances of local power negotiation (Fuller 1997). During the late to terminal Meroitic period (third to earlier fourth century AD) Meroitic office holders in Lower Nubia proliferate, with a greater range of office titles and a greater number of individual office holders named in funerary inscriptions (Fuller 1997; Trigger and Heyler 1970). Given that there is no equivalent evidence from Central Sudan and that evidence for active involvement of Meroitic kings in Lower Nubia (e.g. through monumental building and inscriptions) is extremely limited during this late period, the proliferation of Meroitic title-holders in Lower Nubia is perhaps best understood within its own regional context of power and legitimization. Archaeological evidence for trade in Lower Nubia (Edwards 1996b) contrasts with that elsewhere in the Meroitic domain, indicating some distinct economic connection between the northern province and Roman Egypt that was not part of the central Meroitic prestige goods economy. This raises the clear possibility that elites in Lower Nubia participated in different networks of economic power, while at the same time acknowledging the ritual hegemony (ideological power) of the Meroitic monarchy.

Substantive practices: material culture and ritual in a segmentary world

As the economics of Meroitic trade have been recast as playing a role in the maintenance of power, burial rituals too and the use of material culture need to be considered within a context of social relations and local power networks. While conventional analysis of Meroitic funerary inscriptions has focused on their content, especially in terms of translatable office titles and kin relationships, their occurrence in the funerary context must be considered alongside other deposits and erections. The occurrence of these stelae generally accompanied other sandstone monuments, including ba-statues and figural or inscribed offering tables, placed outside small pyramidal burial monuments containing the burial (Adams 1977; Geus 1991). While this monument type has been found in central Meroitic Sudan, where it appears to be in the small minority (Edwards 1998b), it dominates cemeteries of northern Nubia. What is interesting about this is that while the pyramidal tomb structure clearly mimics in miniature the royal pyramids of Meroe (Figures 12.3, 12.4 and 12.5; and as noted by Woolley and Randall-MacIver 1910), this referencing of royal practices was more important at the distant periphery of suzerainty than within the region of clear sovereignty. This state of affairs implies that local legitimization through connection with the ideological power of the Meroitic royalty played an important role in the social relations of northern Nubia. This evidence further implies that essentialist understandings of burial customs in terms of Meroitic or non-Meroitic identity are flawed and that social identities must instead be seen as representations in the context of local power dynamics.

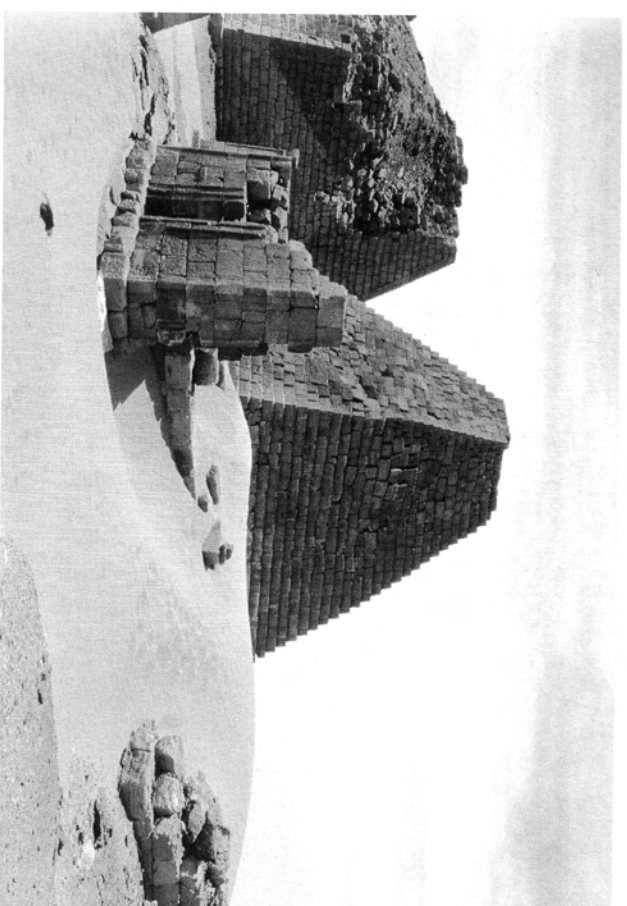


Figure 12.3 Royal pyramids and chapel at Meroe (© Dorian Fuller).

Within northern Nubia inscriptions proliferate in the late to terminal Meroitic period. They are found at a range of smaller sites, and contain increasingly long sections referring to kin and their honorific titles, implying an increased emphasis on legitimization through established networks of social power, and Meroitic means of memorialization. This proliferation of conventions, which symbolically at least indicates connections with the central Meroitic royalty, and burial customs, are transformed in the late third to early fourth century, which is before the historically attested 'fall' of Meroe. Analysis of the small cemetery at Arminna West suggests that while kinship remains important, as indicated by the continuing re-use of individual tombs and burial clusters that probably represent kin groups (Figure 12.6), the actual practices of burial, some of the grave goods and the practice of erecting stelae, statues and offering tables undergo progressive change and experimentation (Fuller 1997, 1999). While some of the new burial customs appear to be inspired by elite burial monuments in the Dodekaschoenos, such as those at Kalabsha which might be attributed to an emergent elite deriving from populations of the Red Sea Hills (Williams 1991), other changes in the burials appear to be purely local developments. This implies that the existing social order in which the symbolism of the older pyramid-stature-stela-offering table practice, which probably referred to royal Meroitic practices, lost its symbolic currency, and local communities began to work within different frameworks of legitimization. Thus a detailed consideration of burial customs, and indeed other aspects of life such as pottery production and agriculture, promises to provide glimpses of the dynamics of social change during the post-Meroitic period.

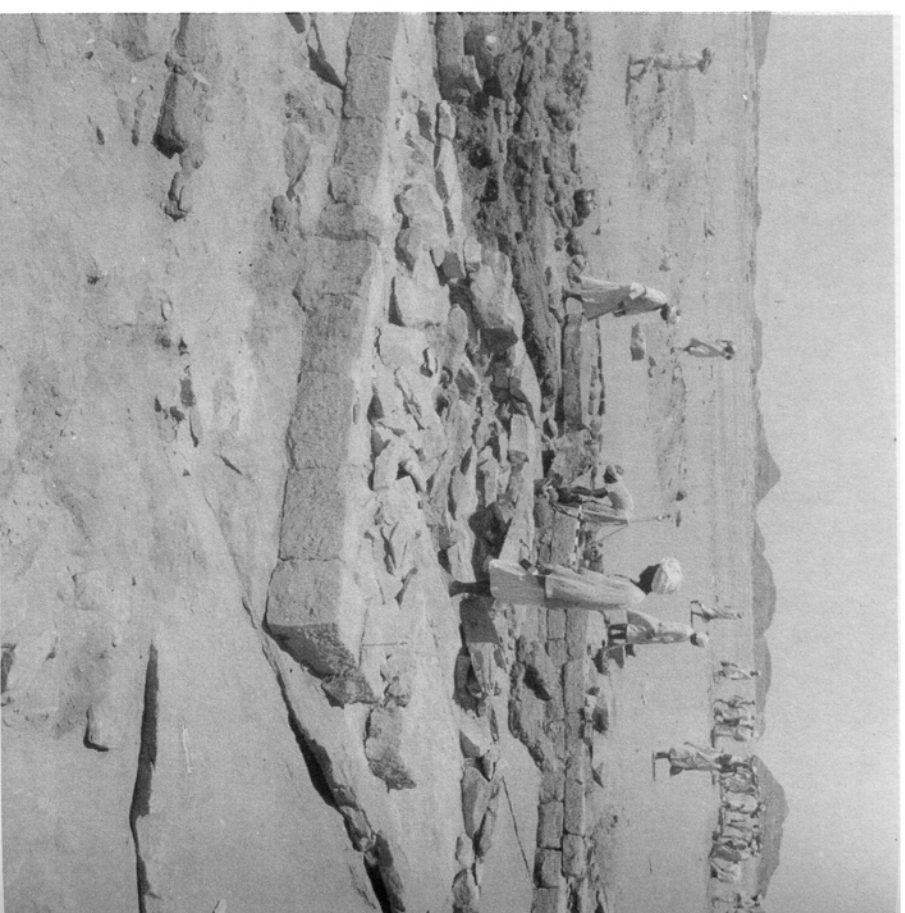


Figure 12:4 Excavated pyramidal tombs at Arminna West, Cemetery B. Note small chapel on tomb in background (Fuller forthcoming, Pennsylvania Yale Expedition to Egypt 1963).

The terminal Meroitic transition: rephrasing the questions

Conventional accounts of the end of the Meroitic Kingdom have tended to imply passive local communities in receipt of change, while the alternative approach promoted by the Sudanic model of Meroitic society examines local communities as actively engaged with social and political change. This model clearly implies a substantivist view of a socially embedded economics, but I have suggested that it should also include an understanding of the manipulation and creation of material culture and ritual in the context of social relations. While older models of the emergence of the post-Meroitic X-Group by ethnic migration have been criticized (Adams 1977; Trigger 1965, 1982), a model of transformation that addresses local social dynamics has remained elusive. Adams (1977: 413–416) once proffered the alternative theory that linguistically Nubian underclasses threw off the yoke of their Meroitic overlords to establish the post-Meroitic Ballana culture and its Qustal-

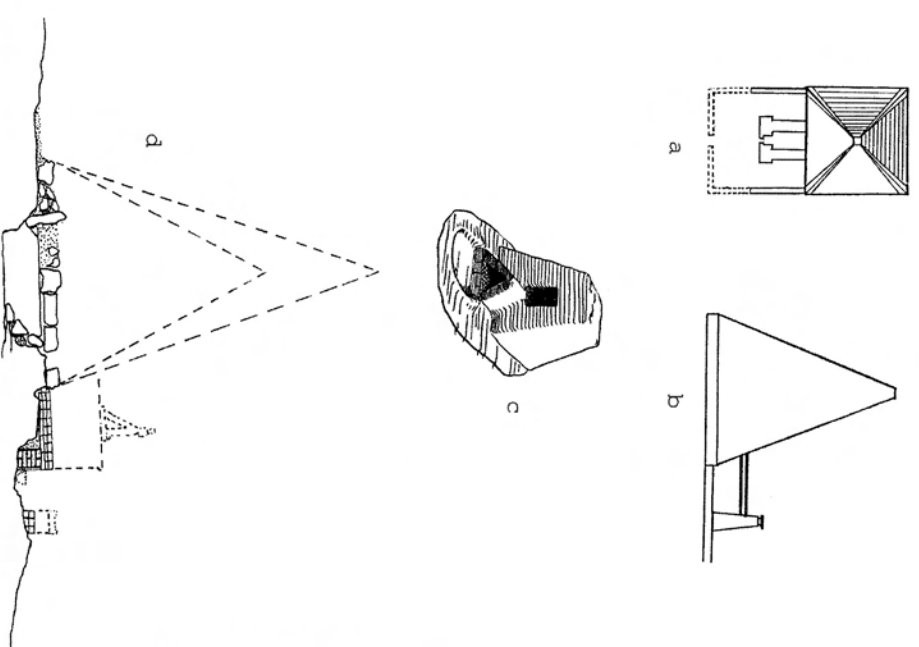


Figure 12:5 (a) and (b) Schematic diagrams of Meroitic royal pyramid, (c) Reconstruction of Lower Nubian elite tomb (after Woolley and Randall-MacIver 1910: 13) and (d) Reconstruction of pyramid at Arminna West, Cemetery B (Fuller forthcoming, Pennsylvania Yale Expedition to Egypt 1963).

Ballana elites. This explanation is problematic both for imposing a modern notion of a class system (which may not be relevant in a Sudanic context, cf. Goody 1976; McIntosh 1999b) and because it replaces the totality of ethnic groups with the totality of classes. These explanations seem to derive from asking questions in terms of what the differences are between the 'Meroitic' culture and 'post-Meroitic' culture and then interpreting these cultural historical abstractions in terms of generalized human groups, whether ethnic groups, states or social classes. Instead we need to ask how individuals and communities drew upon existing practices, beliefs and material culture to perpetuate or change aspects of their social life. Changes in material culture need to be seen in terms of their reflection of the dynamic, and often very local, processes of communication and agency in the past (see theoretical works such as Barrett 1994; Chapman 2000; Dobres 2000; Schiffer and Miller 1999). While Török's (1988, 1997) view on this transition accepts population continuity and social change within Lower Nubia by-and-large, accompanied by an unprovable northward movement of elite who establish themselves at Qustul, an understanding of the

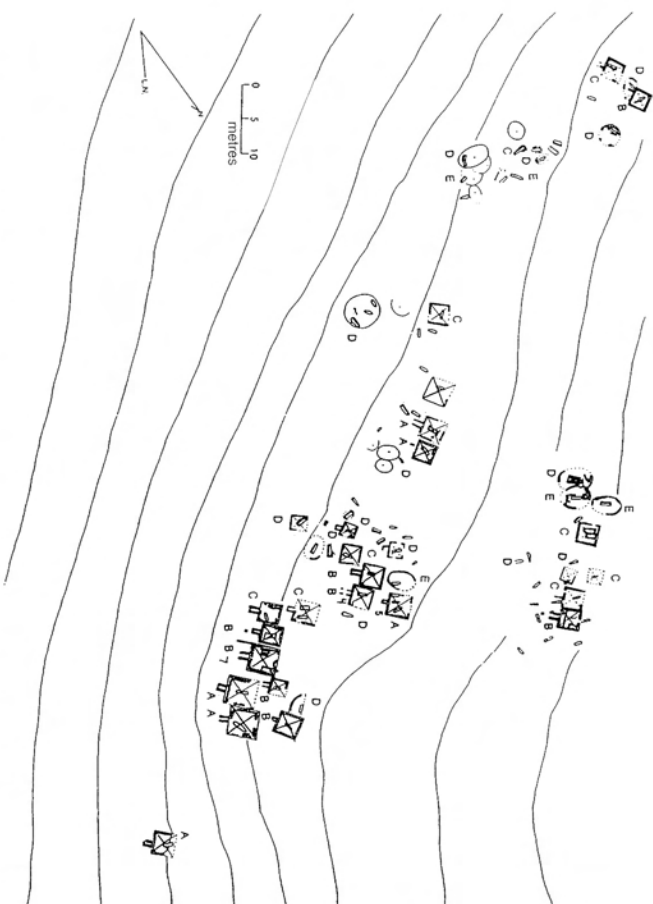


Figure 12.6 Plan of Arminna West Cemetery B. Note that the tombs group into five clusters, each with a range of superstructure types. Letters near tombs indicate probable period of earliest interments: A = Classic/Late Meroitic (late second century – ca. 240 AD), B = Late Meroitic (ca. 240–300 AD), C = Terminal Meroitic (ca. 300–340 AD), D = Kalabasha Phase post-Meroitic (ca. 330–380 AD), E = Gusha Phase post-Meroitic (ca. 370–420 AD).

transformation in local terms, and in terms of Lower Nubian archaeological evidence, remains to be developed.

As outlined briefly above, the archaeological record from Arminna suggests local reinterpretation of and innovation within late Meroitic rituals which was probably responding to changed political circumstances. This suggestion for Lower Nubian change should be seen as parallel to the reconsideration of the 'fall' of Meroe, which has conventionally been attributed to an invasion of Noba tribesmen followed by conquest by Aksum (e.g. Shinnie 1967, Török 1988, 1997b). As later fourth century tumulus burials from El Hobagi containing some 'royal' grave goods suggest, the fourth century needs to be seen in terms of a transformation of Central Sudanese political power and associated symbolism of burial rites (Edwards 1996b, Lenoble 1999, Lenoble and Sharif 1992). While the terms we use to describe and comprehend this change remain controversial, it is clear that simplistic reference to invasions and the 'fall' of the state is not enough.

The straight-jacket (or 'state-jacket') of the pharaonic model for Meroitic society fails to make sense of nuances in the archaeology of Nubia. Indeed Nubia, over many periods, seems to have challenged aspects of our conventional tribe to chiefdom to state typology of social evolution (Fuller 1996; cf. O'Connor 1993). By seeing the Meroitic kingdom as a totality, with causes of change predicated on invasion or collapse, individuals and local communities of ancient Nubia are relegated to passive

roles. As argued in general terms by Trigger (1978b), communities are an appropriate scale for archaeological analysis of social processes, and it is at this scale that local social relations can be seen to interact with broader networks of power and shared symbols. As the archaeological evidence from Arminna West attests, particular communities followed their own historical trajectories, responding in unique but not incomprehensible ways to the changing context of power networks and political authority.

Conclusion

The relationships between the cultural traditions of the societies in Meroitic Nubia and those in Egypt were clearly complex, involving different levels of interaction and inspiration. In the broader context of Africa, Nubia certainly served as a corridor of transmission in terms of trade between the Lower Nile (Egypt) and the savannahs beyond the Middle Nile (Central Sudan). Egyptian products, such as ceramics, glass vessels, wine and perhaps some copper vessels, moved south in the Meroitic period while cotton cloth, gold, ivory, tropical hardwoods and fauna moved north. In the long term it also served as a conduit for the diffusion of crops, with sub-Saharan crops like sorghum and cowpea moving north, whereas horses (in the Egyptian New Kingdom) and at much earlier prehistoric periods wheat, barley and other winter crops moved south. Diffusion of articles of this kind, however, even when incorporated into local practices, may carry with them little in terms of cultural understandings, and indeed there is reason to believe that Nubia and Egypt maintained different food traditions over a long period (Edwards Chapter 10, this volume). In the realm of ritual and political culture there was also much inspiration from Egypt in Nubia, but in this case Egyptian symbols and practices were construed in terms of the social behaviours and political intrigues of Nubia. As such, Egyptian iconography and religious motifs ceased to be Egyptian and became Meroitic, and were utilized by elites and communities in Nubia as potent symbols in maintaining and modifying Nubian power relationships. Thus, at the most visual level of Egyptian inspiration in Nubia, such as pyramidal tombs and temple iconography, the 'Egyptian' elements bore Meroitic meanings and in terms of these cultural symbols Nubia served less as a corridor between Egypt and the rest of Africa and more as a rival in generating symbols and practices of legitimation, which in turn would have been available for selective reinterpretation by other societies further south. Thus Nubia must not be seen as passively receiving culture from Egypt, as many older narratives of Egyptian cultural survival in Nubia imply, but rather as actively borrowing and reordering symbols as part of its own distinctive Sudanic system of power. In understanding Nubian society of the past, therefore, we must be wary of interpreting apparently Egyptian symbols in Egyptian terms, and attempt instead to understand the traditional dynamics of Nubia in Nubian terms.

Notes

- 1 One wonders to what extent the modern Egyptological interest in Kush as a late preserver of Egyptian tradition has been influenced by references in this vein found in Late Period Egyptian literature (such as Manetho) and some classical sources in which deposed Egyptian kings or rebels almost invariably flee south to Nubia (cf. Török 1989: 70).

- 2 Discussions of the rise of the twenty-fifth Dynasty have often been from a Egyptocentric viewpoint, with its origins in 19th century colonialism, as discussed in length by Morkot Chapter 11 and Wengrow Chapter 9, both this volume.

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[note, this typescript is for chapter by Fuller; as published the bibliography is combines for all chapters in the book *Ancient Egypt in Africa*]

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