



EDITORIAL ESSAY: NUBIA, COMING OUT OF THE SHADOW OF EGYPT

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The field of Nubian studies has advanced rapidly over the past several decades, emerging in the 21st century as a vibrant and increasingly independent discipline, if still related to Egyptology in many ways. This special issue reflects some of the developments in the field as older sources are reassessed and new archaeological projects in both Egypt and Sudanese Nubia fill in gaps and populate “dark ages,” providing an increasingly dynamic and nuanced portrait of Nubia and its interactions with Egypt and the Near East. Papers by Williams, Gatto and Spencer show how new work is refining and transforming our view of Nubia, while those by Khan, Yellin and Francigny, et al., show the potential for the reanalysis of texts, monuments and older archaeology in the context of the latest discoveries.

Khan addresses the complicated issue of reconciling Biblical tradition with the Egyptian/Nubian, and Assyrian historical record. The role of Taharqa at the pivotal battle of Eltekeh has important implications for geopolitics of 7th-8th centuries BCE, and reminds us of Nubia’s leading role in the conflict with an expanding Assyrian empire, mentioned in Bible and the Annals of Sennacherib. Yellin’s careful reassessment of the evidence for the ordering of Meroitic rulers has important implications for understanding relationship between this vibrant civilization and the Greco-Roman period in Egypt and more broadly the Mediterranean world. Her work draws attention to Nubia’s rich art historical record and the contribution art history can make to address critical historical issues. Francigny and colleagues demonstrate the importance of an awareness of the extensive literature that has developed in Nubian studies since the 1970’s. They apply an important corrective for future work on the important collection from El-Hesa and an appropriate caution for use of data from older collections.

Williams’s survey of the long history of interactions between Nubia and Egypt through the Second Intermediate Period provides a perceptive counter narrative to the traditional view of Nubia as subordinate to Egypt. He combines recent archaeological and epigraphic discoveries with a re-assessment of older sources to trace both Egypt’s wider engagement with the rest of Africa along with an acknowledgement of our growing awareness of Nubia as a credible rival to Egypt, sometimes penetrating into and impacting

the trajectory of Egyptian civilization. Williams also discusses the significance of the fourth cataract in light of the recent salvage campaigns connected with the recent construction of the Merowe Dam.¹ Previously thought of as a largely empty periphery, it is now clear that the region was occupied during this period, with important implications for Egypt’s trade networks and interactions with Wawat, Kush, Punt, and the peoples of the Eastern Desert, including the Medjay. He highlights one of the most important recent discoveries expanding the range of Egypt’s interconnections with the rest of Africa, the early Middle Kingdom Gebel Uweinat Inscription mentioning Yam. Combined with evidence for the caching of water for caravans on a route running from Dakhla Oasis to the Gifl Kebir, known since the early 20th century but only recently investigated systematically by Rudolph Kuper’s ACACIA project,² this new evidence strongly implies that Yam was not along the Nubian Nile but located far to the West, most likely Darfur or the area around the Ennedi mountains in Chad.³



Figure 1: Bes Amulets found *in situ* on one of a handful of woman buried in flexed Nubian style at Tombos (c. 1350 BC)



Figure 2: Early Third Intermediate Period (ca. tenth century BCE) tumulus at Tombos with east-west oriented shaft and remains of a supine bed burial (the trenches are for the bed legs). A Bat-Hathor amulet found *in situ* on a similar tumulus burial.

Gatto’s paper demonstrates that there is still much archaeological work to do in Egypt that can shed light on Nubian-Egyptian relations outside of submerged Lower Nubia.⁴ Her innovative microhistorical approach employs anthropological models combined with careful archaeology to create a nuanced understanding of the social and economic dynamics of the Pan Grave people and their interactions with Egypt and maintenance of Nubian cultural practices and identity. One of the most important developments in Nubian Studies is the increasing pace of archaeological research, like Spencer’s Amara project, being conducted in Upper Nubia, previously a region that was poorly understood. In particular, excavation by several expeditions at New Kingdom and Third Intermediate Period sites is bringing into focus the complexity of interactions in the New Kingdom colony and during its aftermath. It is clear now that while there may have been population shifts, the region was not depopulated,

abandoned or the colonial population somehow “withdrawn” at the end of the New Kingdom, but settlement continued even at former colonial sites like Amara West and Tombos, helping to explain the rapid emergence of the Kushite Dynasty.⁵ Spencer’s work reflects a picture appearing throughout the region of a complex two-way entanglement of Nubian and Egyptian cultural features, pointing up the inadequacies of Egyptianization models that sought to homogenize Nubia and posited the disappearance of Nubian culture in face of a superior Egyptian civilization.⁶

Both Spencer and Gatto take advantage of the anthropological theoretical framework of cultural entanglement, which is gaining growing currency as an effective way of understanding the legacy of colonialism and cultural interaction in the present and both the recent and distant past.⁷ Entanglement takes into consideration the agency of both indigenous and intrusive groups, in spite of the often unequal relationship

between the two that characterize violent conquest and occupation. Cultures do not interact; people do in an active process of intercultural consumption involving the appropriation and adaptation, but also indifference to and rejection of different objects or practices.⁸ The impact of ancient Egyptian culture in Nubia varied across both space and time, but also within different social contexts, producing the kind of heterogeneous cultural mix described by Spencer rather than the homogenous assimilation to Egyptian norms throughout Upper and Lower Nubia predicted by Egyptianization models.

Egyptian influence was felt most heavily during the early New Kingdom and from the first through the third cataract. For example, the Lower Nubian cemetery Fadrus, which runs through the late 18th Dynasty, reflects a nearly complete adoption of Egyptian burial practices. At the same time, flexed burials continue to appear rarely there and at other Lower Nubian sites, a cultural entanglement that resulted in the juxtaposition rather than the interweaving of Egyptian and Nubian burial practices. A similar pattern prevails at Tombos, where both colonists and individuals of Nubian ancestry are buried in Egyptian style, but to date six burials of New Kingdom Nubian women have been found in Nubian style position, suggesting that a gendered dynamic also prevailed at this colonial site and perhaps at others. A more subtle expression of cultural entanglement comes from one of these women, who wore amulets of the popular household deity Bes around her neck in spite of her (and/or her relatives) insistence on a flexed burial (Figure 1). Meanwhile, in a domestic context at the second cataract fortress of Askut, which was founded in the Middle Kingdom, Nubian cooking pottery increases in proportion steadily through the New Kingdom, when it dominates the cooking assemblage, resonating with the presence of Nubian cookpots at Amara West and other colonial sites. Contradicting Egyptianization models that posited the complete disappearance of Nubian culture throughout the empire, the persistence of Nubian style burial practices, cuisine/ceramic traditions, and other aspects of material culture demonstrates the complexities of entanglements and the resilience of Nubian culture even in the face of colonization and the widespread adoption of Egyptian cultural features.

Recent archaeological surveys and excavation are also showing that different colonial strategies produced different outcomes within Nubia. The impact of Egyptian culture above the third cataract appears to have been more ephemeral, supporting Morkot's argument for a more hands-off colonial policy that allowed a certain degree of cultural and political autonomy in the former Kushite heartland.⁹ Lending support to this model, tombs in the Upper Nubian cemetery of Hillat el Arab exhibit a number of departures from Egyptian practices, reflecting more of an

interweaving of cultural features than the juxtaposition that seems to characterize contemporary colonial sites below the third cataract. For example, painted decoration in the otherwise Egyptian style substructures resembles Nubian rock art rather than following Egyptian canons. Although the individuals are placed in communal crypts extended on their backs in Egyptian fashion, there are no indications of coffins, an important feature of Egyptian burial practice amongst the elite and well down the social ladder. Additionally, their orientation is variable compared to the standard Egyptian position with head towards the west. Traces of beds, a Nubian practice, were found underneath burials in the inner rooms, which the excavator, Irene Vincentelli, attributes to the local administrator.¹⁰ There are also a lack of specialized funerary objects like heart scarabs and Ushabtis that one might otherwise expect in an elite tomb, suggesting adaptation rather than the adoption of Egyptian practices and beliefs. Although I have argued against the idea put forward by Säve-Söderbergh, Török and most recently van Pelt¹¹ that the absence of these items is an indication of a lack of real cultural assimilation in non-elite burials at Lower Nubian cemeteries like Fadrus, their absence in the tombs here is telling since these kinds of objects are do not reflect 'normal' Egyptian practices but are strongly correlated with elite social status in Egypt.¹²

As Spencer documents here for Amara West, the social dynamic becomes more complex below the third cataract over the course of the empire as a result of long-term entanglements, leading to a more heterogeneous society blending and reinterpreting Egyptian and Nubian elements. In addition to the evidence from the settlement discussed here, a mix of Egyptian practices like extended burials in coffins and native Nubian forms like tumuli appear in the cemeteries at Amara. The pattern is similar in the Ramesside and later tombs at Tombos, reflecting a multicultural setting where individuals blended Egyptian and Nubian cultural features (Figure 2). There are nevertheless substantial differences in the nature of the entanglements at each site, expressed through variability both within and between the cemeteries – for example in the contrasting use of communal shaft and chamber burial complexes beneath tumuli at Amara and only simpler shaft and side chambers with bed burials in tumuli at Tombos, as well as the appearance flexed burials of women into the Ramesside and Third Intermediate Period in both Egyptian style mud brick tombs and Nubian style tumuli.¹³ This complex, heterogeneous pattern reinforces Spencer's call for a nuanced diachronic, bottom up approach emphasizing lived experience, showing how the inhabitants of colonial centers interwove Egyptian and Nubian cultural features in both daily life and burial practice, accepting some aspects of each, but rejecting and adapting others.

NOTES

1 "Archaeological Projects - The Merowe Dam Archaeological Salvage Project (MDASP)," International Society for Nubian Studies, accessed

February 20, 2014, www.nubiansociety.org/archaeologicalprojects.htm.

2 Stefan Kröpelin, and Rudolph Kuper, "More Corridors

- to Africa,” *Cahier de recherches de l’Institut de papyrologie et d’egyptologie de Lille* 26 (2007): 219-229.
- 3 Julien Cooper, “Reconsidering the Location of Yam,” *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 48 (2012): 1-21.
 - 4 For recent excavations in the Hierakonpolis C-Group cemetery and associated sites, Renee Friedman, “Excavations in the Nubian Cemeteries,” *Sudan and Nubia* 5 (2001): 29-37; and Renee Friedman, “The C-Group Cemetery at Locality HK27C: Results of the 2007 Season,” *Sudan and Nubia* 11 (2007): 57-62. For the A-Group in Egypt, see Maria Carmela Gatto, “Egypt and Nubia in the 5th-4th millennia BCE: A view from the First Cataract and its surroundings,” *British Museum Studies in Ancient Egypt and Sudan* 13 (2009), 125-45. www.britishmuseum.org/research/online_journals/bmsacs/issue_13/gatto.aspx
 - 5 Stuart Tyson Smith, “Tombos and the Transition from the New Kingdom to the Napatan Period in Upper Nubia.” In *Between the Cataracts: Proceedings of the 11th International Conference of Nubian Studies, 27 August – 2 September 2006, Part One: Main Papers*, eds. Włodzimierz Godlewski and Adam Lajtar (Warsaw: Warsaw University, 2008), 95-115.
 - 6 Stuart Tyson Smith, “Revenge of the Kushites: Assimilation and resistance in Egypt’s New Kingdom empire and Nubian ascendancy over Egypt,” in *Empires and Complexity: On the Crossroads of Archaeology*, ed. Gregory Areshian (Los Angeles, Cotsen Institute of Archaeology at UCLA, 2013); Stuart Tyson Smith and Michele R. Buzon, “Colonial Entanglements: “Egyptianization” in Egypt’s Nubian Empire and the Nubian Dynasty” in *Proceedings of the 12th International Conference for Nubian Studies, 01.–06. August 2010*, eds. Derek Welsby and Julie Anderson (Leuven: Peeters, 2014); cf., W. Paul Van Pelt, “Revising Egypto-Nubian relations in New Kingdom Lower Nubia: From Egyptianization to cultural entanglement,” *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 23 (2013): 523–50.
 - 7 E.g., Nicholas Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture and Colonialism in the Pacific* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1991); Michael Dietler, “Consumption, agency, and cultural entanglement: Theoretical implications of a Mediterranean colonial encounter,” in *Studies in Culture Contact: Interaction, Culture Change, and Archaeology* ed. James Cusick, J. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1998), 288-315; Stephen W. Silliman, “Culture contact or colonialism? Challenges in the Archaeology of native North America,” *American Antiquity* 70 (2010): 55-74.
 - 8 Michael Dietler, *Archaeologies of Colonialism: Consumption, Entanglement, and Violence in Ancient Mediterranean France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 55-74.
 - 9 Robert G. Morkot, “Egypt and Nubia,” in *Empires. Perspectives from Archaeology and History*, eds. Susan E. Alcock, Terence N. D’Altroy, Kathleen D. Morrison, and Carla M. Sinopoli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 227-251.
 - 10 Irene Vincentelli, *Hillat el-Arab* (London: Sudan Archaeological Research Society/BAR, 2006).
 - 11 Törgny Säve-Söderbergh and Lana Troy, *New Kingdom Pharaonic Sites* (Uppsala: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1991), 9, 248; László Török, *Between two worlds: the frontier region between ancient Nubia and Egypt, 3700 BC-AD 500* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), followed by van Pelt, who fails to take into account my response to Török, Stuart Tyson Smith, “Review of *Between Two Worlds: The Frontier Region Between Ancient Nubia and Egypt 3700 BC – AD 500* by László Török,” *Journal of African Archaeology* 8 (2010): 145-148.
 - 12 They incorrectly assume these items are a standard part of Egyptian burial practice when in fact an examination of their occurrence in New Kingdom cemeteries demonstrates that they are part of a reified, elite burial practice. The evidence at Fadrus for extended burial, wrapping, coffins and an east-west orientation, even when placed on the side, is entirely consistent with normal Egyptian practice during the early New Kingdom and provides a dramatic contrast with Nubian burial practice, see Guy Brunton and Reginald Engelbach, *Gurob* (London: Quairitch, 1927); Wolfram Grajetski, “Class and Society: Position and Possessions,” in *Egyptian Archaeology*, ed. Willeke Wendrich (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 184-187; Stuart Tyson Smith, “Intact Tombs of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Dynasties from Thebes and the New Kingdom Burial System,” *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts Kairo* 48 (1992): 193-231; Stuart Tyson Smith, *Wretched Kush: Ethnic identities and boundaries in Egypt’s Nubian empire* (London: Routledge, 2003), 155-166; and Smith 2010 for a rejoinder to Török.
 - 13 For Tombos, Smith 2008; Smith and Buzon; and for Amara West, Michaela Binder, Neal Spencer, and Marie Millet, “Cemetery D at Amara West: the Ramesside Period and its aftermath,” *British Museum Studies in Ancient Egypt and Sudan* 16 (2011): 47–99. www.britishmuseum.org/research/publications/online_journals/bmsacs/issue_16/binder_spencer_millet.aspx.