Current Perspectives in Sudanese and Nubian Archaeology

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Foreword

The Second Sudan Studies Postgraduate Conference (now Sudan Studies Research Conference) took place at the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research at the University of Cambridge on the 5th May 2018. The event, organised by Rennan Lemos, at the time a PhD student at the University of Cambridge, and Samantha Tipper, then a PhD student at Durham University, drew young scholars from across the UK and further afield. It was one of the most vibrant and engaging conferences I have attended. There has been renewed interest in Sudanese archaeology over the last twenty years and a proliferation of field projects and publications by established scholars. Against that backdrop, it was impressive to hear the significant contributions of the next generation of researchers and the degree to which the agenda is being refocused. Sudanese and Nubian archaeology are placed centre stage; indigenous agency and practice are highlighted alongside the complex local and long-distance relationships that underlie the varied material culture found across the region. The importance of championing inclusive dialogues, decolonising the field, and using appropriate theoretical frameworks are clear. There remains much work to do, but it is apparent from the papers published here—as well as those presentations that did not make it into the final volume—that the future of the discipline is in safe hands.

Kate Spence

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Introduction

Sudanese and Nubian Archaeology: Scholarship Past and Present

Rennan Lemos and Samantha Tipper

Current research on Sudanese and Nubian[1] archaeology comprises an increasingly large number of projects. There is a diversity of approaches based on new excavations and museum collections, or revisiting data sets from previously excavated sites presently being undertaken all around the world. This is followed by new interpretations of the role of Nubian and Sudanese populations in various periods of human history, based on interdisciplinary theoretical and methodological perspectives that allow collaborating researchers to rewrite narratives of historical continuity and change.

However, if today new interpretations seeking diversity and complexity are becoming the norm, the history of archaeology in Sudan and Nubia has been marked by colonial discourses and practices that considered ancient local populations as inferior, depending on their northern neighbours in Egypt for innovation and sociocultural change. This introductory essay addresses past, present and possible futures of archaeology in Sudan and Nubian historical writing, favouring postcolonial perspectives, interdisciplinarity, and a necessary epistemological decolonisation. Addressing past inequities in historical and archaeological research in Nubia requires current researchers to actively engage with extant local communities, to develop frameworks of inclusion and to recognise and reflect the continuities and diversity which characterise this special area of the Nile Valley.

Past Interpretations: Inferiority, Dependency and Homogenisation

In the past century, fundamental archaeological works set the basis for our understanding of Nubia's deep history and connections with the Nile valley and Africa more broadly (Arkell 1949; 1953), which has made prehistoric archaeologists in Sudan regularly more open to debates in African Archaeology (e.g., D'Ercole 2017; Garcea 2020). Additionally, groundbreaking publications by anthropologists working in Sudan and Nubia still work as primary resources today (e.g., Trigger 1965; Adams 1977). However, Nubia has been traditionally seen through the lens of Egyptology. James Henry Breasted, George Reisner, Georg Steindorff and other early Egyptologists were responsible for establishing the first broad narratives about the Nubian past. This usually included evolutionist, diffusionist and migration-based perspectives anchored, among other things, on osteoarchaeological observations of skulls from cemeteries found during large-scale surveys and earlier excavations; e.g., the first Archaeological Survey of Nubia (Smith and Jones 1910; Reisner 1910; Firth 1912; 1915; 1927), Reisner's excavations at Kerma (Reisner 1923a/b), or the Egypt Exploration Society's excavations at Sesebi (Blackman 1937). Osteoarchaological analysis in the early times of archaeology in Sudan and

[1] Nubia here is broadly understood as the geographical area between Aswan in Egypt and Khartoum in Sudan.

Nubia was conducted mainly based on skulls (Binder 2019: 106; Tipper 2003). They were measured and classified according to racist paradigms then in vogue that placed populations from Sudan and Nubia at the bottom of evolutionary scales, therefore producing interpretations conveying local residents as racially inferior in comparison to Egypt. This approach produced collections of human skulls kept in various institutions, such as the Duckworth Collection at Cambridge (Shellal and Kerma) or the London Natural History Museum's Sesebi collection, currently used as a basis for modern research exploring more complex aspects of biological data sets (Filer 1992; Buzon 2006; Jakob and Ali 2011; Binder 2019, Power et al. 2019).

Egyptological interpretations of Nubian history and material culture have been traditionally marked by prejudiced, colonial views of Nubian populations. Breasted's account on Nubian history can be used as an example. In 1906–1907, he travelled from Alexandria to Khartoum surveying and copying inscriptions and other records from various historical periods, which formed the basis of his *A History of the Ancient Egyptians,* published in 1908. In this publication, Breasted offered his view of Nubia's history as dependant from ancient Egypt's own history. For example, he assumed that a complex kingdom such as the Napatan, which later grew into an empire, could only result from the ancient Egyptian inventive capacity:

> *"Nubia had now detached itself and a dynasty of kings, probably of Theban origin had arisen at Napata, below the Fourth Cataract. These Egyptian rulers of the new Nubian kingdom now invaded Egypt, and although residing at Napata, maintained their sovereignty in Egypt with varying fortune for two generations"* (Breasted 1908: 22).

The passage above exemplifies how early Egyptology has seen Nubians as incapable of producing history, following a widespread tendency in African historical writing that denied diverse African societies of any inventive capacity (Fauvelle 2020). In order to create a complex social system that would eventually expand over Egypt itself, Nubia would depend on foreign (Egyptian) rulers, as local populations were considered inferior, both racially and culturally. Breasted's ideas were supported by his belief of a "great white race", which spanned from northern Europe to the north of Africa, and produced civilisation (Breasted 1935: 12). On the contrary, according to him, Nubians belonged to a "black race", which inhabited Africa southwards from Lower Nubia (Ambridge 2012: 22). Breasted's views were not unique; they expressed a dominant worldview among archaeologists and anthropologists of the past century that removed Egypt from its African context and created a version of ancient Egypt closer to 'Western civilisation' (cf. Said 1979; Appiah 2016).

In comparison with Egypt, early scholars have traditionally undermined the role of ancient Nubians as producers of cultural development. Ancient Nubian society has been understood as homogenous and monolithic, passively receiving and accepting inputs from ancient Egypt, such as technological improvements of 'corrupt' local ways of doing things. For example, Reisner understood Lower Nubia in the following terms:

> *"I take my picture of the time largely from Lower Nubia as it is to-day, living its isolated, primitive, agricultural life in political security… The largest*

> *centers of population had then, as now, a few Egyptian officials, bullying the local inhabitants and cursing their place of exile"* (Reisner 1923a: 7).

Further examples of Egyptocentric perspectives on local Nubian populations, considered as passive receptacles of Egyptian superior techniques, high literate culture and ultimately civilisation, can be found in the specialised literature. For instance, Bietak (1968: 113) had assumed that C-Group populations of Lower Nubia offered no resistance to the adoption of Egyptian culture, based on a visible transition from burials following local traditions to 'Egyptian' burial customs in the New Kingdom. In his words, once the C-Group met the ancient Egyptians it "completely lost its substance and therefore offered no resistance to the monopolizing Egyptian New Kingdom culture" (Bietak 1987: 122). In general, scholars have considered that the local populations of Lower Nubia were rapidly Egyptianised, while others have suggested a gradual move towards 'civilisation'. For instance, Säve-Söderbergh described the gradual change in building techniques and styles at C-Group settlements towards an "increasing occurrence of mud-bricks, square rooms, and defences imitating Egyptian fortifications" (Säve-Söderbergh 1989: 10). Today, perspectives as such have been proven inadequate, and scholars are increasingly able to identify the coexistence of both Egyptian and local Nubian patterns in settlements and cemeteries throughout Nubia (e.g., Spencer, Binder and Stevens 2017; Spencer 2010; Smith and Buzon 2017).

Early scholarly interpretations of Nubian history based on racist and colonial ideas such as inferiority and dependency were also applied to the material culture excavated at several sites in Sudan and southern Egypt. For instance, when Reisner led the first part of the Archaeological Survey of Nubia, he was unable to identify complexity and diversity in the material culture he found in a cemetery at Shellal. According to him, "the scarabs, amulets and shabtis are identical in form, material and technique with similar objects being found in Egypt in the New Empire" (Reisner 1910: 61). Following Reisner, Steindorff interpreted the material culture from cemetery S/SA at Aniba in an equally homogenising fashion. For example, he believed that

> *"all shabtis found at Aniba were probably made in Egypt and exported to Nubia. […] Many shabtis were mass-produced, as the owners' names were usually left uninscribed, especially within the text of the Book of the Dead; these objects were not made for a specific person, and were sent to Nubia to be sold"* (Steindorff 1937: 75).

It is true that many shabtis from Aniba do not bear the owner's name, but this is especially the case with 18th Dynasty stone shabtis, which were clearly imported from Egypt (Minault-Gout 2012). However, this does not mean that imported 'Egyptian' objects were adopted and handled in the same way throughout Nubia (Lemos 2020). On the contrary, imported shabtis (as well as other object categories) were adapted to fit local demands. This included later decorative patterns added onto imported shabtis to make them follow local demands for foreign objects (Smith and Buzon 2017: 624), which can also be identified in regional preferences in coffin decoration (e.g., Taylor 2017) and alternative roles performed by typically 'Egyptian' objects in local Nubian contexts. Besides, the vast majority of shabtis from Aniba were made of faience and clay, and those usually bear inscriptions naming their owners (Steindorff

1937: 73–85), and sometimes inscriptions almost certainly added by local hands (Steindorff 1937: plate 43, 16).

Early homogenising views of Nubian history and material culture, based on alleged racial inferiority of local populations, find parallels in how the ancient Egyptians themselves approached Nubians, usually depicted in Egyptian tomb walls as prisoners who were treated like commodities that had to be counted, sorted and controlled, as in the Memphite tomb of Horemheb (Martin 1989: plate 92). According to the views professed by early scholars, Nubians probably should have been grateful to the Egyptians for all the benefits they brought with them to the Middle Nile in Antiquity. However, if the ancient Egyptians brought innovation, they also brought violence, destruction, war, kidnapping and subjugation (see Fanon 1967: 48), a topic usually ignored in Egyptology (with exceptions: H. S. Smith 1976: 124–129; Säve-Söderbergh and Troy 1991: 4–6; S. T. Smith 2013: 87–88; Langer 2017: 43; Bestock 2018; Matić 2019). Such an Egyptocentric approach to Nubia would find echoes in modern colonial mind-sets and attitudes in vogue in 20th century, which emphasised infrastructural developments carried out by colonial officials in local contexts as progress towards stability and civilisation. However, colonial projects in local contexts usually aimed for economic exploration of raw resources and markets, rather than local development (e.g., Sheldon 2013: 76).

The Egyptological tradition in Nubian Studies included large-scale surveys and excavations that produced crucial data sets available today to renovated scholarly scrutiny, as well as established the basis for our understanding of Nubian cultural history. For example, following a preliminary survey by Weigall (1907), the excavations at Shellal within first Archaeological Survey of Nubia allowed Reisner to establish the basic cultural sequence for Nubia, which is still used, in its core, to this day (Reisner 1910: 5; 313–356). However, the extent to which Egyptology can understand Nubia's complexity "out of the shadow of Egypt" remains limited (see Smith 2014). Egyptocentric frameworks disregarded ancient Nubians as producers of sociocultural innovation, and earlier excavations' archives express their emphasis on ancient remains over modern Nubian populations, which ended up being disconnected from their original place, both historically and spatially, in the constitution of such archives (Carruthers 2020).

If, on the one hand, the Egyptological tradition in Nubian Studies produced important information and methodological advancements, although used to support homogenising approaches to Nubian dependency to Egypt, on the other hand, at least since the UNESCO Nubian campaign and the publication of Adams' *Nubia: Corridor to Africa* in 1977, Nubiology and Sudanese Archaeology constitute, for some scholars, an independent field with its own methods and aims. Instead of approaching Nubia through the lens of highly ideological textual sources produced by imperialist and xenophobic ancient Egyptians, especially in the Middle and New Kingdoms (Smith 2003), the focus has turned instead towards material culture as the primary resource for interpreting Nubia's complex social structures and historical continuity in the absence of texts produced by Nubians themselves (e.g., Adams 1977: 6; Adams 1987: 286–287; Edwards 1989: 2).

The extent to which further disciplinary boundaries (e.g., Egyptology *versus* Nubiology/Sudanese archaeology *versus* archaeology/anthropology) provide a way "out of the shadow of Egypt" remains open to discussion. Indeed, current scholarship seems to pay little attention to disciplinary boundaries, while focusing on sociocultural diversity in various historical periods and geographical areas in Sudan, including regions traditionally left out of the archaeological mainstream; i.e., areas far removed from the Nile Valley (e.g., Manzo 2017; Brass et al. 2018; Cooper and Vanhulle 2019). One thing seems to unite scholars from diverse backgrounds working with Nubian and Sudanese material in Sudan and elsewhere—a postcolonial attitude towards history and material culture, which

aims to emphasise Nubian agency in complex sociocultural processes that resulted in an independently rich and continuous history.

Present Scholarship: Complexity and Diversity

Today, Sudan is the site of increasingly collaborative archaeological research. These are characterised by a variety of approaches and aims, but an exploration of local cultural diversity seems to be a shared characteristic of most projects (e.g., Spencer, Stevens and Binder eds. 2017; Raue ed. 2019). These include the inputs from foreign and local mind-sets and practical knowledge, and professionals from a huge variety of fields, from the humanities to the hard sciences, as well as a strong focus on community archaeology (Tully 2014; 2015; Tully and Näser 2017; Fushyia 2017). The input from other disciplines has been fundamental to provide a basis from which archaeologists can identify and interpret diversity; e.g., long-distance connections between Nubia and other parts of the world in the New Kingdom or the Meroitic Period, which archaeology alone would not be able to identify (Fulcher, Stacey and Spencer 2020; Spedding 2019). Achieving such results, which depend on extracting and analysing material samples, would not be possible without the collaboration of Sudanese colleagues and authorities.

Whether explicitly discussed or not, an emphasis on Nubian agency and contribution to historical and sociocultural change guides current approaches to Nubian history and archaeology, as well as fieldwork practices. This includes current theoretical discussions on cultural entanglements, creativity and Nubian influences upon Egyptian culture (van Pelt 2013; Buzon, Smith and Simonetti 2016; Spencer, Stevens and Binder 2017), which also guide current approaches to previously or recently excavated material culture (e.g., Weglarz 2017; Kilroe 2019; de Souza 2019; 2020; Miniaci 2019; Lemos 2020). New excavations and surveys are now emphasising variability where past scholars only identified standardisation and acculturation (e.g., Budka 2019). Furthermore, new comparative discussions are pointing towards a more effective integration of the archaeology carried out in the Nile Valley in various periods and other parts of the African continent (e.g., Edwards 2019).

New theoretical discussions and approaches to material culture and excavation are only possible due to a decolonising effort that revisits the discipline's past in order to change its present. In Raue's words, "there was never a lack of theoretical basis in the archaeological investigation of Nubia—but such theories were simply not treated explicitly" (Raue 2019: 8). Therefore, endeavours such as Minor's work on Reisner's legacy consist of important steps forward that explicitly discuss theoretical perspectives applied to Sudanese and Nubian material, while providing us with ways of moving away from deep-rooted, inaccurate and dangerous perspectives that endure imperceptibly in today's scholarship (Minor 2018). Similarly, current community archaeology projects in Sudan, based on the collaboration between archaeologists and local communities, include a variety of inputs—both Western and non-Western—to the interpretation, preservation and communication of archaeological sites and cultural heritage (e.g., Fushyia and Radziwiłko 2019). Further attempts to decolonise Nubian Studies and Sudanese archaeology are necessary if we aim to fully understand Nubia's internal complexity and creative input to broader narratives of human history, as well as to stimulate local socioeconomic development through archaeological practice and heritage preservation (Bradshaw 2018; Fushyia and Radziwiłko 2019).

Moving Forward: Current Archaeological Research

Histories of Sudan and Nubia have been written based on Egyptological ways of understanding and classifying historical continuity and change; e.g., based on ‘kingdoms’ and ‘intermediate periods’ (e.g., Morkot 2000: 75). Egyptocentric approaches to Sudan and Nubia should now be avoided. This requires new attempts to rethink the analytical categories and terminology usually deployed by scholars working on Sudan and Nubia's ancient history. This also involves a daily exercise to identify possible hidden theoretical biases that lead us to instinctively think and write about Sudan and Nubia based on ancient Egyptian paradigms, especially common for the New Kingdom and Napatan Period.

Current and future challenges include efforts to further decolonise Nubian Studies in order to allow us to think completely “out of the shadow of Egypt” (Smith 2014), and to emphasise Nubian viewpoints on their own continuous history. This is not a goal that will be achieved in a few years. It requires a continuous collective effort to emphasise the independent character of Nubian Studies and archaeology in Sudan and to discuss archaeology's colonial roots and connections with institutions and projects that further marginalised local communities, whose interests have been historically ignored (Kleinitz and Näser 2013; Näser 2019; Näser and Tully 2019). Current research projects, publications, excavations and surveys in Sudan point towards a brighter future, where sociocultural diversity is explicitly sought, while past prejudiced interpretations are challenged in new historical narratives.

The present volume can be considered as a sample of Nubian Studies’ current affairs, at least within a European context. It stems from the 2nd Sudan Studies Postgraduate Conference (now the Sudan Studies Research Conference) held at the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, University of Cambridge, on 5th May 2018. The conference was previously held at Durham University (Tipper and Tully eds. 2018). The Cambridge conference gathered over 40 scholars from over 30 institutions in Europe, North America and Sudan. The papers and posters presented at Cambridge convey the diversity of perspectives and methodologies guiding different types of research projects on Sudan and Nubia. They range from new theoretical assessments of Nubian material culture inspired by postcolonial theory to bioarchaeological approaches to social complexity in Sudan in various periods. The present volume includes a selection of the papers delivered in the Cambridge conference, which express the multitude of research projects being carried out at various institutions.

Kilroe’s study focuses on pilgrim flasks, a global object category introduced to Nubia through Egyptian imperial expansion and colonisation. The author discusses, based on deposition patterns of these objects in Nubian contexts, how a single object category can be understood and experienced differently across cultural boundaries. Kilroe’s paper helps us to go further beyond acculturation/Egyptianisation perspectives on material culture in Nubia, which received and transformed foreign material patterns according to pre-existing complex local cultural backgrounds.

D’Itria’s contribution sheds light onto local specificities of Kerma religion based on their use and local production of faience amulets—objects usually (and simplistically) understood as Egyptian influences upon local Nubian beliefs and practices. Focusing on baboon- and ladder-shaped amulets, the author explores their connections with typically Kerman religious beliefs and practices.

Shinn presents an analysis of A-Group glyptic. According to her, early Nubian seals and sealings have never been approached systematically. Shinn’s analysis shows that, since the earliest stages of Egypto-Nubian exchanges, local complexity and cultural backgrounds played a crucial role in processes of transformation of foreign objects, resulting in typically Nubian-style glyptic, which differed in comparison with Egyptian-style glyptic.

Moving beyond traditional geographical spans, Rega, Minucci and Capasso present results of recent fieldwork at Mahal Teglinos in Eastern Sudan. The authors focus on a set of Gash Group burials containing macro-lithic tools from the eastern necropolis, and their relationships with the body. They discuss the evidence in the light of ethnographic parallels and gender theory, shedding light onto complex funerary customs in Sudanese prehistory.

Eldai and Babiker's contribution highlights Sudan's input into human population history and diversity, linking east Africa to global narratives of evolutionary history. Their paper explains that the inclusion of data from the Sudanese region into the global genomic repertoire can reveal a major diversity in terms of population history, but also shed light onto adaptation and migration routes from the earliest stages of human history to more recent periods. Because of this, the authors stress the importance of collecting aDNA samples in on-going excavations in Sudan, which will contribute to the development of new narratives on human evolution.

The peer-reviewed contributions grouped in the present volume represent the great variety of research projects currently being carried out on Sudanese and Nubian data sets. Each paper conveys a specific approach to a different set of material. However, the present edited volume can also be seen as a unity, as all papers explore Sudan and Nubia's diversity, complexity and input into broader historical processes as an independent sociocultural entity.

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