Chiefs or Kings?

Rethinking Early Nubian Politics

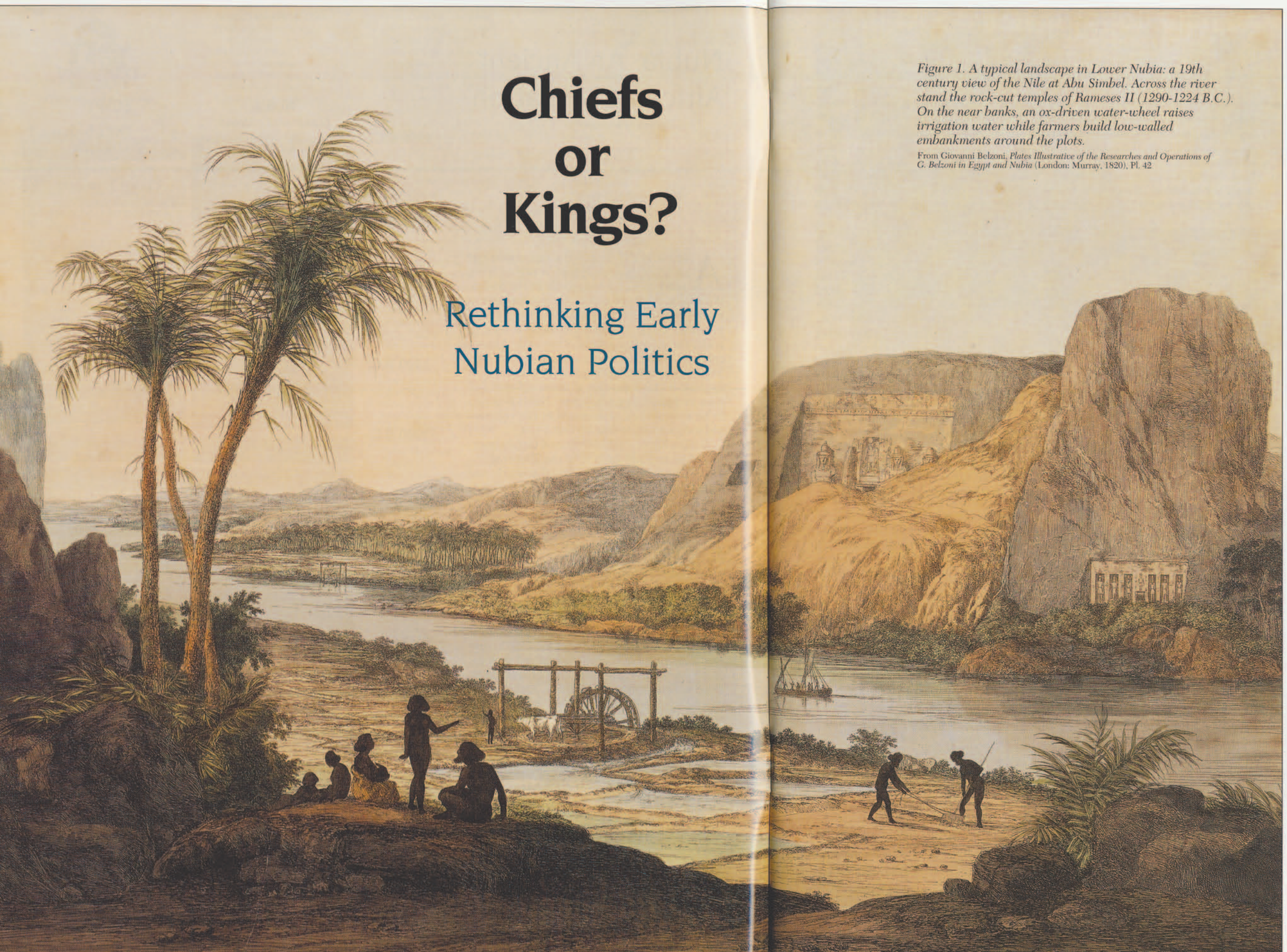

Figure 1. A typical landscape in Lower Nubia: a 19th century view of the Nile at Abu Simbel. Across the river stand the rock-cut temples of Rameses II (1290-1224 B.C.). On the near banks, an ox-driven water-wheel raises irrigation water while farmers build low-walled embankments around the plots.

From Giovanni Belzoni, *Plates Illustrative of the Researches and Operations of G. Belzoni in Egypt and Nubia* (London: Murray, 1820), Pl. 42

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Egypt and Nubia—immediately upstream of Egypt—developed the two earliest known of Africa's many civilizations. Yet Nubia is not found on modern maps and for many people its history remains mysterious. In medieval and later times it was recognized as a distinct country, but today most of Nubia is subsumed into the Republic of the Sudan, and northernmost Nubia is part of modern Egypt.

Nubia and Egypt were formidable competitors for control over key sections of the Nile Valley, trade-routes, and sources of raw materials. Nubia not only resisted but reciprocated Egyptian aggression. Indeed, soon after the Late Bronze Age (1550–1000 B.C.), during which Nubia endured a 400-year domination by Egypt, the Nubians drastically turned the tables. Egypt was conquered by Nubia—partially after 750 B.C., fully after 712 B.C.—and for a period a line of Nubian pharaohs, known as the 25th Dynasty of Egypt, ruled both lands. This "Ägypto-Nubian" kingdom was the largest ever seen along the Nile until recent times.

For a long time relatively few scholars studied Nubia's early civilization as compared to Egypt's or those of the Near East, and hence it was little known to the public in general. That situation has improved. Specialists in early Nubia are increasing in number. The evidence recovered by the pioneers in Nubian archaeology is being re-evaluated and significant new archaeological discoveries being made. Since the Brooklyn Museum's exciting exhibit in 1978–1979, important Nubian exhibits have opened in Europe, Canada, and the United States, including The University Museum's "Ancient Nubia: Egypt's Rival in Africa." Our knowledge of ancient Nubia is expanding and changing.

The Land and Its Civilization

Here, I focus on the Nubian Bronze Age (3000–1000 B.C.), one of several major phases of Nubian civilization that are covered in this issue of *Expedition*. Geographically, Nubia was like Egypt—a fertile, narrow oasis running through arid deserts. Only in Southern Nubia could nomads survive east and west of the Nile. Other nomadic groups roamed the Red Sea hills far to the east of Nubia.

Nubia was a very large country. Measured along the twisting course of the Nile, it was 1700 kilometers long (1054 miles), Egypt only 1100 kilometers. Most Bronze Age Nubians lived on the fertile flood plain, which was concentrated in three relatively well settled regions: Lower or northern Nubia, Upper or central Nubia, and Southern Nubia. Each was separated from the other by long stretches of infertile, thinly occupied land. 'Nubia' is a name that occurs relatively late in history (towards the end of the 1st millennium B.C.). Its medieval and later inhabitants spoke a distinctive language, called Nubian, but whether Nubian was spoken extensively in the Bronze Age or even later, in Napatan-Meroitic times, is uncertain.

The economy of Bronze Age Nubia was simple. Most people were agriculturalists dependent on flood and basin irrigation (Fig. 2), although animal herding was also important. However, a surplus was produced which, supplemented by income from trade with Egypt and elsewhere, supported an elite stratum in Nubian society and the development of a distinctive civilization.

Some scholars recognize Napatan-Meroitic culture as a civilization, but not the Bronze Age culture which preceded it. And it is true Bronze Age Nubia lacked some features associated with other civilizations. Egypt, for example, had grandiose architecture, elaborate art forms, and a writing system; Nubia did not. Yet, Bronze Age Nubia had temples, palaces, and royal tombs; in other words, it had a complex society and the institutions that went with it. Moreover, Nubian political systems were probably larger in scale and more state-like than is generally recognized. It is this relatively advanced stage of social development, as well as the richness and variety of its material culture, that makes Nubia civilized.

Figure 2. Nubians today plowing on the floodplain of the Nile. The earliest cattle in Africa were humpless. Hump-backed cattle like these were introduced from India sometime during the Bronze Age.

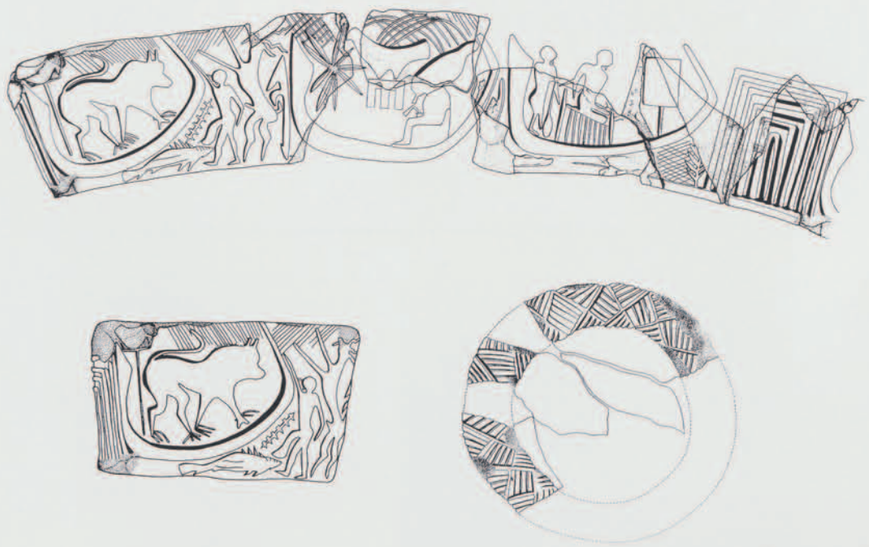
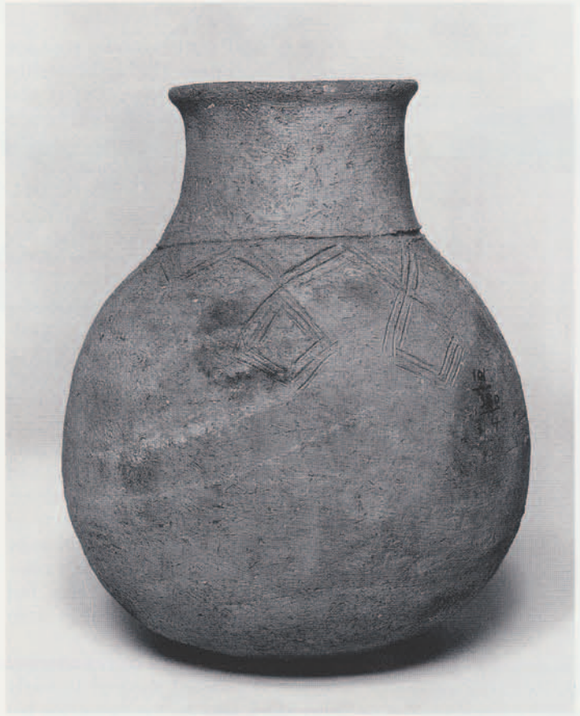


Figure 3. Incense burner carved with Egyptian icons found at Qustul, a Lower Nubian site used by A-Group people of the Terminal phase. Excavations at the cemetery of Qustul revealed a small number of graves abundantly furnished with Egyptian imports and local luxury items.Top: rollout view; bottom left: side view; bottom right: top view.

From Williams 1986: Pl. 34. Reproduced courtesy of The Oriental Institute of The University of Chicago. Rim dia. 14 cm; H. 8.8 cm



a

b

Figure 4a,b. The C-Group people dwelling in Lower Nubia were probably the descendants of A-Group people. However, C-Group pottery was quite different and included a coarse red ware and vessels with incised decoration.The hatched checker pattern on 'b' was a popular design used primarily around 2000–1800 B.C. From Dakka.

a: UM no. 92-2-17; H. 17.5, Dia. 16.0 cm; b: UM no. 92-2-14; H. 6.0, Dia.13.1 cm;

Understanding Bronze Age Nubia

Our understanding of Bronze Age Nubia as a cultural and political force is based in part on its archaeology, and in part on references to Nubia in contemporary Egyptian texts and art. Understanding also depends on the models or theories about Nubian developments put forward by various scholars. These have proved valuable and productive, but nevertheless need to be debated, tested, challenged and, if necessary, revised.

One model controlling many presentations of ancient Nubia is that of "center and periphery." The basic tenet of this model is that of any two peoples or polities involved in such a relationship, the "center" is more highly developed economically, politically, and technologically. The other entity, the "periphery," is dependent on the center economically and for cultural stimulation. As a result of the center's influence or control, social change in the periphery may be due to external rather than internal factors. In this model, Nubia is the dependent, sometimes subject, periphery of Egypt, the center.

Figure 5. This Early Kerma bowl with incised rim dates to ca. 2300–2000 B.C. The careful articulation of red and black surfaces around the rim indicates a well-controlled firing technology. From Kerma.

UM no. 92-2-21. H. 19.0, Dia. 32.2 cm

Figure 6. A-Group painted bowl. This thin-walled decorated luxury ware is a distinctive feature of the A-Group Terminal phase (3500–2900 B.C.).The net pattern imitates basketry, as may the conical form. From Amadeh.
UM no. E16035. H. 17.6, Dia. 18.8 cm

Figure 7. Kerma in the Classic period was a wealthy city with a complex political structure and a stratified society. The graves of the elite were supplied with numerous offerings, such as these beautifully crafted pottery beakers. Handmade and very thin, these vessels were likely used for drinking.
L: UM no. 92-2-44; H. 12.1, Dia. 14.4 cm. R: UM no. 92-2-35; H. 12.3, Dia. 14.2 cm

Yet this influential model may not accurately reflect the relationship between Nubia and Egypt. First, the theory in general is complex and "raises many detailed questions concerning the precise formulation of the relationships involved" (Champion 1989:18). Further, its application to Bronze Age Nubia as a whole may be overly simplistic, true in part for some periods, but not for others. In fact, the notion that Nubia was typically peripheral to Egypt is debatable. We tend to overvalue Egypt for its "western-style," grandiose culture, and to undervalue the seemingly more modest, certainly much less well documented Nubian civilization.

In reality, Egypt and Nubia may have been much more equal in political and military strength than we tend to think; and certainly Nubian culture needs to be evaluated in its own terms rather than by comparison with Egypt's. Egyptian influence existed in Bronze Age Nubia, but the dynamics of society and culture were often distinctly Nubian.

These issues relate to yet another interpretive model applied to early Nubia which involves the distinction between chiefdoms and states. "Complex" chiefdoms are larger than "simple" ones, but both are smaller in scale and less efficiently impersonal in governance than states. In both scholarly and popular

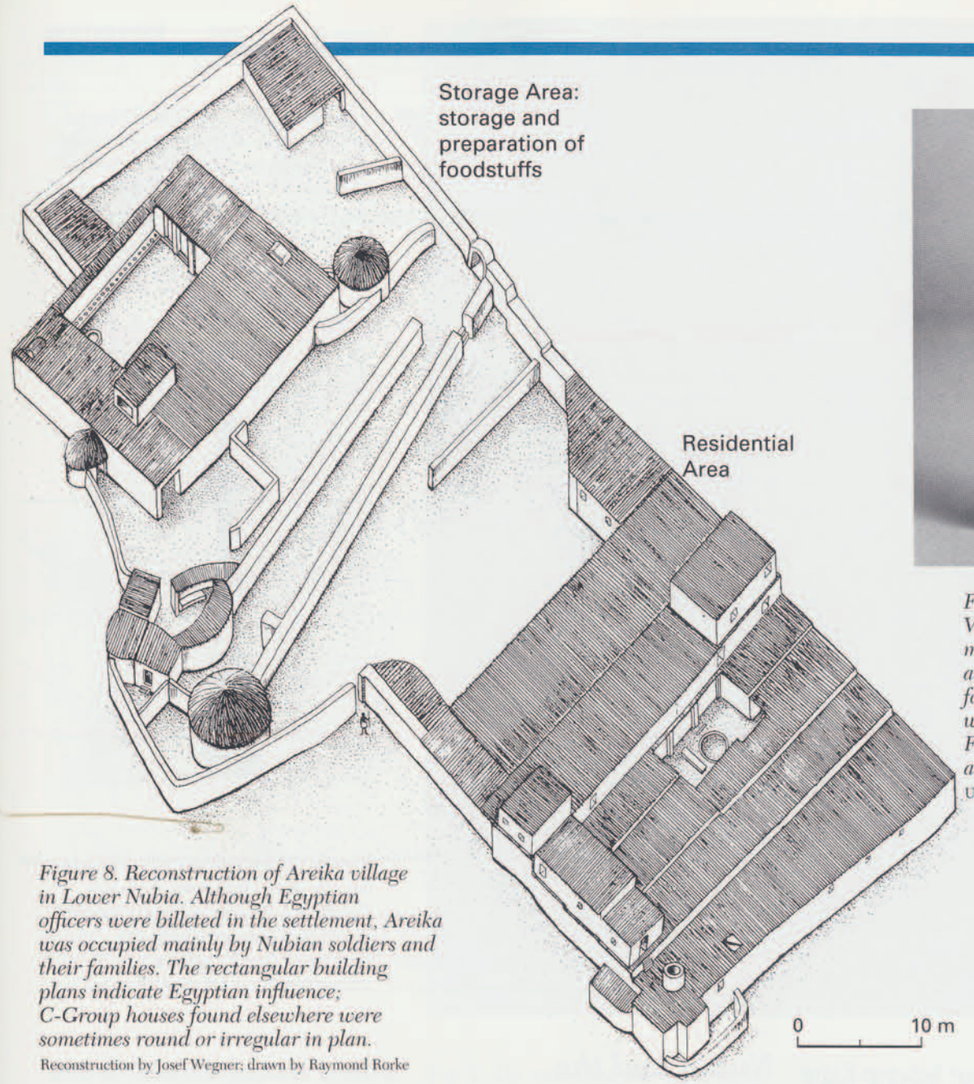


Figure 8. Reconstruction of Areika village in Lower Nubia. Although Egyptian officers were billeted in the settlement, Areika was occupied mainly by Nubian soldiers and their families. The rectangular building plans indicate Egyptian influence; C-Group houses found elsewhere were sometimes round or irregular in plan.
Reconstruction by Josef Wegner; drawn by Raymond Rorke

Figure 9. The tenacious Nile Valley fly was an emblem of military valor in both Nubia and Egypt. This fly amulet was found in a Kerma-Group warrior's burial at Buhen (see Fig. 11). Made of ivory, bronze and electrum.
UM no. E10347A. W. 6.0, L. 11.5, Th. 1.6 cm

Figure 10. This mud-brick fortress at Buhen was one of a number built by the Egyptians in Lower Nubia during the 12th Dynasty (1991–1783 B.C.) to maintain their control over the region. Seen here are the defensive ditch, the lower bastions, and the base of the main wall.

Figure 11 (left). A warrior's burial of the Classic Kerma period, found near the fortress of Buhen. Next to the warrior is a sacrificed ram (food for the afterlife) and on top of the body lies a short sword.
UM neg. G5-35350

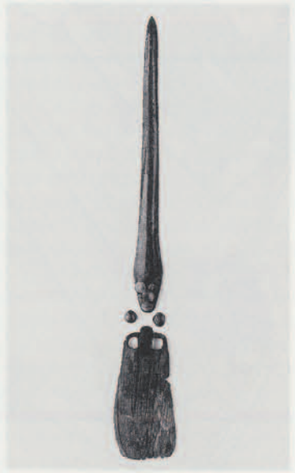


Figure 12. Bronze sword with ivory handle from the burial shown in Figure 11. The sword was probably made in Nubia, although the prototype was Egyptian.
UM no. E10341. W. 3.4. L. of blade 31.2 cm

Figure 13. A scene from the tomb of viceroy Huy at Thebes includes Nubian nobility presenting tribute—gold, skins, and giraffe tails—to the Pharaoh Tutankhamen. (See also the cover of this issue.)
From Nina de G. Davies, *The Tomb of Huy* (London: The Egypt Exploration Society, 1926), Pl. 27

literature the contrast between Egypt and Nubia is often presented as one between a state and an agglomeration of chiefdoms.

Egypt did represent a nation state, albeit an unstable one that periodically underwent political fragmentation and even civil war. However, Nubia also may have incorporated Bronze Age states. The Egyptians themselves used the same terms for ruler (*heka*, *wer*) for both Nubian and Near Eastern leaders, the latter often being state rulers; it is modern scholars who translate these terms as "king" for Near Easterners, but "chief" for Nubians. There is in fact considerable evidence suggesting state formation was a well-established process in Bronze Age Nubia, and consequently we need to revise many of our ideas about early Nubian politics.

Nubia and the Origins of Egyptian Civilization

Revisionism can, however, sometimes go too far. Qustul, a Lower Nubian site of the earliest Bronze Age (ca. 3000–2900 B.C.), is a good example. It has been challengingly described as "a birthplace of pharaonic civilization several generations before the rise of the first historic Egyptian dynasty" (Williams 1980:12; 1986). This proposition is not only doubtful in itself, it unintentionally diminishes Qustul's significance for Nubian political developments.

Qustul belongs to the "Terminal" phase of a long-lived Lower Nubian culture (ca. 3500–2900 B.C.) labeled A-Group by George Reisner, who first defined the archaeological and cultural phases of Nubia for both Bronze Age and Napatan-Meroitic times. A-Group Nubians belonged to a complex stratified society, with an elite benefiting from a lively trade with Egypt.

Terminal A-Group material culture is distinctive and striking. Its many products include a wide range of pottery styles, one of which was an incredibly thin-walled "luxury" (non-utilitarian) ware with bright red designs painted on the exterior surfaces (Fig. 6). Unfortunately, many important aspects of the social, economic, and technological lives of the A-Group are now irrecoverably lost. Settlements yield the best evidence for these aspects, but until recently archaeologists preferred to excavate cemeteries and temples in Nubia (as in Egypt). For much of Nubia this imbalance between cemeteries and settlements can be redressed in the future, but Lower Nubia, now serving as the reservoir (Lake Nasser) of the Aswan Dam, is permanently flooded.

Cemeteries do, however, tell us something about social organization, and the cemetery of Qustul was an unusual one. Though few in number, the graves were exceptionally large and much more lavishly supplied with local luxury goods and Egyptian imports than other known A-Group cemeteries. Williams, who published the cemetery, supposed that scenes painted on pots from Qustul represented Nubian victories over contemporary southern Egyptian kingdoms, and deemed a stone incense burner carved with icons typical of early Egyptian kingship and religion to be Nubian in origin (Fig. 3). He concluded that "some twelve kings at Qustul participated with other kings in Upper Egypt in the creation of a unified culture" and "helped fashion pharaonic civilization" (1980:21).

For good reasons, most interested scholars do not accept Williams's theory; the scenes of victory are doubtful, and the incense burner was certainly decorated by an Egyptian. Qustul is a politically charged site, but those buried there are not precociously early Egyptian pharaohs. They are more likely rulers of a complex chiefdom that covered all of Lower Nubia. This chiefdom was on a scale much larger than scholars supposed prior to Qustul's discovery. This in turn suggests a process of political development was underway from which emerged, a few centuries later, what might be Nubia's first known state.

The First Nubian Kings?

Polities with a population substantially exceeding 100,000 would normally be called states, and their rulers, kings, not chiefs. Such kings may have existed in Nubia as early as 2250 B.C, at the time of the emergence of the C-Group and Kerma cultures.

Egypt, itself only recently formed into a national state, expelled the A-Group people from Lower Nubia by 2900 B.C. It maintained the region as a largely empty buffer zone except for, after 2520 B.C., a few strategically located centers. During this period, Egypt traded with but also raided Upper Nubia, according to reliefs depicting captured prisoners in pharaoh Sahure's funerary

temple (2458–2446 B.C.). Upper Nubia already had rulers, perhaps even a paramount ruler.

The archaeology of Upper Nubia is poorly known until 2400 B.C., after which we find people of two strongly different material cultures, labeled C-Group and Kerma-Group, co-existing there. In shape and decoration C-Group and Kerma-Group pottery were very different (Figs. 4, 5). Their tombs were also dissimilar: C-Group people built stone-masonry, circular tomb superstructures, while the Kerma-Group preferred earthen tumuli (see Fig. 8 in Alexander's article, this issue). The C-Group probably descended from the A-Group people who had fled south, the Kerma-Group, from an Upper Nubian "Pre-Kerma" people.

Lower Nubia was eventually resettled by C-Group people (after 2390 B.C.), but Egyptian expeditions continued to traverse both that land and Upper Nubia, trading Egyptian products for incense, ebony, panther skins, elephant tusks, and other materials. During this time, Egyptian sources tell us, the Nubians were organized under rulers; the relatively modest tombs of these rulers at places like Anibeh in Lower Nubia and Kerma in Upper may not be accurate reflections of their power, which might have been considerable. Were these rulers chiefs, each independent of the other, or were they in some cases kings—leaders of small states—with the other rulers being their agents?

Most scholars think the first situation more likely, but Egyptian sources on early Nubia suggest the second was possible. Harkhuf, an intrepid Egyptian expedition leader, relates that by 2240 B.C. the Nubian polities of Wawat, Irtjet, and Setju had united under a single ruler. Most scholars believe this process involved only Lower Nubia, producing at best a complex chiefdom. But if both Lower and Upper Nubia were involved, as is possible, the result would be a polity about 1100 kilometers long with a population well in excess of 100,000, and a polity this size, according to anthropological distinctions, would be a state, not a chiefdom.

Despite subsequent conflict with Egypt, this Nubian state may have continued until about 2000 B.C., while Egypt fragmented into competitive northern and southern kingdoms. Advocates of a center and periphery model could argue that the emergence of either state or chiefdom was due to contact with Egypt, but on present evidence, internal Nubian dynamics were just as likely to be the decisive factor.

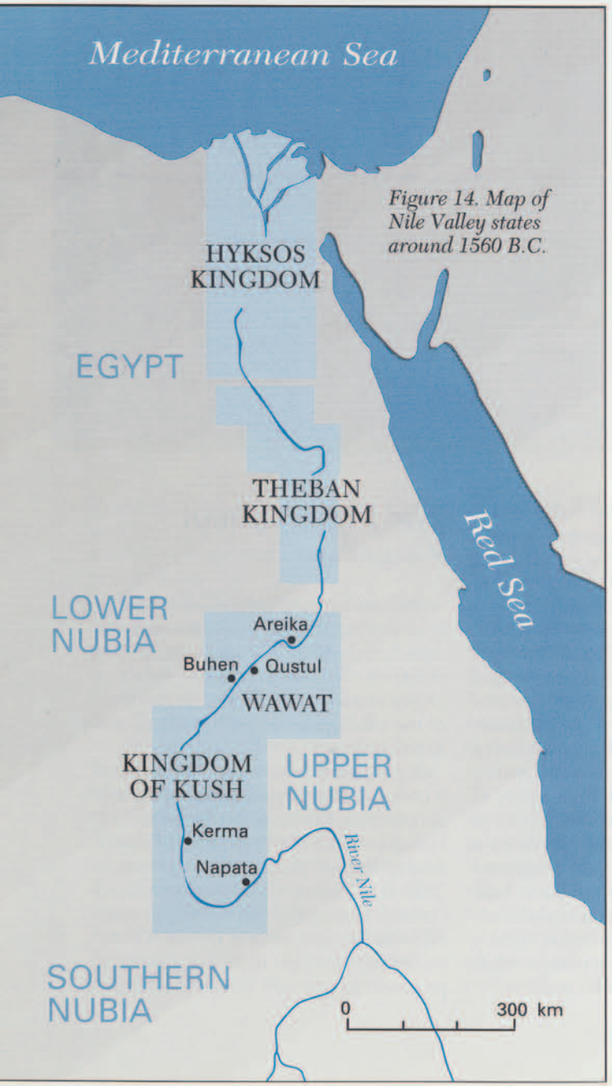


Figure 14. Map of Nile Valley states around 1560 B.C.

The Kingdom of Kush

By 2000 B.C., Egypt succeeded in forcibly reoccupying Lower Nubia. The C-Group people, inherently warlike and experienced in siege craft due to long service in the Egyptian army, resisted invasion and could only be rendered subordinate by means of powerful Egyptian fortresses built throughout their land (Fig. 10).

Throughout most of the Egyptian occupation, the C-Group were excluded from the fortified towns, but elsewhere interaction between Nubians and Egyptians was significant. For example, Wegner's recent study (n.d.) of a C-Group "village" excavated by The University Museum in 1907 has shown it was occupied by Nubian soldiers and their families, together with the Egyptians who officered them (Fig. 8).

Upper Nubia, known as Kush by its then inhabitants, remained independent while Kerma-Group culture underwent important developments. Vercoutter, Gratien and Bonnet have much expanded our knowledge of this culture and identified two "central places" (sites of greater regional importance than others) at Sai and Kerma (O'Connor 1994). Cemeteries here and elsewhere reveal a highly stratified society, with graves varying greatly in size and in lavishness of offerings (Figs. 7, 9). Militarism is an omnipresent feature (Fig. 11); early Kerma-Group burials include those of many bowmen, burials of a middle phase often have daggers, and males in the final, "Classic" phase typically were buried with a short bronze sword (Fig. 12).

At Kerma itself, Charles Bonnet's recent excavations have revealed a substantial town. Its central core (6 hectares, or about 15 acres) contained a large temple, a circular "royal audience hall," a palace and many elite houses, the whole ringed by a 30 foot high, fortified town wall (O'Connor 1994). Extramural settlements expanded the town to about 25 hectares, making Kerma—because of its

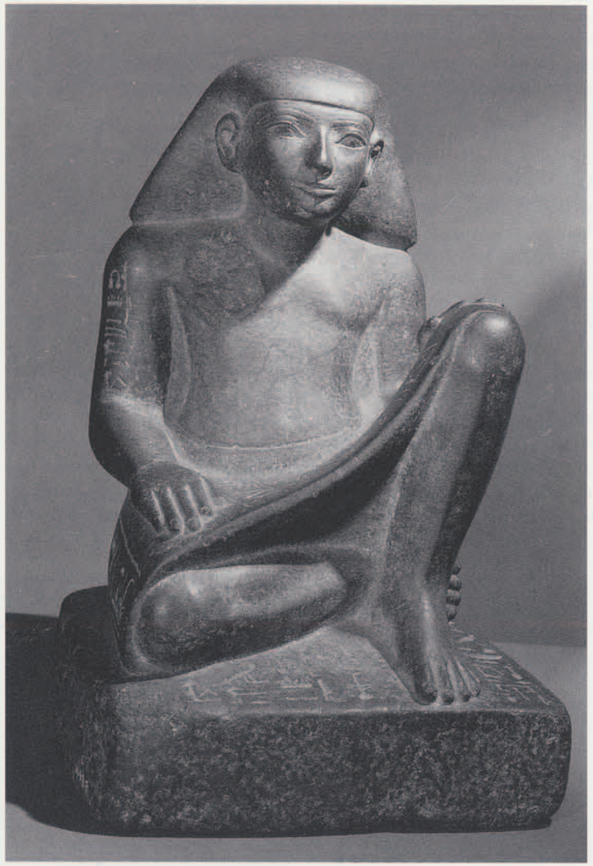


Figure 15. Statue of the Nubian princeling Amenemhet from the temple of Horus at Buhen. Amenemhet, who later became prince of the province of Tekhet, owed allegiance to the ruling Egyptians, but was ethnically a Nubian.
UM no. E10980; neg. S5-23177. H. 36 cm

Figure 16. Shabti of King Taharka, from the Napatan period. One of the 25th Dynasty Nubian rulers of Egypt (750-656 B.C.), Taharka was buried in an Egyptian-style pyramid tomb at Nuri, his mummified body accompanied by shabtis and other grave goods.

size and important functions—the earliest known city in Africa outside of Egypt.

Scholars differ as to the political status of Upper Nubia at this time. Extant Egyptian texts can be interpreted as showing Upper Nubia divided up among several small chiefdoms that slowly and imperfectly coalesced into a state by 1700 B.C. But an alternative reading suggests Upper Nubia was organized as a state as early as 2000 B.C., with a capital at Kerma and subcapitals at Sai and perhaps Bugdumbush.

Certainly, throughout the Middle Kingdom (2040–1640 B.C.) Egypt felt threatened by Kush. Despite strong trading relationships, Egypt attempted to intimidate Kush by periodic attacks, to little avail. Indeed, in ca. 1870 B.C. the Ägypto-Kushite frontier was heavily fortified, as if in anticipation of Kushite attacks on Egyptian-held Lower Nubia. Kush was certainly increasing in strength, and by 1700 B.C. was ruled by a Nubian dynasty of great power and wealth. Its rulers were buried at Kerma under enormous tumuli about 300 feet across.

Eventually, these kings did conquer Lower Nubia, and the Egyptian officials within its fortresses transferred their loyalty from Egypt to Kush. Inscriptions set up by these officials record the services they provided the "ruler of Kush." These are the earliest known inscriptions set up on behalf of an African ruler outside of Egypt (see Alexander's article, this issue).

While Kushite or Kerma-Group culture shows some Egyptian influence, its political independence from Egypt and pre-existing social complexity suggests the center and periphery model may not be appropriate here. Soon, however, this model does become much more relevant.

The Restructuring of Nubian Society

By 1560 B.C. much of the Nile Valley was divided between three more-or-less equal powers (Fig. 14). The "Hyksos," Canaanite invaders, dominated northern Egypt; an independent Egyptian or Theban dynasty held southern Egypt; and Kush controlled Lower and Upper Nubia. The Thebans began a war of liberation, expelled the Hyksos by 1538 B.C., and were intent on building an empire in the Levant. First, however, they had to deal with the formidable Kushites, whom the Hyksos had tried to recruit as allies in the war with Thebes. Lower Nubia was quickly reconquered, but Kush resisted fiercely and was not fully subordinated until 1460 B.C.

Thereafter, Upper and Lower Nubia formed a colonial domain, governed by an Egyptian viceroy (Fig. 13) supported by Egyptian officials and soldiers. Nubia paid both tribute and taxes to the Egyptian pharaoh, and many Egyptians settled in Nubia. Egyptian temples were built there, and estates were set up to produce income for them and for other temples in Egypt itself.

But the majority of the population remained Nubian and, rather than becoming an exploited or enslaved class, participated substantially in this newly developed colonial society. For Egyptians, color was not a bar to integration or advancement, but cultural and linguistic differences were. The Nubians largely assimilated Egyptian culture and, to a substantial degree, prospered.

Nubian political leadership survived, for the Egyptians allowed Nubians to be ruled by their own "princes"; three shared Lower Nubia (Fig. 15), and others shared Upper Nubia. These princes were considered part of the Egyptian bureaucracy. They lived and were buried in Egyptian style. Yet they had Nubian as well as Egyptian personal names, probably spoke a Nubian language, and wore regalia reflecting their Nubian heritage. As a whole, the Nubian community was complex in structure, including a wealthy elite as well as middle and lower classes.

Over time, Egyptians and Nubians seemed to intermingle ever more closely, and Nubians (or Ägypto-Nubians, the result of intermarriage) probably rose high in the bureaucracy. When, after 1070 B.C., internal problems forced Egypt to relinquish Nubia, the politically sophisticated Nubians probably continued to maintain a state based in Upper Nubia. Lower Nubia gradually became depopulated. Meanwhile, Southern Nubia had remained independent of colonial rule, as well as militarily powerful, to judge from recorded conflicts between its inhabitants and the Egyptians. After Egyptian control ended, some Southern Nubians may have settled in or even occupied Upper Nubia and, drawing on the administrative expertise of its indigenous but Egyptianized inhabitants, forged a powerful new Nubian state.

At any rate, a new dynasty arose in Upper Nubia. Its members were buried (after 900 B.C.) near Napata, their tombs having at first circular superstructures (an "un-Egyptian" feature, perhaps reflective of Southern Nubia), later, stone-built rectangular forms derived from the tumuli. From these rulers descended the 25th Dynasty, the conquerors of Egypt in 750–712 B.C (Fig. 16).

During the colonial period north and central Nubia undoubtedly experienced a center and periphery relationship, with Egypt the stronger, dominant partner; substantial social change took place among the Nubians as a result. However, after the colonial period the situation changed dramatically.

From 712–657 B.C., when Nubia controlled Egypt, the former became the center, the latter the peripheral, dependent polity. Moreover, after the two split apart, Nubia was able to maintain itself as a large-scale independent state, the Napatan-Meroitic kingdom (see Dafa'alla's article, this issue). Egypt, however, was for the most part permanently of peripheral status: first as a subject of the Persian empire; then as a kingdom ruled by the Ptolemies, who were Macedonian Greek in origin and culture; and finally as a province of the Roman empire. All these developments lay far away in time from the Bronze Age, the focus of this essay. Yet, in important ways, the kings which I believe emerged in early Nubia show that the process of Nubian state formation had deep Bronze Age roots.

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