Medieval Nubia

Another Golden Age

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It is no easy task to review the history of Nubia from A.D. 400 to 1500 in a few pages, for I am obliged to speak out of one book of two quite different civilizations. The Ballana phase, immediately following the fall of Meroe, represents in many ways the last gasp of the pharaonic and Kushite traditions, which had held sway in the Nile Valley for more than three thousand years. The adoption of Coptic Christianity in the 6th century, ordered in an era so different from its predecessor that we might be tempted to suspect the coming of a new people, had no incontrovertible evidence that there was no such transition.

The Ballana Phase

The fall of Meroe and the dissolution of its empire did not quite spell the end of Kushite central tradition. Meroe itself was overrun by barbarians and for a time disappeared from history, but in the more northerly portion of Nubia there survived a splinter-state called Nobatia. Nobatia’s rulers continued to wear the Kushite royal regalia, and its people still worshiped the Kushite gods. But the Merotic language was lost; the few and fragmentary records from early Nobatia are in a kind of corrupted Greek. These records tell us little of historical or cultural importance. Most of our knowledge of Nobatia has come through the archaeological excavation of numerous town sites and tombs, and in particular from the great earthen tumuli at Ballana and Qustu, near the Egyptian Sudanese border, where for about two centuries the Nobatian rulers were buried. This earliest phase of the Nobatian kingdom and civilization, before the coming of Christianity, is now usually referred to as the Ballana phase, after the location of the principal royal cemetery.

The Ballana royal tombs, excavated in the 1930s, contained an immense wealth of jewelry, furniture, and weaponry, as well as sacrificed animals and slaves—all very much in the Kushite and pharaonic Egyptian tradition. But the Nobatian kings were living at a time when Byzantine, not pharaonic, traditions were predominant in Egypt, and they were not immune from these influences. Their mortuary furnishings exhibit an intriguing blend of pharaonic and Byzantine motifs. For the common people, it seems to have been a far more important deity. Her worship was continued in some of the old Kushite and Egyptian temples that still remain in repair, and also in small mud-brick shrines which are the only religious architecture attributable specifically to the early Nobatians.

The early Nobatians seem for the most part to have prospered through trade with Roman and Byzantine Egypt, in spite of occasional hostilities. It was not however a time of high artistic or cultural creativity, especially in comparison to the periods that preceded and followed. The Nobatians of the Ballana period raised no architectural monuments, apart from the huge but simple earthen tumuli of the rulers, and they produced no indigenous literature that has survived. Their pottery, though well-shaped, copied the severely simple red traditions of late Roman potters. The ceramic furniture in the royal tombs is of course another matter, but the design of these goods makes it clear that they were nearly all made abroad.

The Conversion

The conversion of Nubia to Christianity, in the middle of the 6th century, has been recounted by four ecclesiastical historians. Their accounts differ in some details, but all of them speak of a very rapid process of conversion, which was complete by the year 580. We might incline to dismiss this as church propaganda were it not thoroughly confirmed by archaeological evidence. In the numerous early Nobatian cemeteries we can observe an abrupt and immediate abandonment of the old funerary customs. The graves were no longer cut in the rock; instead, they were filled with large urns containing the ashes of the deceased.

Figure 1. The late medieval "castle" at Kabdumari, Sudanese Nobatia. In the last two centuries of the Christian period, with barbarisms on the rise, domestic structures in Nubia were increasingly fortified. There appeared two-story houses that were almost like miniature castles, with guarded access and with cleverly concealed exits within the thickness of the walls.

Figure 2. Royal cemeteries of a Ballana monarch, after restoration. The columns are essentially Byzantine in style, but the walls feature the Kushite decorated Column and Panels in decoration along the rims.
change over from pagan to Christian burial practices, involving a different form of grave, and the cessation of the age-old practice of burying material goods with the dead. We can observe also the conversion of ancient Egyptian and Kushite temples into churches, and the violent destruction of the mud-brick Isis shrines at the great urban center of Qasr Ibrim. The rapidity of conversion reflects the fact that Christianity, unlike earlier religions of the Middle East, demanded not only the abandonment but the repudiation of previous traditions and practices.

The circumstances involved in the Christianization of Nubia were in considerable part political. In the 6th century the Byzantine or Melite and the Mono-

The triumph of the Monophysite Coptic Church in Egypt, after A.D. 682, assured the ultimate ascendancy of this sect in Nubia as well. Throughout the Middle Ages the Nubians remained faithful adherents of the Egyptian Coptic Church and its Patriarch of Alexandria.

The coming of Christianity had, of course, little effect on the circumstances of Nubian daily life. The mass of the people were, as always, peasant farmers continuing to live in the same mud villages but now worshipping in local churches rather than in stone temples or Isis shrines. At Qasr Ibrim, Faras, and other more urban centers artisans continued to turn out pottery, textiles, and other goods both for local trade and for export to Egypt. Yet the ideological and cultural transformation of the country was nothing less than revolutionary. One particular example may serve as an illustration. For the period between about 800 B.C. and A.D. 250—that is, the Kushite and Ballana periods—we have royal tombs enough to account for every known ruler, and we have in addition a substantial corpus of monumental royal inscriptions. For the period from 550 to 1500—the Christian period—we have not identified the tomb of a single Nubian ruler, and our only royal proclama-

Figure 5. Map of medieval Nubia, showing locations of the three Christian kingdoms—Nobatia, Makourja, and Alobia—and principal settlements.

Figure 6. The majority of medieval Nubians were peasant farmers who lived in villages: their lives were regulated by the rise and fall of the Nile; no less than were those of Egyptian farmers. This is the medieval village site of Meroe, in modern Nubia, after partial excavation. The site, like all those in Lower Nubia, has since been inundated by the waters from the Aswan High Dam.

Nubia has received much less world attention than that of Kush, yet its cultural and political achievements were no less remarkable. It was in every respect a second golden age, an age noteworthy not for warfare but for something far rarer in history: more than 500 years of uninterrupted peace. Happily, the civi-

Figure 5. The pottery of the Ballana period was simple to decoration, initiating the traditions of the late Nubian renaissance. This wheel-made bowl has a design of three leaf shapes.

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The Political Situation

Christian Nubia was never unified politically. At the time of Christianization there were, according to church historians, three Nubian kingdoms: Nobatia in the north, Makouria in the so-called Middle Nile region, between the Third and Fourth Cataracts, and Aelia in the region which centered around the confluence of the Blue and White Niles (Fig. 4). The two latter kingdoms are not mentioned in any previous accounts, and their pre-Christian ancestors are unknown.

Some time in the 8th century the two kingdoms of Nobatia and Makouria became united under a single ruler, who thereupon resided at the Makourian capital of Dongola. The circumstances of unification are quite obscure. but remarkably, it does not seem to have involved bloodshed. Subsequently and for many centuries the two toponyms "Nobatia" and "Makouria" remained in use, and it is apparent from historical sources that the two regions were administered somewhat differently. Nobatia was a free-trade zone in which Egyptian merchants were allowed to travel freely and to settle. Egyptian coinage was in circulation, and day-to-day affairs were overseen by a kind of viceroy, the Eparch of Nobatia. Makouria, on the other hand, remained closed to foreigners except by special royal permission. Money was in circulation, and foreign commerce was a royal monopoly. The nominally united kingdoms should probably be thought of as very much more like the Latin-American Ancasian marriages

The Religious Situation

Guaranteed against Muslim conquest by the Baqt treaty, Nobatia remained firmly in the Christian fold throughout the Middle Ages. From at least the 8th until the 14th century the church in Nobatia was considered to be integral with the Coptic Church in Egypt. All of the Nubian bishops were necessarily appointed from Egypt, and apparently many of them were Egyptian Copts, at least some of the lower clergy. Yet certain cultural differences persisted right through the Middle Ages. The liturgy in Nobatia was always celebrated in Greek, not Coptic, though Coptic was sometimes used for certain prayers. The language of the church in Egypt. In the later Middle Ages the indigenous language of Nobatia, written in a modified Greek alphabet, also began to be employed in religious inscriptions, often in combination with Coptic. Over the centuries the Nubians also developed increasingly distinctive canons of church architecture and decoration. The monastic life never seems to have had the same appeal in Nobatia as it had in Egypt. Perhaps the country as a whole was sufficiently rural, and removed from the fleshly corruption of urban life, so that the people felt no need for further evasion. The few Nubian monasteries that have been discovered archaeologically were relatively small affairs, and it appears from the tombstone inscriptions in the nearby cemeteries that the majority of the monks were Egyptians or nobles rather than Nubians. Certainly, all of the monasteries seem to have been abandoned in the later Middle Ages.

Daily Life

The medieval Nubians, like all their predecessors since the early Bronze Age, were village dwellers. They lived in immovable small, densely concentrated hamlets scattered along the Nile wherever there were sufficient plots of cultivable land (Fig. 6). The main crops, as in all earlier times, were sorghum millet, but wheat, barley, and a wide variety of fruits and vegetables were also grown. There were also local artisans, especially potters, weavers, and carpenters, in many of the villages, while locally pottery and textiles were produced and widely distributed from a few specialized centers like Quseir Batin, Faraq, and Dongola.

Domestic arrangements seem to show clearly that the basic residential unit in medieval Nobatia was the nuclear family of husband, wife and children, rather than some larger kin group. Indeed, all the surviving evidence suggests that kinship was not very important in the social fabric. Furnishings of inscriptions, which are often quite long, do not mention parentage, and in the large corpus of legal documents recovered from Quseir Batin there is hardly a hint of corporate kin groups or of kinship obligations. Property was almost always individually owned, and seems to have been fairly portable and freely disposable without reference to kinship obligations.

In nearly every settlement the center of village life was the church, of which more than 120 examples have been identified archaeologically in the territory of Nobatia alone. The number and distribution of the churches remains something of a mystery, for little is known about the population distribution. Some fairly important settlements had only a single church, while others, no larger, had as many as five or six. Religious life, or at least expressions of religiosity, was by no means confined to the church; it spilled over into nearly every aspect of daily life. The walls of houses were regularly adorned with protective inscriptions, and especially, graffiti, and protective names and devices were also inscribed into the surfaces of pottery vessels and other valued goods. Many people carried hajjas, or leather amulets in which a protective passage of scripture, written on paper, was carefully folded and sewn up. Trade with Egypt evidently flourished, at least in Nobatia, during nearly the whole of the medieval period. The major exports were slaves and dates, while the Nobians received in exchange wine, textiles, and luxury goods of glass, glazed pottery, and bronze. Aswan was always the main entrepôt through which the Nubian trade was funneled, and there were certain industries there whose output was intended primarily for the Nubian trade. The Christian Nubians, like other medieval peoples, were highly legalistic. The excavations at Quseir Batin have yielded an extraordinary number of wills, conveyances, deeds, and other legal

Figure 7. An abandoned church of the early medieval period at Atldin, Sudanic Nobatia. Ordinary churches were in the beginning often constructed from a combination of rough stone and mud-brick masonry, stone being used for the exterior walls and brick for interior partitions and for vaulting walls. After about the 10th century, however, church construction was almost entirely in brick (see Fig. 5).
Instruments, written always in the Old Nubian manner, as were the documents, were carefully buried, usually in sealed jars, with the result that a substantial number of them have been found intact.

**Cultural and Artistic Achievements**

The most outstanding cultural and artistic achievements of the medieval Nubians were in the fields of ecclesiastical and domestic architecture. The churches were vast, with richly painted interiors, and the monasteries were splendid. The Nubians were also skilled in metalwork, woodcarving, and jewelry. They produced beautiful amulets and other small items that were traded throughout the region.

**Ecclesiastical Architecture**

Foremost among the architectural monuments of medieval Nubia were the great churches. Some of these were built on a grand scale, with huge expanses of wall space available for mural decoration. The churches were often dedicated to saints, and their interiors were filled with images of the divine. The Nubians were also skilled in the art of fresco, and their murals were often brightly colored and highly detailed.

**Mural Decoration**

The Nubians were masters of mural decoration, and their churches were adorned with a wealth of images and inscriptions. The murals were often brightly colored and highly detailed, and they depicted scenes from the lives of the saints, as well as scenes from the life of Christ.

**Domestic Arts**

Nubian artisans applied their skills to a number of different media, but above all to pottery. Curiously, this is the one field of artistic expression in which Nubia has consistently outstripped Egypt, at all periods in history. The elaborately decorated wares of the Christian period, of particular note is a group of fine Nubian pottery vessels, which were exported throughout the region and beyond.

**Domestic Context**

The Nubians were a farming people, and their pottery was used for a wide variety of purposes, from cooking to serving food. The vessels were often decorated with brightly colored designs, and the Nubians were skilled at using a variety of slips and glazes to create a wide range of effects.

**Summary**

The Nubian civilization was a rich and diverse one, with a long and complex history. The Nubians were great artists, and their murals and pottery are some of the most beautiful and enduring works of art produced by any civilization.

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**Figure 19. Mural Painting of the Madonna and Child in the Cathedral at Faras.**
hundred miles, and broken bowls sometimes laboriously drilled with holes and stitched back together with rags.

Religious Literature

The numerous surviving examples of religious literature from medieval Nubia are very largely canonical, and therefore, of course they exhibit no distinctly Nubian innovations apart from the use of the medieval Nubian language. Five fully preserved books have been recovered from Nubian sites, all were prayer books or breviaries. There are in addition innumerable fragmentary texts, including gospel books and scholion of the saints, sermons, homilies, and all kinds of ritual formulae, most of which are well known from the world of early Christendom throughout the Near East. Like a great deal of Nubian medieval literature, religious texts were to range freely between worldly and otherworldly concerns, and between lofty moral precepts and primitive ritualisticism. The early texts are all on parchment, but paper was introduced at least by the 10th century, and thereafter became general (Fig. 15).

An extraordinary feature of the Nubian religious texts is their linguistic diversity. Some are in Coptic, some in Greek, and some in Old Nubian; many, including most translations, are in a combination of Greek and Old Nubian. It has been suggested that Coptic was understood and employed only by the ethnic Egyptian monks and clergy, while Greek and Old Nubian were employed singly or in combination, by the native population. It should be added that Arabic was also widely understood by persons engaged in trade; the excavations at Qur Ibrim have yielded a very large number of Arabic commercial documents.

The interesting feature of medieval Nubian literature is its vastness; it is not so much in the content as in the evidence that it gives of relatively widespread literacy, a condition that is also suggested by the very large body of commercial, administrative (see Fig. 15), and legal correspondence that has been recovered from Qur Ibrim. There is here, once again, a marked contrast to all of the earlier civilizations of Nubia.

Decline and Fall

The Christian Nubian rulers enjoyed especially cordial relations with the Fatimid sultans of Egypt. When the Fatimids were overthrown by Saladin in 1172, he immediately launched a preemptive raid into Nubia, fearing that the Nubians might attempt to support their deposed allies. The raid did little lasting damage, but it put the Nubians on notice that peace with Egypt could no longer be taken for granted. It was not however until the Maniak dynasty's control of Egypt in 1250 that the long peace inaugurated by the Fatimids came finally to an end.

By this time the annual payment of slaves had long since been discontinued, although on paper it was still a requirement of the treaty. The Maniaks demanded not only an immediate resumption of the tribute but a payment of armies, and when this was not forthcoming they began a series of military incursions into Lower Nubia that continued for more than a century. In 1275 the Maniak Sultan Qalawun inflicted a decisive defeat on a Nubian army and thereafter declared himself sovereign over the northern part of the country, although he does not seem to have maintained his rule for any length of time.

As always, militarization begot militarism. The increasingly militaristic character of late medieval Nubia is reflected not only in contemporary texts but in the repair of fortifications at Qur Ibrim and the increasingly fortified character of new churches. After 1300 there appeared a series of structures that can only be characterized as miniature mosques, and these rather than churches became the primary architectural monuments of late medieval Nubia.

Maniak incursions were only one of several factors contributing to the decline and ultimate fall of the Christian kingdoms. The ruling family at Dongola was itself rent by dynastic disputes, with rival claimants often seeking the support of the Maniaks. As a result of these experiences, or perhaps as a political expedient, some of the would-be rulers converted to Islam, and in 1323 a Maniak claimant successfully usurped the throne at Dongola. This did not however spell the end of Nubian Christianity, which survived without serious challenge for another century and a half.

The real coup de grâce to medieval Nubian civilization was delivered neither by dynastic usurpers nor by the Maniaks.
but by the hoards of Arab nomad tribes that poured into the central Sudan in the 15th and 16th centuries. Some of these people came directly across the Red Sea from the Arabian Peninsula, but the larger number were pushed out of Egypt by the Mamluks, who pursued an aggressively anti-Bedouin policy. The newcomers overran most of the territories of Makuria and Aboda, depopulating the former rulers and setting themselves up as local warlords in a dozen or more petty principalities. The preoccupations of these chieftains were sufficient to destroy the valuable trade along the Nile that had been the lifeblood of Nubian prosperity, and the country fell into a condition of abject poverty as well as political anarchy. To top off the disaster, the Patriarch of Alexandria refused to send more bishops into Nubia because of the disturbed political situation, and the Nubian church was left to sustain itself as best it could without outside support. The most northerly region of Nubia, where the narrow valley of the Nile was flanked by deserts, held no attraction for nomad invaders, and it was spared the fate of Makuria and Aboda. Here, in what is now Egyptian Nubia, a curious splinter-kingdom, calling itself the Kingdom of Dotawa, managed to linger along until near the end of the 15th century, still maintaining a semblance of the Christian faith and some of the appearances of the now-withered Kingdom of Makuria. The last document relating to the Kingdom of Dotawa, still written in the Nubian language, bears the date 1484, after which time the historical record falls entirely silent. When the Ottoman conquerors of Egypt extended their rule into northern Nubia, around the middle of the 16th century, they apparently found no surviving trace either of an organized state or of an organized church. The Christian civilization of Nubia was, it seems, the product of peaceful conditions, and it was unable to survive without them.

The impoverishment of Nubia at the end of the Middle Ages was, in the short run, extraordinary. Not only was there no organized state, no organized religion, and no foreign trade, but even writing and learning entirely disappeared. So too did all of Nubia’s artistic traditions. The pottery not only ceased to produce decorated wares, they ceased even to make use of the potter’s wheel, and reverted to the production of crude vessels reminiscent of those of the early bronze age. The country had for all practical purposes retreated to an early tribal level of cultural development. It was into this ideological vacuum that there came, in time, an extraordinary group of itinerant Islamic teachers and scribes. It was they who laid the foundations of Nubia’s present-day civilization: a civilization in many ways different from the medieval as the medieval was from the Kushite.

The Medieval Nubian Achievement

It would be easy to dismiss the medieval civilization of Nubia as a mere provincial variant of Christian civilization in general, just as in the past it was possible to dismiss the civilization of Kish as a watered-down Sumerian culture. Both judgments would be equally wrong. In the last analysis, however, the question of originality is irrelevant. Medieval civilization except the earliest has been wholly interwoven or assimilated or both. It has built on the foundations laid by previous generations and has borrowed freely from its neighbors. What matters ultimately is the quality of life that each brings to its culture. Viewed from that perspective, medieval Nubia achieved something almost unprecedented in history: six hundred years of uninterrupted peace. In these days of flaying ethnic, religious, and national conflicts throughout the world, it is an achievement deserving of utmost respect.

Bibliography


Figure 13. Painted pottery dishes from the Late Christian period (about A.D. 850-1000), found in the pottery factory at Faraa, Sudanese Nubia. In this period there was a preference for vases with a white or yellow background, while in the Late Christian period the preference was once again largely for red and orange wares (Fig. 14).

Figure 14. Painted pottery vases from the Late Christian period (about A.D. 1200-1300), found in the village site of Meinarti, Sudanese Nubia.

Figure 15. An administrative document in the Old Nubian language, found in the town site of Quay Birin, Egyptian Nubia.