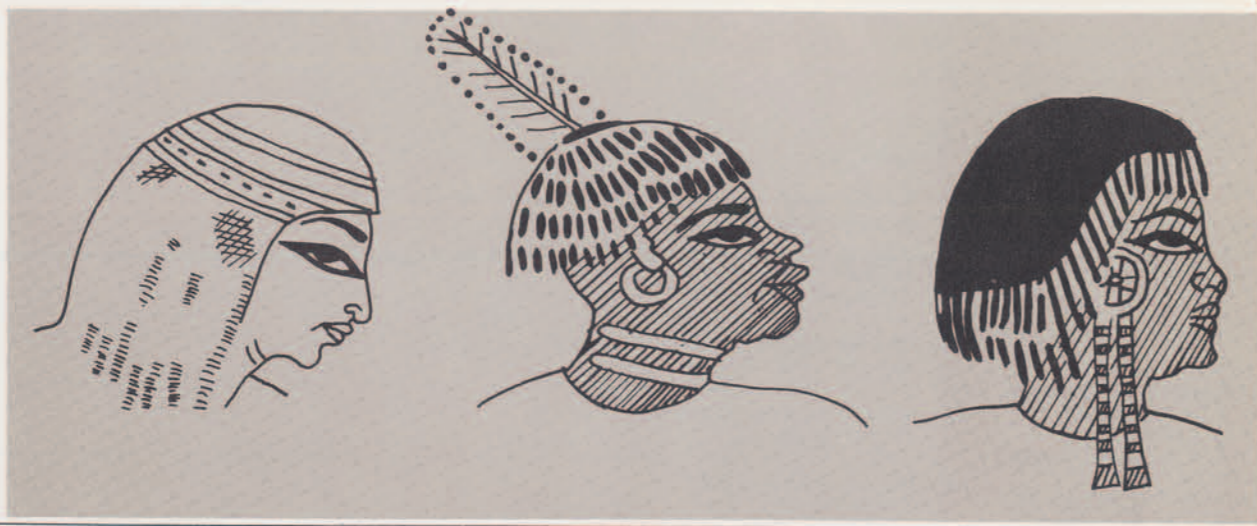


Ancient Egypt and Black Africa—Early Contacts

David O'Connor



1 Egyptian representations of an Egyptian (left) and two Africans, one (center) with Negroid features and both with markedly dark skin.

2 Upper and Lower Nubia.



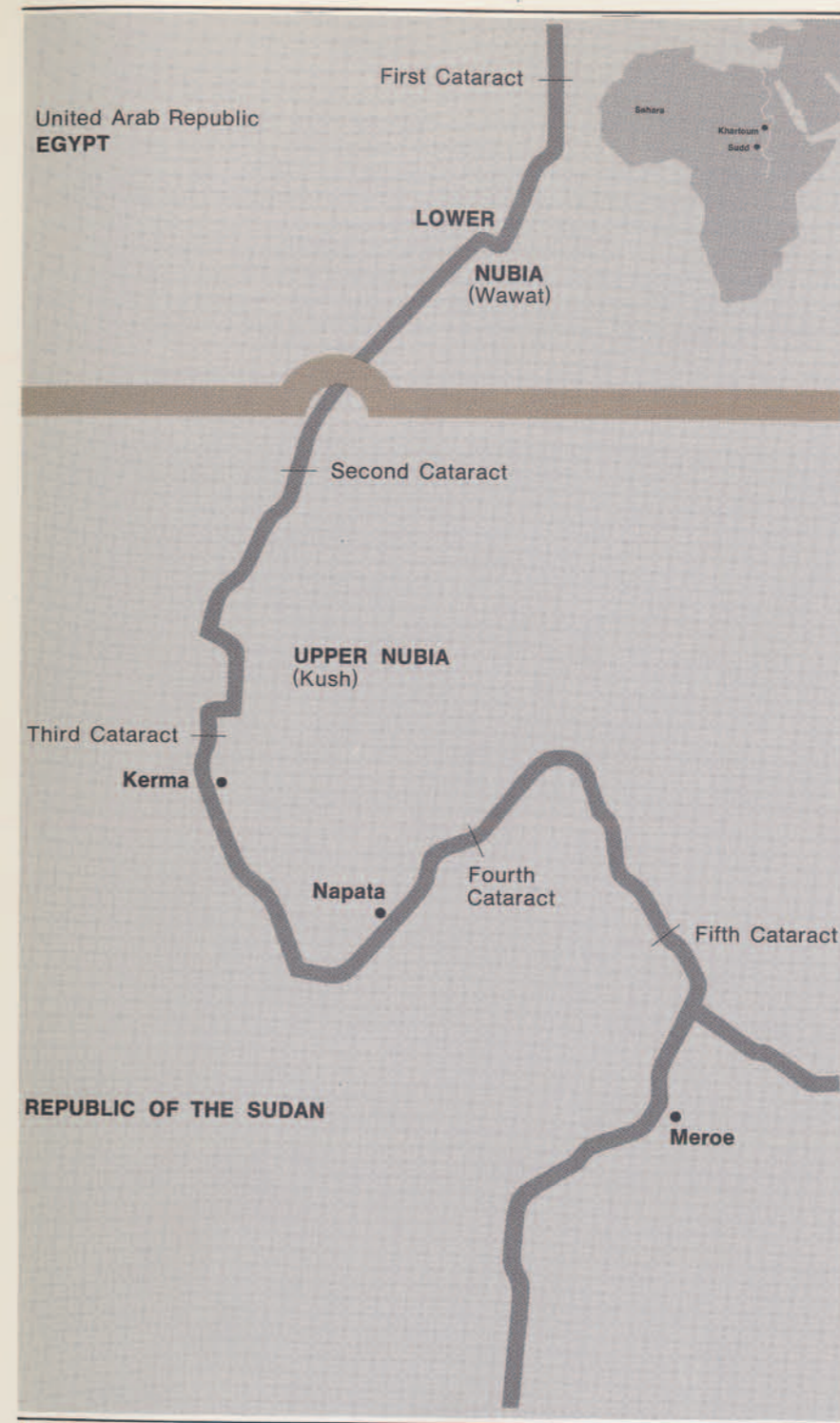
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In 1955 a west African scholar, Marcel Diop, argued vehemently that professional Egyptologists had been concealing a startling fact for over half a century; Diop claimed that the ancient Egyptians were Negroes and their characteristic civilization was a Negro achievement. It is in fact a not uncommon belief that Egypt was part of Black Africa, but as far as physical appearance goes this is not true. Thousands of sculpted and painted representations from Egypt and hundreds of well preserved bodies from its cemeteries show that the typical physical type was neither Negroid nor Negro. The second part of Diop's thesis however was that Egyptian civilization had been spread throughout Africa by emigrants from Egypt and presented in dramatic form a genuine and fascinating historical problem. Geographically ancient Egypt was an African country and her civilization was part of a mosaic of African cultures distributed over the face of that vast continent. Was there any serious contact between ancient Egypt and Black Africa, that is the Negroid and Negro peoples of western and central Africa; and, if there was, how important was the flow of influences in either direction?

This is not just an academic question, for many Africans and Afro-Americans, intensely interested in the history of early African cultures, often feel that the creativity of these cultures has been unfairly minimized by European scholarship. This is not true of prehistorians and historians of Africa today; the old habit of attributing any unusually sophisticated idea or technique appearing amongst Black Africans to the influence or the presence of a racially "superior" Hamite or other non-Negro has rightly been abandoned. However, as the achievements of Black Africa are recognized and increasingly better documented, and the distinctive characters of its many cultures emerge, the role of Egyptian influence becomes even more problematical. Are there any significant similarities between Egyptian and ancient African cultures; if so, how much are they due to a general "African" nature, and how much to cultural interaction?

Egyptian civilization was in fact peculiarly resistant to outside influence, but many ancient people, including Africans, borrowed from it. This was not however indiscriminate borrowing from an overwhelmingly superior culture and was varied in its effects. The Greeks, for example, were impressed by Egypt; their statuary and architecture were at first strongly influenced by Egypt and, according to the Greeks themselves, some of their leading philosophers and scientists went to Egypt to study its ancient knowledge as well as the new learning established after 320 B.C. in the Hellenistic city of Alexandria. Yet developed Greek art and thought cannot be mistaken for Egyptian. Similarly, amongst ancient Black Africans there must have been varied reactions to Egyptian contact, affected both by the cultural strength of each African group and by the role in which the Egyptians appeared. Egyptians in Africa were sometimes traders and employers, sometimes conquerors and colonists, sometimes defeated enemies.

Physical hindrances to contact must also have affected the potential spread of Egyptian influence. It is generally agreed that in late prehistoric times, between 5000 and 3000 B.C., the chances for contact between the Egyptian Nile valley, the Sahara and Africa south of the Sahara and along the upper reaches of the Nile, were better than in later periods. The Sahara at this time had a moister climate and supported a comparatively large and mobile population, which included Negroid and Negro physical types, as did the communities living near modern Khartoum. Certainly, domesticated animals appear to have spread during this period from Egypt (which had derived them from the Near East) throughout North Africa, deep into the Sahara and as far south as Khartoum; agriculture was established in Egypt at the same time but spread more slowly. However, there was no comparable spread of Egyptian cultural influence. The many communities along the Egyptian Nile had no political or religious cohesiveness, and the common material culture and neolithic economy that they shared



was not very different in its nature from that of contemporary African cultures. The typical pottery and artifacts of prehistoric Egypt are not found outside of the Nile valley or south of the Second Cataract, and only along the upper Nile is some influence perceptible.

Between the Second Cataract and Khartoum at this time a typical product of the indigenous population, called the "Khartoum Neolithic" people, was pottery with impressed designs, a tradition inherited from their hunting and gathering predecessors. By contrast, the wares of contemporary Egypt were sometimes painted but rarely incised, while the commonest fabric was plain red polished, often with an added black top. This decorative idea was copied on a small scale in the Khartoum Neolithic and eventually became an important feature of later pottery styles in Lower and Upper Nubia. Otherwise, borrowing was restricted to a simple tool, the "gouge" found in fact throughout the Sahara as well as along the Nile.

The civilization of historical Egypt developed so rapidly in the first centuries of the third millennium B.C. that some have suggested that the creative inspiration came from the already developed cultures of Mesopotamia. Literacy, centralized political control, an elaborate religious system, a metal (copper, later bronze) technology and a developed style in art and monumental architecture were firmly established in Egypt by 2700 B.C. However, it was just at this time that contact with other parts of Africa became more difficult. The Sahara was arid by 2500 B.C. and while its retreating population introduced agriculture and domesticated animals into western and central Africa, the desert routes to Egypt became more difficult to traverse. Even the chief remaining corridor for human movement, the Nile valley, was to a large extent blocked in the south by a vast swamp, the Sudd.

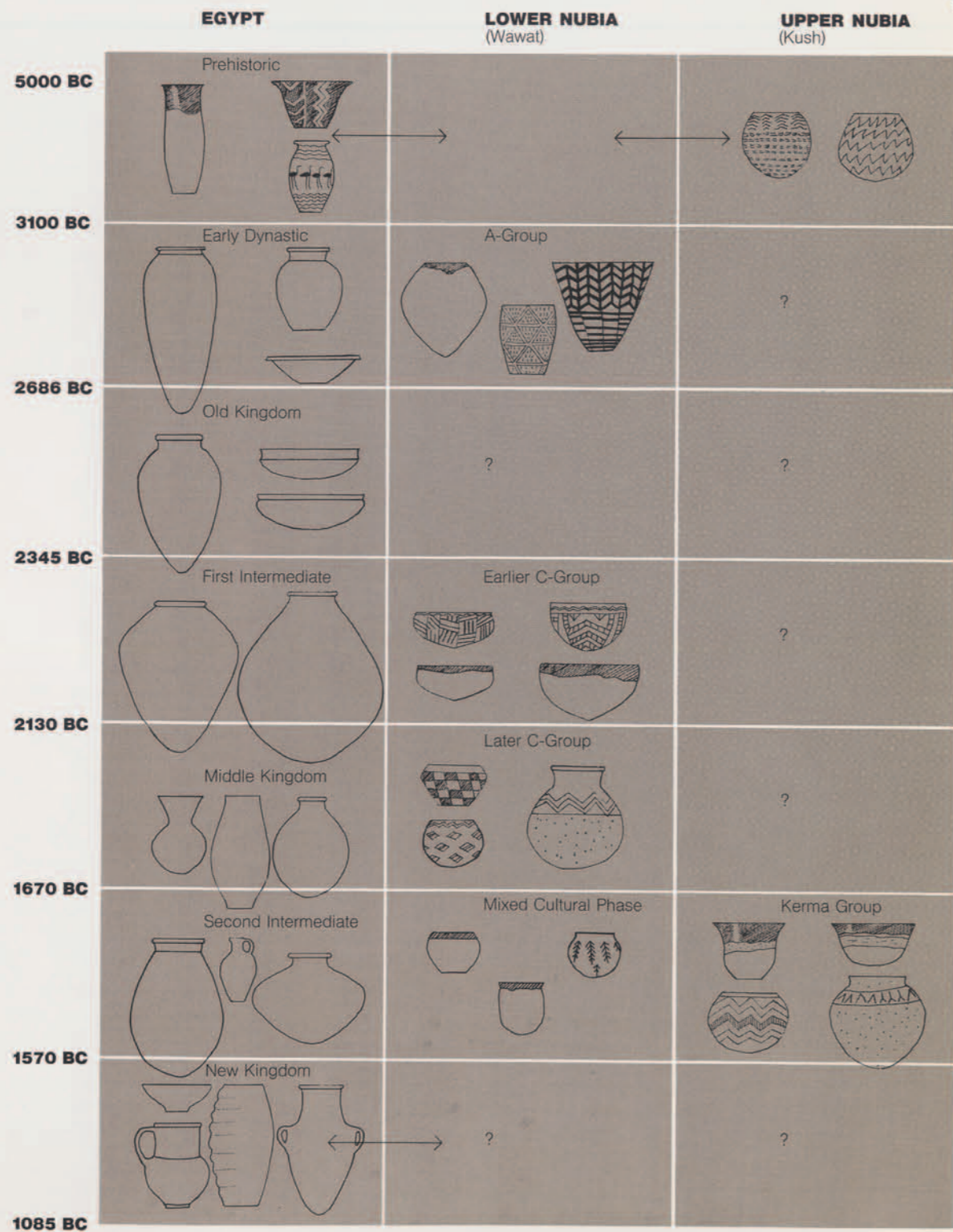
Some scholars therefore doubt that there could have been any significant contact between Egypt and most of Black Africa after 3000 B.C. They suggest that apparent similarities such as the appearance of centralized political structures and divine kingship, which appear in some Black African groups in the first and second millennia A.D., are general and coincidental. Other historians believe such similarities are ultimately derived from ancient Egypt, probably via the "Egyptianized" kingdom of Meroe in the Sudan (591 B.C.-A.D. 320), and are perhaps linked to the diffusion of iron technology from the same source. Recently however the appearance of iron-working in western Africa has been dated to about 500 B.C., and is unlikely to have come from Meroe where iron was still rare at the same date. It can no longer be automatically assumed that the iron-working which appears in central Africa in the early first millennium A.D. was derived from Meroe, since an alternative source is now known to have existed.

The controversy will be resolved only by extensive archaeological exploration, which so far has taken place only in the extreme north of the principal contact area, the modern Republic of the Sudan. Lower Nubia, the area between the First and Second Cataracts (now shared between Egypt and the Sudan), has been thoroughly explored; since 1900 it has served as an ever-

growing reservoir to the Aswan Dam, a fact which has stimulated periodic bursts of salvage archaeology, culminating in an extraordinary international effort in 1961-1964. Upper Nubia, the valley between the Second and Fourth Cataracts, has been less well explored; recent surveys have reached as far as the Third Cataract and a handful of early historical sites have been excavated as far as the Fourth Cataract. Further south the principal excavated sites are Napatan (706-591 B.C.), Meroitic or later. Archaeological coverage is not yet full enough to trace the possible diffusion of Egyptian influence beyond the Sudan in these or earlier times.

However, the accumulation of data over the last sixty years and its continuous reinterpretation have enabled us to study the earliest effects of ancient Egypt on its nearest southern neighbors, who included considerable numbers of Negroid and Negro peoples, and to guess what the effect may have been on more remote Black Africans. For nearly 1500 years (3000-1570 B.C.) the indigenous cultures of Lower Nubia were markedly different from those of historical Egypt, and in Upper Nubia the distinctions carried on into the Meroitic period. The differences are most easily to be seen in the pottery, in which the varied and inventive traditions of the ancient Sudan contrast

1 Egyptian and Nubian pottery types.



strikingly with the unimaginative wares of historical Egypt, but are to be found also in most other aspects of material culture, in language, and surely, in social and political organizations and in religious beliefs. These latter aspects are poorly documented, since the Sudan did not become literate in its own language until ca. 180 B.C. and even now the earliest script, Meroitic, remains untranslatable.

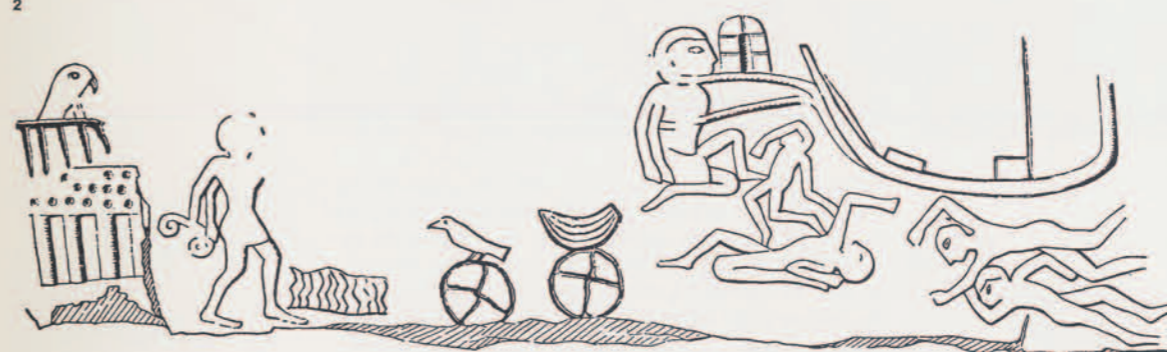
Lower Nubia was unlikely to support a highly developed culture. It has access to some important resources (copper, gold and some valued types of stone) but only a small amount of cultivable land, and throughout history it has acted as a buffer zone between Egypt and the inhabitants of Upper Nubia. Nevertheless, the indigenous population of this region (which, certainly by 2200 B.C., consisted of a mixture of brown and black-skinned peoples, according to Egyptian depictions) was remarkably resistant to Egyptian cultural influence in spite of close and sometimes oppressive contact with the Egyptians. Already by ca. 3050 B.C. Egyptian expeditions had reached the Second Cataract while the people of the contemporary Nubian culture, labeled A-group by archaeologists, buried their dead foods and liquids in imported Egyptian pots

and Egyptian-made copper implements. These were obtained as a result of A-group control over the trade in luxury items, such as ebony and ivory, from further south. The material culture of the Nubians however remained basically non-Egyptian right up to the point (ca. 2600 B.C.) when they were decimated, enslaved and expelled by Egyptian troops intent on securing full control of the trade-routes and natural resources of the area.

From ca. 2590 to 2420 B.C. the Egyptians controlled Lower Nubia from a few weakly defended settlements between the First and Second Cataracts, but these were eventually abandoned partly because of political instability in Egypt itself and partly because of an incursion of African people into Lower Nubia. These people, who may well have been related to the A-group, came possibly from the now rapidly drying deserts to the east and west; during their period of occupation, part of, and finally all Lower Nubia came to be called Wawat. Organized under chieftains, the C-group were war-like enough to be hired as mercenaries by the Egyptians and they also hindered Egyptian trading expeditions, which until ca. 2185 B.C. were still reaching

2 A relief carved on a rock near the Second Cataract, commemorating the earliest known historical conflict between Egypt and Nubia. The scene is dated to King Djer (ca. 3050-2973 B.C.) and the slain and bound figures are believed to be Nubians.

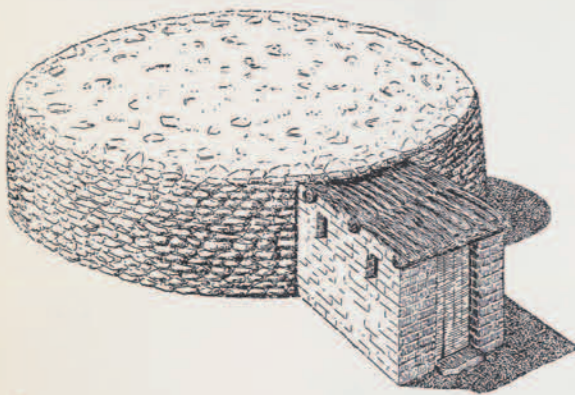
3 Model representing a group of Nubian mercenaries carrying bows, from an Egyptian tomb of ca. 2130 B.C. They may well be people from Wawat.



Upper Nubia. Eventually the C-group secured complete control of this trade and as a result, early C-group graves often contain Egyptian artifacts representing both booty and payment.

By ca. 1930 B.C. the Egyptians had reasserted their control over Lower Nubia, and consolidated it with a series of great forts eventually reaching to the southern end of the Second

able amounts of cultivable land, was capable of supporting a larger and more complexly organized population than Lower Nubia. Already in the mid third millennium B.C. an important chieftainship, called Yam, existed in the area; it was visited by Egyptian traders and it provided them with armed escorts who protected the traders from the interference of the C-group people of Lower Nubia.



Cataract. These forts, with massive walls thirty to forty feet high, are eloquent testimony to the military threat offered by the C-group and the other African peoples in the general area. During the period of domination the C-group continued to live in flimsily built settlements, to bury their dead in substantial and un-Egyptian tombs with circular stone superstructures and to produce a variety of distinctive artifacts showing no Egyptian influence. When Egypt once again underwent an internal decline, the Egyptians did not abandon the forts but the C-group clearly regained some economic and political independence. Late C-group graves are often rich and include a number of especially large examples which probably belong to chieftains; some Egyptian influence may have affected burial customs, but as a whole the native culture of Wawat maintained its individuality.

At this point there was a dramatic incursion from Upper Nubia. Upper Nubia, with consider-

After the Egyptian re-occupation of Lower Nubia however, the relationship became more complex; Upper Nubia, now called Kush, was regarded as a military threat and the great forts were meant in part to prevent Kushite attacks. The Egyptians fought several campaigns south of the Second Cataract and a contemporary inscription, while contemptuous of the Kushites, reveals by its very vehemence a fear and respect for Kushite fighting ability. In a recent translation by Gardiner, the text reads, in part:

When one rages against him [the Nubian] he shows his back; when one retreats he starts to rage. They are not people worthy of respect; they are cowards, craven-hearted.

But the Nubians were formidable enough for the royal author of the inscription to envisage that his troops might fail to resist them:

... he who shall destroy [the frontier] and fail to fight for it, he is not my son and was not born to me.

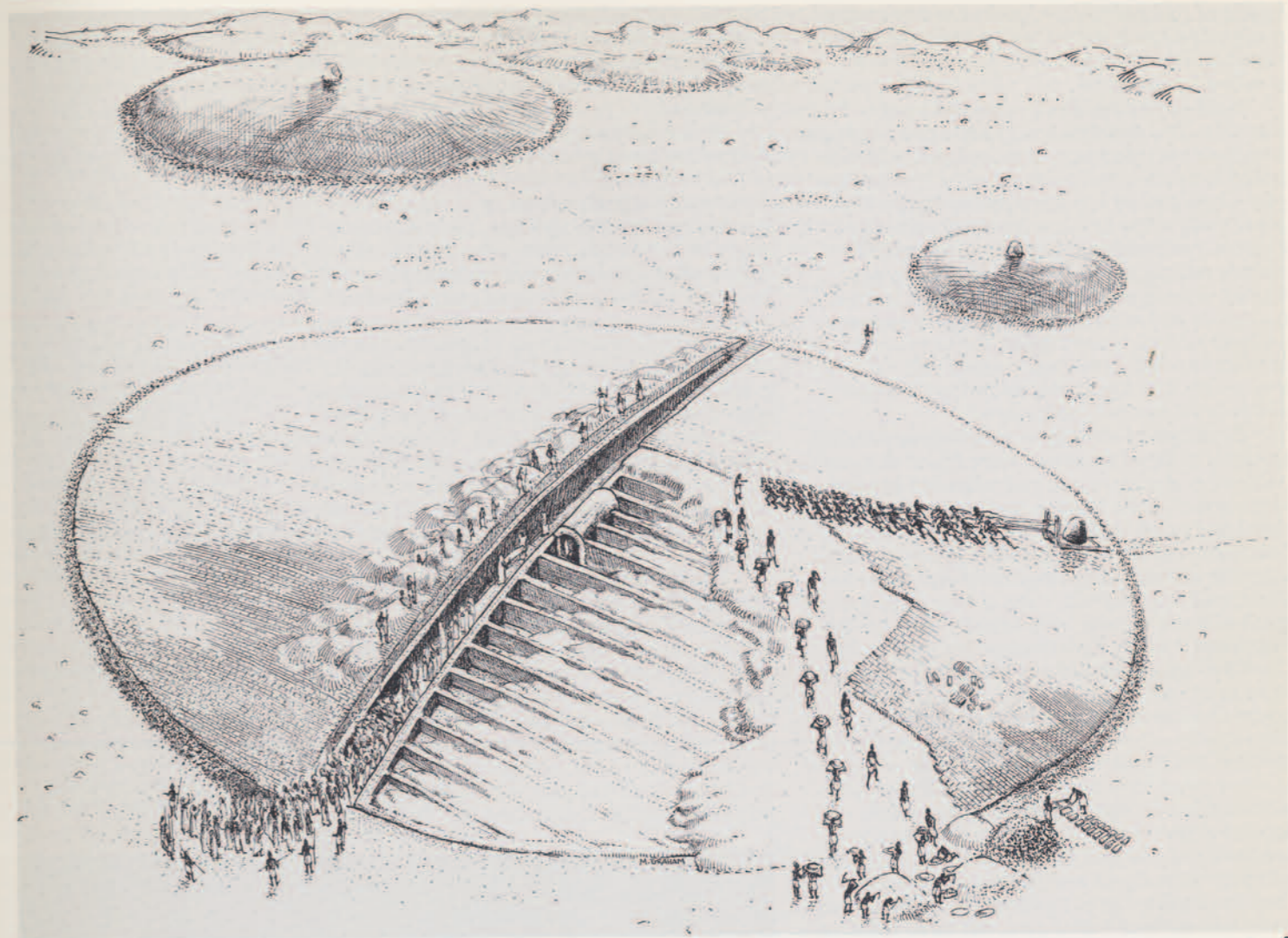
Despite the sporadic hostilities, trade continued to flow between Kush and Egypt, although the entry of Kushites into Lower Nubia was carefully regulated. Finally, in ca. 1650 B.C., the Kushites took the opportunity offered by declining Egyptian power, invaded Lower Nubia and occupied the Egyptian forts. Kushite political organization had reached the point where a single king, called by the Egyptians the "ruler of Kush," controlled not only Lower Nubia but probably Upper Nubia, the Kushite home-land, as well. Egypt by now was divided between an Asiatic dynasty in the north and an Egyptian dynasty in the south, and the Kushite and Asiatic rulers entered into an alliance against the Egyptian king. In a unique contemporary inscription, the Egyp-

1 The remains of an Egyptian fort at Buhen, near the Second Cataract.

2 A "chieftain's" grave of the late C-group. The chapel attached to the circular superstructure is for offerings.

3 Artist's impression of a Kushite royal burial at Kerma. The funerary procession, including the soon to be sacrificed women, is entering the main corridor while workers complete the construction of the mound. The corridor which contained the sacrifices was filled in last of all.

4 A Kushite warrior's dagger.



tians revealed the political reality of the situation by referring to the Kushite ruler as an equal of the Asiatic and Egyptian kings, in marked contrast to the Egyptian custom of referring to all foreign rulers as inherently inferior to the pharaoh.

Unfortunately, we cannot yet trace through archaeology the development of this important Kushite state, but in 1912-1914 a partially excavated cemetery at Kerma revealed what are almost certainly the royal burials of the "rulers of Kush" of the period ca. 1670-1570 B.C. and some of their predecessors. The latter probably did not exercise as much power, since the Kushites we know were originally divided into a number of tribes and the consolidation of control must have been gradual. The latest royal burials are extraordinary structures. The king was placed, with rich funerary equipment, in a central

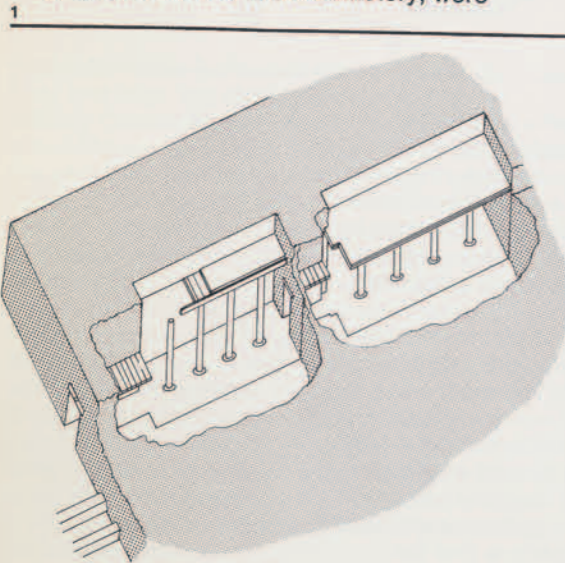
chamber or pit, and at the same time large numbers of women, presumably from his family, were sacrificed and buried in a nearby corridor or chamber. Over the burial complex was heaped a vast earth mound, sometimes held together by a mud-brick framework and a brick paving over the surface; a large stone cone was sometimes placed at the top.

These Kushite rulers no doubt maintained control over Upper and Lower Nubia through their exalted positions within the community, with however the support of warrior retainers, whose burials are found in and around the royal tumuli. Typically a warrior's funeral equipment includes a formidable metal dagger and he is usually accompanied by two or three sacrificed women. There are also indications that the Kushites had a fleet of boats, which would have secured them control over the river, the chief

means of communication; boats are depicted in some buildings at Kerma and, earlier, the Egyptians had regulations against Kushite vessels entering Lower Nubia.

Kushite culture was in essentials non-Egyptian. The Kushites were dark-skinned people with their own language or languages, and their burial structures and customs were, for the most part, unparalleled in contemporary Egypt. The great mass of the artifacts from Kerma are of Kushite manufacture; they include excellent pottery, mainly a very fine red polished black-topped ware in beaker and bowl forms, leather garments, and mica and ivory inlays in animal or geometric form. Nevertheless, the long period of contact inevitably resulted in some cultural interaction with Egypt, the evidence for which needs to be carefully considered.

Hundreds of objects, mostly fragmentary but certainly of Egyptian origin, were found at Kerma, consisting of statues and statuettes of Egyptian kings and officials, faience and stone vessels, metal and wood objects, jewelry, and pottery. This led the excavator, Reisner, to believe that an Egyptian garrison and manufacturing center had dominated the Kushites, but it is now clear that some of these objects were plunder from Lower Nubia and the rest were secured through trade. The Kushites evidently were impressed by some aspects of Egyptian civilization; they collected Egyptian artifacts, refurbished some of the Egyptian temples in Lower Nubia and engaged the services of Egyptian scribes and craftsmen, some of whom must have been at Kerma. However, the technical knowledge of these Egyptians was applied to giving material form to Kushite conceptions and one may suspect that any intellectual influence from Egypt was similarly transformed. Thus the knowledge of building in mud-brick may have been derived from Egypt, but three massive brick structures found at Kerma are not of traditional Egyptian design. Their enormous walls take up between 80 and 90% of each structure and were meant to support an extensive second story, none of which survived. The ground floor rooms are quite small. One of these buildings, near the river, was perhaps the residence of the Kushite king; the two others, in the cemetery, were

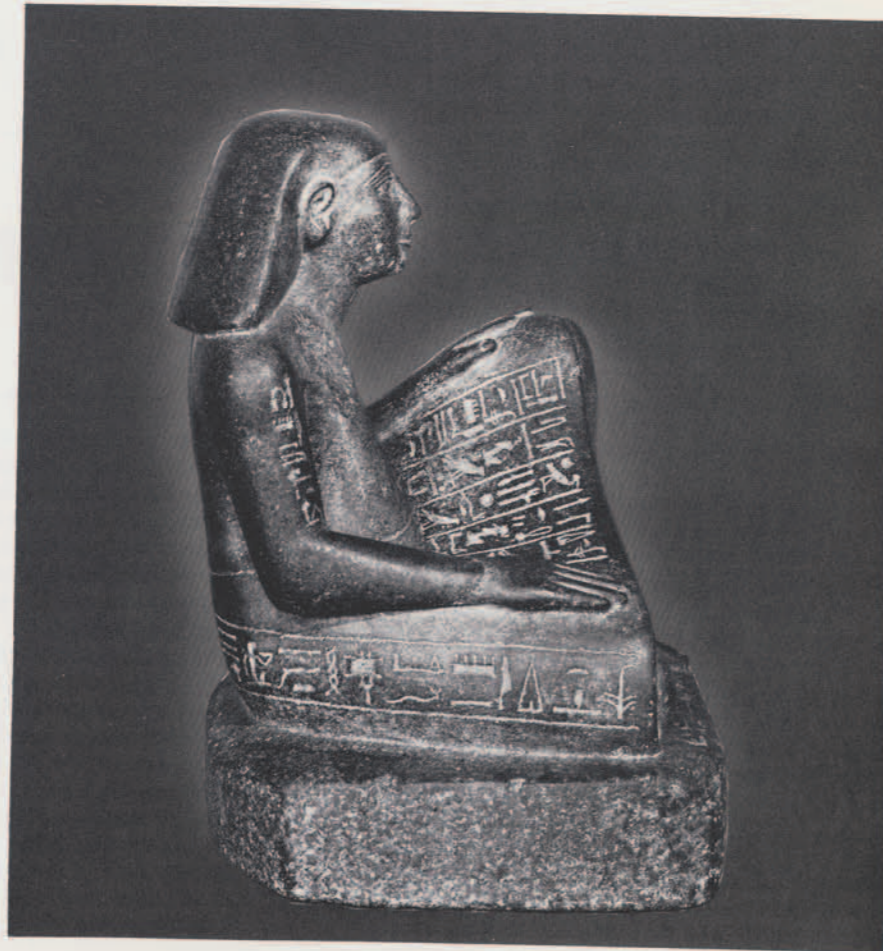


chapels and contained wall paintings in Egyptian style but of quite un-Egyptian content. Rows of painted hippopotami, giraffes and ships indicate a close connection with indigenous beliefs and experience.

In and around the denuded Kushite town at Kerma there was evidence for considerable industrial activity, including the making of pottery, faience and copper or bronze objects. The Kushites were skilled potters, but the faience-workers and metallurgists were probably Egyptian; their products however reflected Kushite culture. Faience (a powdered stone composition covered with a glassy glaze) occurs frequently but an un-Egyptian glazing of stone objects is also not uncommon, and some of the material produced, such as lions in blue faience or blue-glazed stone, are of Egyptian form but are not paralleled easily in Egypt itself. The famous Kerma daggers are based on an Egyptian prototype fitted however with a peculiarly Kushite pommel of ivory and tortoise shell, and there are occasional metal copies of typical Kushite pottery shapes.

The subsequent history of Kushite culture is not yet known. Between 1570 and 1500 B.C. the resurgent Egyptians rapidly re-occupied Lower Nubia and campaigned into Kushite territory until a new Egyptian frontier was established at Napata. For the next 400 years Wawat (Lower Nubia) and Kush were colonial possessions, governed by an Egyptian bureaucracy and sending an annual tribute, primarily of gold, to Egypt. The Nubians of Wawat now became Egyptianized and their chieftains, absorbed into the admin-

2



istrative system, are found depicted and buried in completely Egyptian style. In the larger and more diverse province of Kush the interaction was undoubtedly more complex, but unfortunately only Egyptian centers have so far been excavated. Resistance to Egyptian control is indicated by serious revolts throughout Dynasty XVIII (1570-1320 B.C.) and may have persisted into later periods. On the other hand, large numbers of Kushites were absorbed into the Egyptian army and some probably gained high rank in the provincial administration. The last effective viceroy of Kush, for example, was called Penehasi, "the Nubian" and although this name was also given to Egyptians he may well have been a Sudanese. In any case, Penehasi remained in Kush, presumably as its independent ruler, when the Egyptians abandoned the province in ca. 1085 B.C.

There is no textual or archaeological evidence on the transition to the later and better known Napatan and Meroitic periods. It is surely significant however that the earliest Napatan royal burials were of an earth-mound type, reminiscent of the Kushite customs at Kerma, and that Egyptian influence did not become strong until the Napatans conquered and, for a brief period (751-656 B.C.), ruled Egypt. Thereafter it is true that certain Egyptian cultural forms in art and religion become evident, but the many differences in detail and emphasis, and the eventually exclusive use of the native Meroitic language and script emphasize once again the individuality of these early Sudanese civilizations.

Turning briefly to the question of African influence on Egypt, it is sometimes said that ancient Egyptian institutions and social structure were, in a general way, "African." This however, implies a uniformity of thought and experience throughout the continent which in fact is unlikely to have existed. More specifically, Egypt seems to have been little affected by African or other foreign cultural influences. Their trading and military expeditions certainly must have enabled the Egyptians to learn much about their southern neighbors, but only one or two Nubian gods were absorbed, as minor deities, into the Egyptian pantheon while a few Nubian words appear in the Egyptian language. From early historical times it is true that a steady though proportionately small stream of Nubians entered Egypt as slaves or mercenaries; however, even when immigrants settled down as a community they rapidly absorbed Egyptian culture and within a few generations are virtually indistinguishable from Egyptians in the textual and archaeological record. There is evidence that in the New Kingdom especially individual Nubians were appointed to important posts at the royal court in Egypt and, in view of the fact that the pharaohs maintained harems which included Nubian women, it is not unlikely that a few of the Egyptian kings may have been at least partly Nubian. Nevertheless, no resulting cultural influence can be detected arising from this form of contact. The significant Black African influence on Egypt was indirect. The mineral and other natural resources of the northern Sudan attracted the Egyptians into the area where they encountered numerous and sometimes well organized and formidable human groups; contact stimulated a variety of commercial, diplomatic and military reactions which

meant that the southern lands played a role in Egyptian foreign policy approaching in importance that of western Asia.

The cultural interaction between Egypt and her nearest Black African neighbors was then a complex matter from very early times; Egyptian influence was sometimes resisted and, if absorbed, underwent a transformation in the process. If it did penetrate into Africa beyond the Nile the transformation was probably even more radical and the resistance of the indigenous cultures to it even stronger •

1

A reconstructed section view of "K II," a brick chapel in the Kushite royal cemetery at Kerma. The ground floor chambers were roofed with wooden beams supported by wood columns, and the outer room had a stone slab floor. The plastered walls were painted by Egyptian artisans with scenes of Kushite inspiration. The details of the second story rooms are unknown.

2

Statue from Buhen in Lower Nubia of an Egyptianized chief of Wawat, Amenemhet (ca. 1500-1480 B.C.). He is depicted in completely Egyptian style and only his full official titles, found on another statue, reveal that he is Nubian.

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