

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 not of one but 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 ushered in an era so different from its predecessor that we might be tempted to suspect the coming of a new people, had we not incontrovertible evidence that there was no such incursion. The

Nubians from first to last have remained one people, but they have been swept by many different tides of history.

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 Meroitic 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 cul-

tural 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 Qustul, 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 (Fig. 2). For the common people, Isis seems to have been by far the most important deity. Her worship was continued in some of the old Kushite and Egyptian temples that still remained 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 (Fig. 3). The ornate 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.

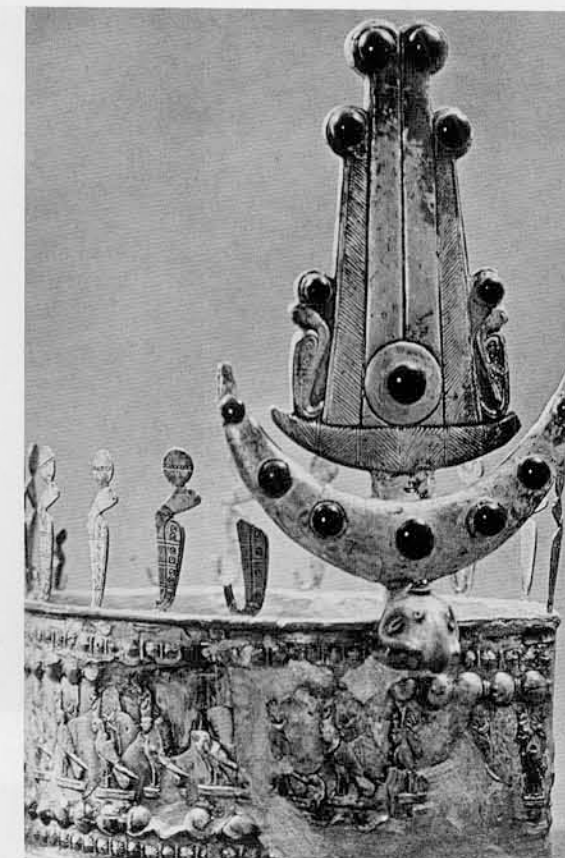


Figure 2. Royal crown of a Ballana monarch, after restoration. The crowns are essentially Byzantine in style, but they feature the Kushite deities Uraeus and Horus in decoration along the rims.

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 be inclined 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

Figure 1. The late medieval "castle" at Kulubnarti, Sudanese Nubia. In the last two centuries of the Christian period, with militarism 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 crypts within the thickness of the walls.



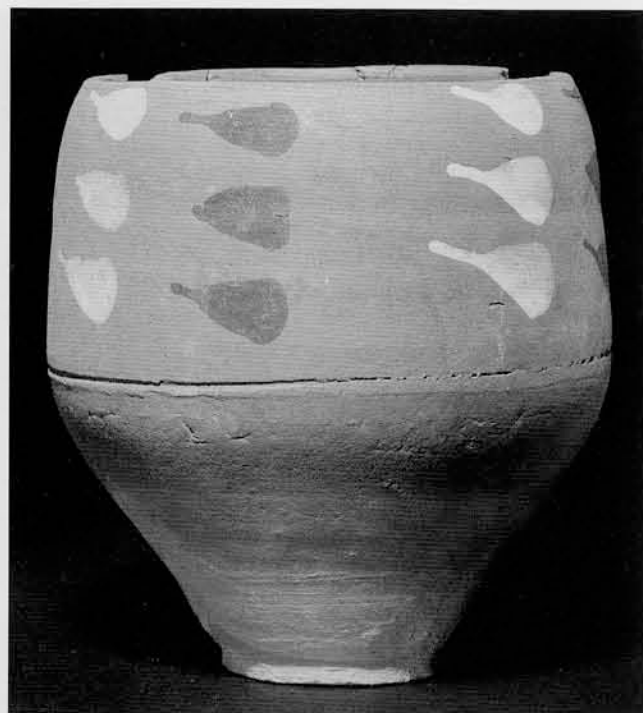


Figure 3. The pottery of the Ballana period was simple in decoration, imitating the traditions of the late Roman redwares. This wheel-made bowl has a design of three leaf shapes.

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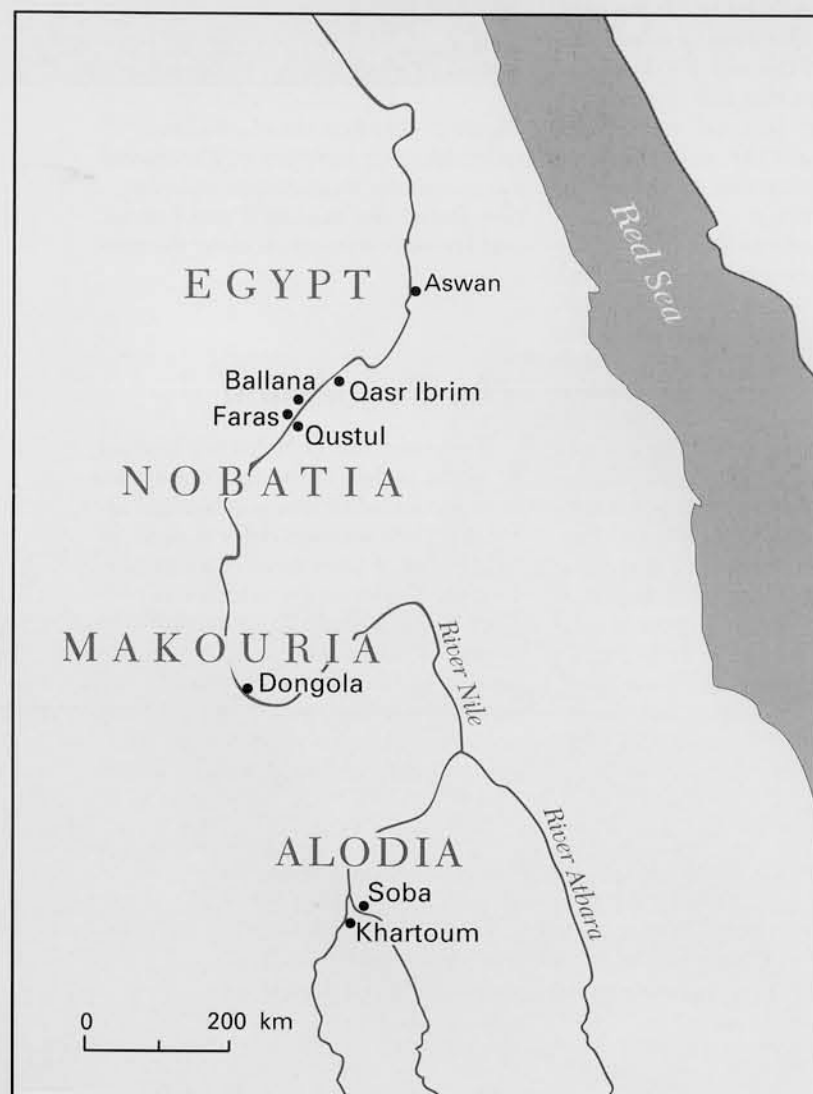


Figure 4. Map of medieval Nubia, showing locations of the three Christian kingdoms—Nobatia, Makouria, and Alodia—and principal settlements.

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 Dyophysite or Melkite and the Monophysite sects were actively vying for control of the church; there were frequent and sometimes violent confrontations between their adherents in Egypt and other eastern lands. Both sects sought advantage by enlisting the support of the Nubians, who were still famous as warriors, and both sent missionary expeditions at just about the same time. For their part, the rulers of Nubia probably saw a chance to strengthen their ties with Egypt and with Byzantium by adopting what by now had become the established faith of those countries, and indeed of most of the civilized world as they knew it.

Both Melkites and Monophysites apparently had some initial success, but

the triumph of the Monophysite Coptic Church in Egypt, after A.D. 642, 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 illustration. For the period between about 800 B.C. and A.D. 550—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 magniloquent 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 proclamation is a rather modest church dedication. The entire art, architecture, and literature of the medieval period cel-



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 Meinarti, in Sudanese Nubia, after partial excavation. The site, like all those in Lower Nubia, has since been inundated by the waters from the Aswan High Dam.

ebrated a heavenly king, not an earthly one, and the church (which was not royally controlled) exerted far more influence on men's minds than did the state. Perhaps most remarkably of all, the Nubians, long famous as warriors, became one of the world's most peaceful peoples, a reputation they have retained down to the present day. In short, one civilization gave way with incredible rapidity to another, which owed far more to the traditions of contemporary Christendom than it did to its own Kushite predecessor.

The civilization of Christian Nubia has received much less world attention

than has that of Kush, yet its cultural and political achievements were no less remarkable. It was in nearly every respect a second golden age, an age noteworthy not for warlike activity but for something far rarer in history: more than 600 years of uninterrupted peace. Happily, the civilization of medieval Nubia is actually better known to us than is any predecessor, thanks in part to the richness of the archaeological record and in part to the diligent interest of Arab writers and visitors, who took far more scholarly interest in Nubia than did any of the country's earlier neighbors.



Figure 5. Interior view of the ruined cathedral of Qasr Ibrim, Egyptian Nubia. Cathedrals were larger than churches, measuring, on the average, about 80 by 65 feet. All were built of cut stone, which was in some cases recycled from earlier Egyptian or Kushite temples.



Figure 7. An abandoned church of the early medieval period at Adindan, Sudanese Nubia. 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 ceiling vaults. After about the 10th century, however, church construction was almost entirely in brick (see Fig. 8).

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 Alodia 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 antecedents are unknown.

Some time in the 8th century the two kingdoms of Nobatia and Makouria became united under a single ruler, who thenceforth 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 permit, no money was in circulation, and foreign commerce was a royal monopoly. The nominally united kingdom should probably be thought of rather like late medieval Austria-Hungary: two kingdoms united only at the top, under a single ruler.

Alodia, whose capital was at Soba, near modern Khartoum, was never united with Makouria, and there are occasional hints of strained relations between the two. Yet, remarkably, there is no evidence of warfare during the entire 800-year period of coexistence of the two Christian kingdoms. Presumably it was their common adherence to the Coptic Christian faith that provided a unifying bond.

Another key to Nubian peace and unity, however, was the Baqt treaty, negotiated between the rulers of Makouria

"Guaranteed against Muslim conquest by the Baqt treaty, Nubia remained firmly in the Christian fold throughout the Middle Ages."

and the Muslim Emirs of Egypt in the year 652. It came on the heels of an unsuccessful Muslim invasion of Nubia, and inaugurated what became in effect a six-century truce. Under terms of the treaty the political and religious autonomy of the Nubians were guaranteed, provided that they made an annual payment of slaves and other goods to the Islamic Governor at Aswan, guaranteed safety of Egyptian merchants traveling to Nobatia, and returned any runaway slaves from Egypt. The treaty was with-

out precedent or parallel in Islamic annals. From the perspective of history, however, the extraordinary thing about the Baqt is not so much its terms as the fact that it continued to be honored for almost six hundred years. The treaty provided the foundation both for the peace and for the economic prosperity that were essential features of medieval Nubian civilization.

The Religious Situation

Guaranteed against Muslim conquest by the Baqt treaty, Nubia remained firmly in the Christian fold throughout the Middle Ages. From at least the 8th until the 14th century, the church in Nubia 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 ethnic Egyptians, as were at least some of the lower clergy. Yet certain cultural differences persisted right through the Middle Ages. The liturgy in Nubia was always celebrated in Greek, not Coptic, though Coptic very soon became the liturgical language of the church in Egypt. In the later Middle Ages the indigenous language of Nubia, written in a modified Greek alphabet, also began to be employed in religious inscriptions, often in combination with Greek. 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 Nubia as it had in Egypt. Perhaps the country as a whole was sufficiently rural, and removed from

were village dwellers. They lived in innumerable small, densely concentrated hamlets scattered along the Nile wherever there were sufficient plots of cultivable land (Fig. 6). The main crop, as in all earlier times, was 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 luxury pottery and textiles were produced and widely distributed from a few specialized centers like Qasr Ibrim, Faras, and Dongola.

Domestic arrangements seem to show clearly that the basic residential unit in medieval Nubia was the nuclear family of husband, wife and children, rather than some larger kin group. Indeed, all our surviving evidence suggests that kinship was not very important in the social fabric. Funerary inscriptions, which are often quite long, do not mention parentage, and in the large corpus of legal documents recovered from Qasr Ibrim there is hardly a hint of corporate kin groups or of kinship obligations. Property was almost always individually owned, and seems to have been freely heritable 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 distribu-

tion of the churches remains something of a mystery, for it bears little relation to the distribution of population. 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 incised into the surface of pottery vessels and other valued goods. Many people carried *higabs*, 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 main exports were slaves and dates, while the Nubians 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 Qasr Ibrim have yielded an extraordinary number of wills, conveyances, deeds, and other legal

the fleshly corruption of urban life, so that the people felt no need for further escape. 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 rather than Nubians. Curiously, too, 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,

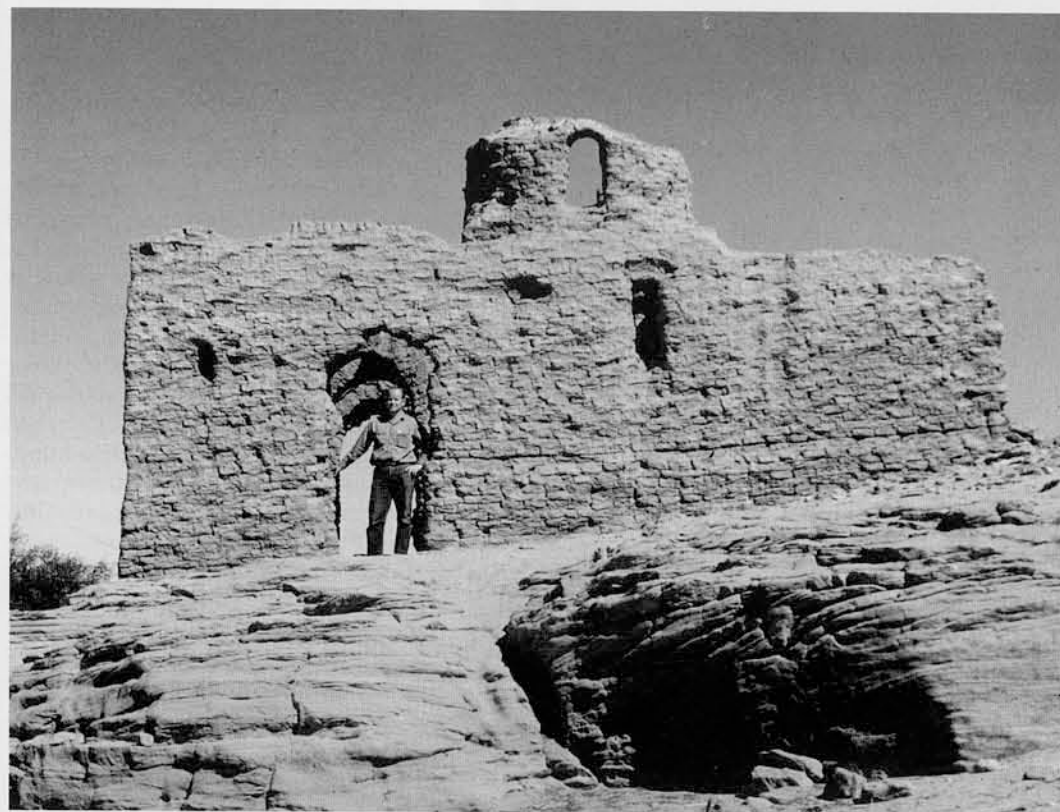


Figure 8. An abandoned church of the late medieval period at Serra, Sudanese Nubia. Medieval churches became increasingly smaller over time. By the middle of the 13th century, the average size of these buildings was only 30 by 25 feet, and some were much smaller even than that.



Figure 9. Interior view of the cathedral at Faras, Sudanese Nubia, after excavation by a Polish expedition. Mural paintings can be seen on the far wall and on the column at left. Polish conservators removed and preserved no fewer than three separate layers of paintings in some places, and this in turn permitted a study of the evolution of Nubian mural art over time. The wall paintings from Faras and elsewhere can be seen today in the National Museum in Warsaw, the National Antiquities Museum in Leiden, and above all in the Sudan Museum in Khartoum.

instruments, written always in the Old Nubian language. After execution 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 architecture, mural decoration, domestic manufactures—especially pottery—and religious literature. At least in the first three of these fields, the Nubians wrought significant and ingenious innovations on familiar Christian themes.

Ecclesiastical Architecture

Foremost among the architectural monuments of medieval Nubia were the cathedrals, of which a half dozen examples have been identified (Fig. 5). The buildings shared most of the liturgical features of ordinary Nubian churches but were substantially larger in size and were built of cut stone. Roofs were originally supported on monolithic columns topped by ornate capitals, a feature not found in pre-Christian Nubian architecture. The most distinctive feature of the cathedrals was the possession of two aisles on either side of the central nave, in place of the usual one. Most of the buildings had, in their original design, a *narthex* or portico at the western end, in contrast to ordinary churches which usually did not.

All Nubian churches were oblong in plan (Fig. 7) and were divided into a central nave and flanking aisles, with an apsidal sanctuary at the east end and sacristy rooms on either side of it. In place of a narthex most churches had small corner rooms at the northwest and southwest corners, while access to the building was through doorways in the north and south walls. These features of design are also found in Ethiopian churches, but do not occur in the Coptic churches of Egypt. A uniquely Nubian innovation, appearing after about A.D. 850, was a narrow passage leading behind the apse, and connecting the two sanctuary rooms.

For reasons that are not entirely clear, the design of the Nubian churches became increasingly small with each passing century. In the middle of the 13th century, there appeared a very small and

radically simplified form of church, lacking the apsidal sanctuary, eastern passage, and sometimes even the western corner rooms (Fig. 8). One possible explanation is that, with the passage of time, the use of the church interior came to be reserved more and more exclusively for the clergy, while public services were held out-of-doors.

Mural Decoration

The earliest Nubian churches seem to have been decorated mainly with carved stone. After the 8th century, carving gave way to mural painting as the exclusive form of decoration in churches. At least a few scraps of painted decoration have survived in nearly all of the known churches, but in most cases the paintings have suffered severely both from natural deterioration and from vandalization in the centuries after 1500. However, at least one cathedral and five ordinary churches

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were buried under windblown sand before the end of the Christian period, which preserved their programs of mural decoration more or less intact. Outstanding among these was the great cathedral at Faras (Fig. 9), surely one of the most surprising and dramatic finds of the Campaign to Save the Monuments of Nubia.

All or parts of 169 separate paintings were preserved in the Faras Cathedral, as excavated by a Polish expedition in the early 1960s. These had been executed over a period of several centuries, with later paintings often superimposed over earlier ones. The earliest paintings were in a rather simple and severe style, employing muted colors and rather massive, blocky human figures. Later paintings were in a purely Nubian style, employing bright colors and lavishly ornate detail in the treatment of robes, wings, and other

elements. Human facial features were considerably more humanized and animated than in earlier paintings, and ethnic Nubian bishops and princes were faithfully portrayed with dark skins. Toward the end of the Christian period, however, church painting reverted to a very simplified style employing mainly yellow, white, and blue.

No other Nubian church exhibited the same elaborateness and profusion of decoration as did the Faras Cathedral, but the basic program of decoration seems to have been pretty much the same in all the buildings. The lower walls of the apse were occupied by a central figure of the Madonna and Christ child (Fig. 10), flanked on either side by the twelve Apostles. The half-dome over the apse, if there was one, was dominated by the colossal head and shoulders of the all-seeing Christ Pantocrator. There was very often a nativity scene at the head of the north aisle (Fig. 11), a standing figure of the Archangel Michael at the head of the south aisle, and a head of Christ surrounded by the symbols of the four evangelists on the south interior wall. Other popular motifs were cavalier saints, among whom we can often recognize the figure of St. George spearing the dragon. A scene found in a number of churches, and reaching colossal proportions on the west wall at Faras, depicted the three Hebrew youths in the fiery furnace, protected by the Archangel Michael (Fig. 12).

The wall paintings from Faras and elsewhere undoubtedly represent the supreme achievement of medieval Nubian art.

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 elaborate decorated wares of the Christian period, no less than those of the Meroitic period, have no parallels in the northern country.

We have already noted that the pottery of the Ballana period was severely simple in decoration. This tradition persisted for a time in the early centuries of the Christian period, though decoration gradually became more frequent and more complex. Then, in the 9th century, the Nubian wares suddenly blossomed

forth once again in a profusion of bright colors and a wide variety of curvilinear and rectilinear motifs, including numerous animals, birds, and fish in addition to more abstract geometric designs (Figs. 13, 14). Once revived, this tradition persisted until nearly the end of the Christian period, although over time the designs became more and more frilly and less representational.

The inspiration for the Classic and Late Christian wares is not difficult to seek. Most of the motifs can be found in medieval manuscript illumination, and to a lesser extent in church decoration. It was left to the genius of the Nubian potters, however, to adapt these motifs to the decoration of pottery vessels. It should be noted, of course, that we are not speaking of everyday cooking and eating vessels but of luxury wares that were widely traded and highly prized. Vessels produced at Faras have been found distributed over a range of several



Figure 10. Mural painting of the Madonna and Child in the cathedral at Faras.

hundred miles, and broken bowls were sometimes laboriously drilled with holes and stitched back together with rawhide.

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 are prayer books or breviaries. There are in addition innumerable fragmentary texts, including gospels, lives and saying 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 seem to range freely between worldly and otherworldly concerns, and between lofty moral precepts and primitive ritual fetishism. The early texts are all on parchment, but paper was introduced at least by the 10th century, and thereafter its use 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 tombstones, 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

Figure 11. Mural painting of the Nativity in the cathedral at Faras.

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 Qasr Ibrim have yielded a very large number of Arabic commercial documents.

The interesting feature of medieval Nubian literature 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 Qasr 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 Fa-



Figure 12. Mural painting of Shadrach, Meshak, and Abednego in the fiery furnace, protected by Archangel Michael, in the cathedral at Faras. The Archangel Michael was clearly the main focus of medieval Nubian folk religion; his name occurs far more often than any other in popular religious texts and in graffiti on house walls.



timids were overthrown by Saladin in 1172, he immediately launched a pre-emptive 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 Mamluks seized control of Egypt in 1250 that the long peace, inaugurated by the Baqt, 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 Mamluks demanded not only an immediate resumption of the tribute but a payment of arrears, and when this was not forthcoming they began a series of military incur-

sions into Lower Nubia that continued for more than a century. In 1276 the Mamluk Sultan Qalawun inflicted a decisive defeat on a Nubian army and thenceforth 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, militarism begot militarism. The increasingly militaristic character of late medieval Nubia is reflected not only in contemporary texts but in the repair of fortifications at Qasr Ibrim and the increasingly fortified character of houses. After 1300 there appeared a series of structures that can only be characterized as miniature castles (Fig. 1), and these rather than churches became the primary architectural monuments of late

medieval Nubia.

Mamluk 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 riven by dynastic disputes, with rival claimants often seeking the support of the Mamluks. 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 Muslim 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 Mamluks

but by the hordes of Arab nomad tribes that poured into the central Sudan in the 15th and 16th centuries. Some of these peoples 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 newcom-

ers in time overran most of the territories of Makouria and Alodia, deposing the former rulers and setting themselves up as local warlords in a dozen or more petty principalities. The predations 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 total deserts, held no attraction for nomad invaders, and it was spared the fate of Makouria and Alodia. Here, in what is now Egyptian Nubia, a curious splinter-kingdom, calling itself the Kingdom of Dotawo, managed to limp 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-vanished Kingdom of Makouria. The last document relating to the Kingdom of Dotawo, 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

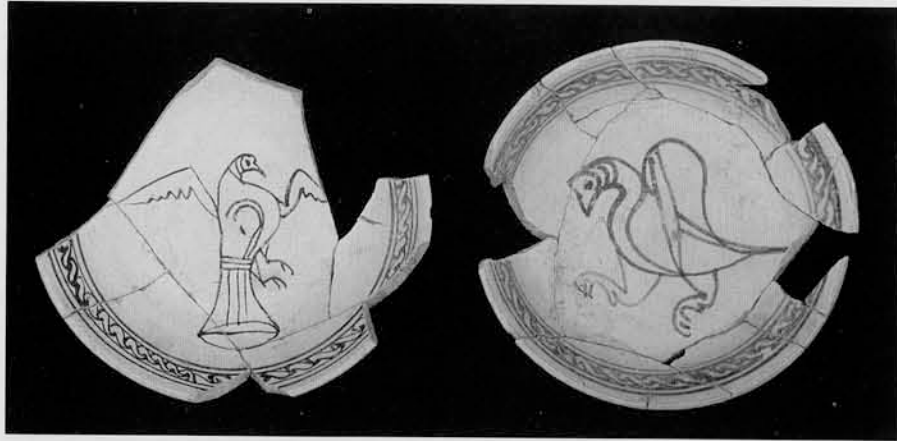


Figure 13. Painted pottery dishes from the Classic Christian period (about A.D. 850–1000), found in the pottery factory at Faras, Sudanese Nubia. In this period there was a preference for wares with a white or yellow background, while in the Late Christian period the preference was once again largely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

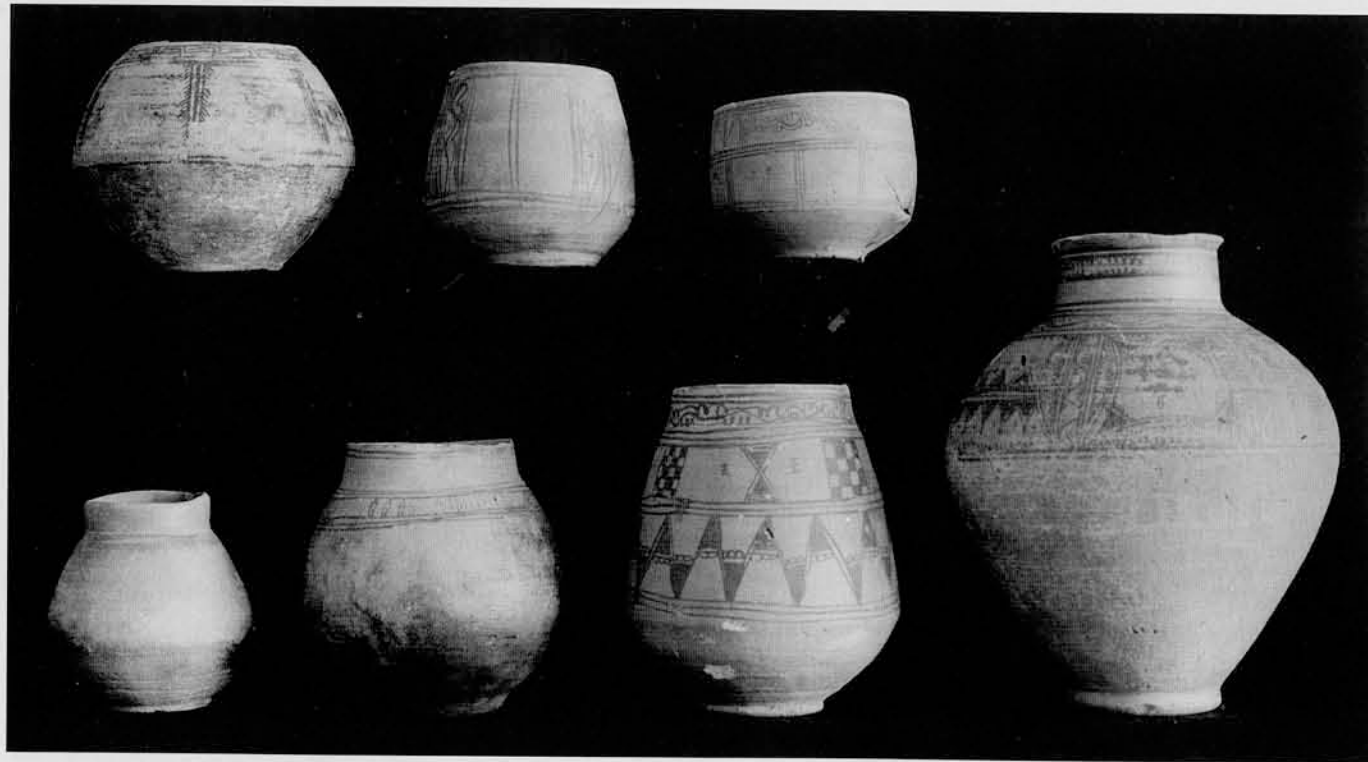


Figure 14. Painted pottery vases from the Late Christian period (about A.D. 1200–1300), found in the village site of Meinarti, Sudanese Nubia.

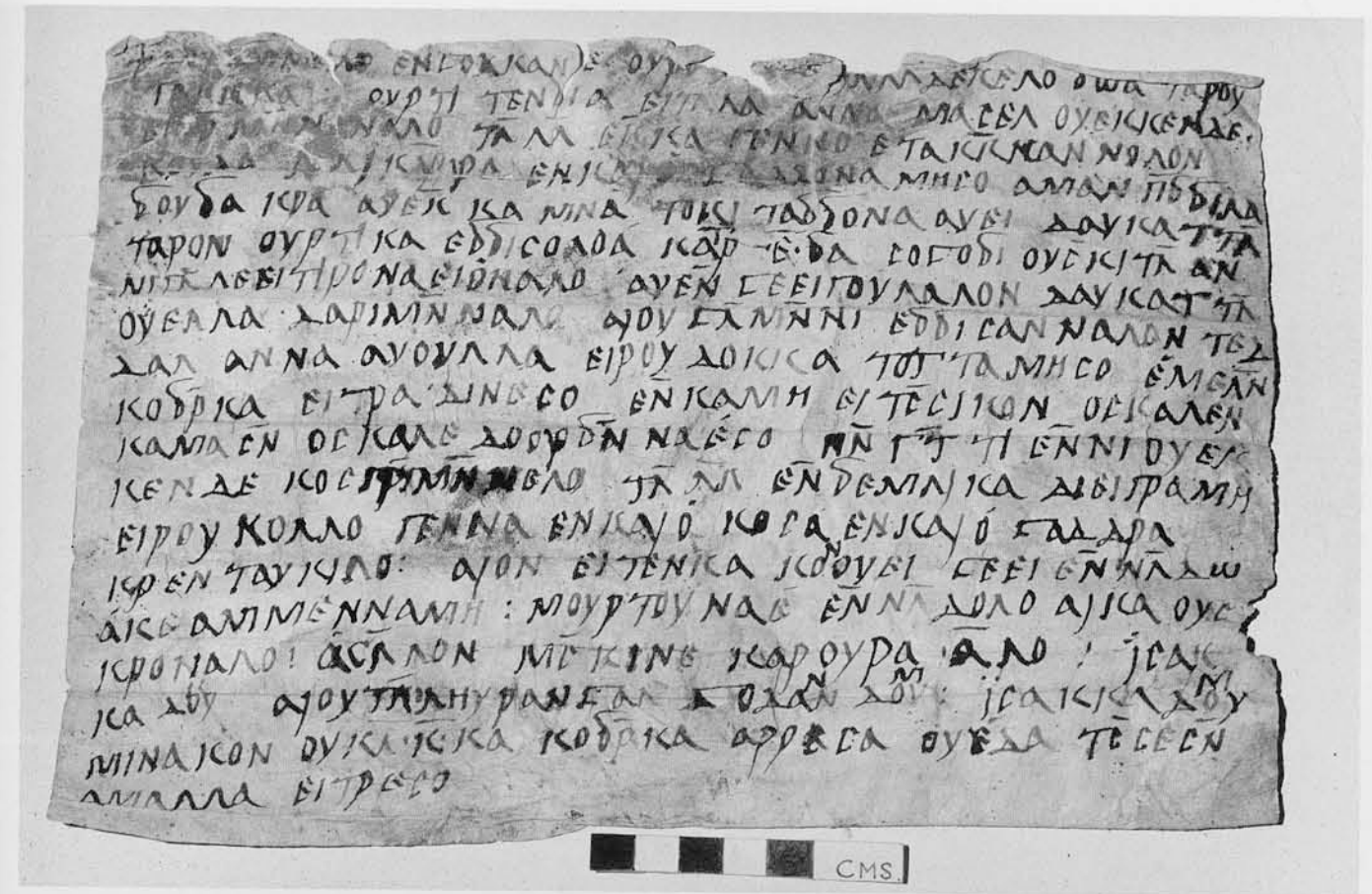


Figure 15. An administrative document in the Old Nubian language, found in the town site of Qasr Ibrim, Egyptian Nubia.

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 potters 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 sufis. It was they who laid the foundations of Nubia's present-day civilization: a civilization in many ways as 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 Kush as a watered-down Egyptian culture. Both judgments would be equally wrong. In the last analysis, however, the question of originality is irrelevant. No civilization except the earliest has ever been wholly autochthonous or autonomous; each has built on the foundations laid by its predecessors and has borrowed freely from its neighbors. What matters ultimately is the quality of life that each brings to its citizenry. Viewed from that perspective, medieval Nubia achieved something almost unprecedented in history: six hundred years of uninterrupted peace. In these days of flaming ethnic, religious, and national conflicts throughout the world, it is an achievement deserving our utmost respect.

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