

The Nubian Dark Age

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The period between the end of the Viceregal administration during the last years of the 20th Dynasty, and the first datable inscriptions of the 25th Dynasty in the 8th century is frequently treated as a 'Dark Age', and the apparent 'lack' of archaeological material is balanced by a corresponding increase in the use of colourful language¹.

The concept of a 'Dark Age' has taken root in Nubian studies, but unlike the comparable, and contemporaneous, Dark Ages of Greece and the Near East, has never been discussed². The idea of a Nubian Dark Age is to a degree accidental, resulting from the examination of two different questions within the context of an accepted absolute Egyptian chronology, and from an Egyptian perspective. Some fundamental questions raised by the material, and by its interpretation, have, as a result, never been pursued. This approach accounts for the attitude adopted by many scholars to the period; indeed, one may suspect that a number would have treated it very differently had they not felt obliged to conform to the accepted, Egyptologically-derived, chronology. The currently accepted absolute Egyptian chronology may be correct; but if it is, some difficult questions arise concerning events in Nubia during the Third Intermediate Period.

Nubian history during the Third Intermediate Period has been discussed relative to one of two major issues: either the collapse of the Viceregal administration, or the rise of the kingdom of Kurru, its conquest of Egypt and rule there as the 25th Dynasty. These two issues have nearly always been viewed as separate and unrelated phenomena. Indeed, discussion of this period has been Egyptocentric, concerning itself with those problems directly related to Egypt, and also using Egyptian type evidence. Thus in periods where there are no large stone monuments or hieroglyphic texts there is assumed to be some sort of hiatus or 'Dark Age'. At best the assumption is that the region 'regressed' to a 'tribal level'³. This latter view is particularly applied to the part of the Nubian Nile Valley between Dongola and Napata, an area assumed to have been under Egyptian control during the New Kingdom.

Archaeologically, the 'hiatus' in Lower Nubia has been considered within the broader context of an area assumed to have been devoid of population from the later New Kingdom (by some from the later 18th Dynasty) until the Ptolemaic period. The discussion here has centred upon interpretation of the evidence available, and as Adams⁴ recognises, a conflict of opinion has arisen between archaeologists and philologists. Whilst those who have worked as field archaeologists in Lower Nubia agree actively (Arkell, Shinnie and Trigger) or tacitly (Hintze and Millet) with Adams that there was a lack of settled population in Lower Nubia during most of the 1st millennium BC, they are divided as to its causes. Adams and Shinnie adhere to the view first proposed by Firth, that ecological problems were caused by declining Nile levels. Arkell and Desanges regard political motivation, the hostility between Egypt and Nubia, as more likely, whilst Katznelson suggests economic decline was a prime factor.

The widely accepted view is that a diminishing flow of the Nile throughout the New Kingdom resulted in a decline in agricultural production and an eventual exodus of the population; the Egyptian settlers and administrators, Egyptianized Nubians, local princes and some of their retainers to Egypt, and the rest of the indigenous population to Upper Nubia⁵.

According to the most recent historical reconstructions, Upper Nubia was relinquished from Egyptian control by the end of the 19th Dynasty or 20th. It is argued that the Viceregal administration functioned during its latest phase from Thebes, or became the leader of an independent Lower Nubia, albeit briefly,

¹ The literature and issues of the Dark Age are discussed in MORKOT, 1991.

² A review of the Dark Age problem throughout the Near East and Europe may be found in JAMES *et al.*, 1991, with extensive bibliography.

³ TRIGGER, 1976, p. 140.

⁴ ADAMS, 1976, pp. 130 ff.

⁵ ADAMS, 1964, pp. 114-115.

before the «evacuation» of the population. Goedicke⁶ and Trigger⁷ have tentatively suggested that Upper Nubia was in the control of local princes from the end of the 20th Dynasty or contemporaneously with the 21st Dynasty an idea which may be implicit in the work of other writers.

Admittedly, archaeological knowledge of the area most significant for considering the rise of the independent Kushite kingdom, the Dongola-Napata reach of the Nile, is limited. No major New Kingdom sites are reported from the region between Kawa and Napata, which, given the easily identifiable nature of Egyptian monuments elsewhere in Nubia, must be significant, and strongly suggests that there were no Egyptian towns in this area. It can be argued that the evidence in this area has been lost; either because totally covered by sand, or destroyed. Large monuments certainly have vanished from this region, however, textual evidence and other available sources should also be considered, and even from the Napatan and Meroitic periods these record only Pnubs (Kerma), Kawa and Korti as major centres in this region. The alternative model for New Kingdom occupation of this region argued by the writer may ultimately be proved wrong; but this does not preclude its application and a consequent re-consideration of our preconceptions.

It is not surprising, in the light of the accepted reconstruction of late New Kingdom Nubian history, that most writers have treated the appearance of the «Kingdom of Kurru» in the mid-9th century as a new beginning, and as a phenomenon largely unrelated to the end of the Viceregal period.

All discussions of the rise of the Kurru kingdom have been based upon chronological premises which have affected the interpretation of the archaeological evidence. Reisner's original chronology was logically worked back from the, firmly dated, 25th Dynasty. Thus, 20th-dynasty material from the earliest burials at el-Kurru has been designated «heirloom», and similar explanations have been given for anachronistic material in other Kushite sites. Other factors which might logically have been discussed within the context of a postcolonial Nubia, and which find parallels in contemporaneous Third Intermediate Period Egypt, have likewise been judiciously ignored or explained as «Late Napatan» phenomena. The assumption of historians that the Viceregal administration was actually disestablished, with the elites moving to Egypt, raises a number of issues which have never been resolved satisfactorily.

Following the model of New Kingdom power distribution argued by this writer⁸, it is quite conceivable

that with the withdrawal of the Viceregal administration, or its secession, in the reign of Ramesses XI, the power vacuum was filled by local princes. A number of rulers with «Neo-Ramesside» titularies, a strikingly Third Intermediate Period phenomenon, have been ascribed to the 4th/3rd centuries BC on the slenderest of evidence, and, more disturbingly, the inscription of a Queen, Karimala, universally accepted as of post-20th and pre-25th Dynasty date, is simply ignored in all discussion of this period of Nubian history.

Theoretical models of post-colonial systems have never been applied to Nubia, and the assumed emigration of the population never questioned. Indeed, archaeologists have been so bound by the Egyptian framework that the whole concept of a Nubian «Dark Age» has never really been critically examined.

Whilst direct comparisons should be avoided, analogies with 20th century, and other, de-colonialisation may not be altogether irrelevant here, at least as indicators of the sorts of situations which can arise. It is certain that the end of the Viceregal administration was far more complex than modern writing on this period would suggest: it did not simply stop and go away.

This theoretical framework for events in Nubia is based upon a model differing from the conventional view. However, to say that something was happening does not resolve the problems of absolute chronology: postulated events could be spread over a longer or shorter period.

Note

This paper epitomises part of the writer's doctoral dissertation (University of London), where all of the issues and the relevant literature are discussed. The references and notes have been minimised in this abstract.

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⁶ GOEDICKE, 1972.

⁷ TRIGGER, 1965, pp. 113-114.

⁸ The model is proposed in my thesis; a summary may be found in DAVIES ed., 1991.

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