LOST KINGDOMS of the NILE
Nubian Treasures from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
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Ancient Nubia

Introduction

It is difficult to make sweeping statements that encompass all phases of Nubian culture because, unlike ancient Egypt, the history of ancient Nubia is not a continuum of a single, unified culture separated only by different rulers. Instead, ancient Nubia was composed of kingdoms that flourished at different times and places, each with its own culture. The periods that offer us the most information about the cultural achievements of ancient Nubians are the Kerma (2000–1500 BC), Napatan (750–270 BC), and the Meroitic (270 BC–AD 350) periods.

It is important to keep in mind that the study of ancient Nubia is growing, and that scholars are researching, excavating, and learning new information all the time. A great deal remains to be learned, and our understanding of ancient Nubia expands every year.

One of the most difficult aspects to piece together about an ancient people is their daily life. This is especially true of ancient Nubians, as they have left us almost no artwork showing themselves at home or engaged in the many tasks that they must have performed every day; nor have they left us any written accounts explaining their lifestyle. All we have from which to interpret and reconstruct their day-to-day activities are the objects that they made and left behind. The objects that they placed in their burials have been the best preserved, so archeologists interpret the lifestyle of ancient Nubians primarily by studying their grave goods. How successful would that be for our culture?

Domestic animals

By piecing together clues that the Nubians have left us, we can learn a great deal about their world. We know, for instance, that animals played a major role in their lives. As in most ancient cultures, cattle, sheep, and goats provided not just food, but clothing and other necessary objects. Nubians made animal skins into leather for clothing such as skirts, kilts, head coverings, sandals, and wrist guards; they also made horse bridles and other implements from leather, used goat hair to upholster furniture, and sheep’s wool to make blankets.

The importance of animals as a source of food and clothing carried over into the religious life of ancient Nubians. We know that animals were used in religious ceremonies because of the tiny sculptures of cattle and sheep found placed in graves. In the Kerma period, hundreds of cattle skulls were arranged around the perimeter of large, round graves. Amun, one of the most powerful gods of Nubia, was shown as a man with the head of a ram. Because of the ram’s religious importance, it is not surprising to find sacred images of the ram worn as pendants, rings, and earrings.

The frequent appearance of dogs in Nubian art seems to indicate that dogs were as important to families in ancient Nubia as they are today. Besides being the pet and guardian of the family, dogs accompanied men in battle, as well as in hunting. Sometimes, soldiers even had their beloved dogs buried with them. For example, one grave contained a beautiful red and green leather dog collar with impressed designs of horses on it. The names these pets were given are similar to dog names used today—such as Blackie (for its color) and Gazelle (for its speed).
Economy
The people of ancient Nubia did not use coins for money. They traded or bartered for the goods and services they needed. People who earned their living by fishing, farming, or raising cattle and sheep could trade their fish, vegetables, and meat for things that were made by other craftspeople, such as pottery, jewelry, baskets, or furniture.

Occupations were varied. The government probably employed some people, since the expertise of engineers, architects, supervisors, and workers was needed to run the gold mines, to dig the huge, round, royal Kerma graves, to quarry stones for making sculptures, and to build the great royal pyramids and temples of the Napatan and Meroitic periods.

Because the only dependable way across the vast African desert north to Egypt and the Mediterranean world was through Nubia, international trade was a major part of Nubian economy. Nubian merchants would have set up caravan centers or trading outposts near the southern and northern Nubian borders.

At the southern border, trade items were brought from central Africa. There, merchants would barter for items such as lion and cheetah skins, ostrich eggs and feathers, ivory tusks, and ebony logs. In the north, Egyptian soldiers directed the flow of trade into Egypt from forts strategically placed on the Nile. They attempted to monopolize the expensive trade goods from southern Nubia as well as large quantities of gold from Nubian mines. Egyptian products exported to Nubia included some foodstuffs (wine, honey, and oils) and the luxury goods often found in Nubian graves: alabaster vessels and sculptures, scarabs, and jewelry.

Gold
Just as the physical environment of Nubia determined the types of animals and plants found there, so too the natural mineral resources shaped the Nubian way of life. The rich desert gold mines made Nubia a major player in the ancient mineral trading world. Gold nuggets in bags, or ingots shaped in doughnut-sized rings, were used like money in the international world.

The mineral operations would have required a highly organized labor force, with skilled prospectors to find the gold, mapmakers, supervisors, quarrymen, accountants and scribes to tally and weigh the gold, as well as treasury officials to prepare the exports. Also, many laborers—such as diggers, crushers, washers, and smelters—would have been required to obtain and refine the gold.

Others shaped the gold into ingots. Cargo carriers were also necessary to transport the gold both overland and by boat. In addition, military officials were responsible for the supervision of the gold workers in the mines, and soldiers accompanied the expedition to protect the valuable cargo from thieves. In this way, these natural resources created a large job market.

Once the raw material was in hand, craftspeople used it to make exquisite jewelry, statues, and other precious objects for wealthy families. Gold and silver were in constant demand, especially by ancient Nubian rulers, who filled their tombs with jewelry and vessels made from precious metals. The quality and quantity of tomb goods reflect the wealth and power of the person with whom they are buried.
Pottery
In Nubia, most people lived along the Nile, and the banks of the river are a natural resource for clay, the common ingredient for making pottery. We know that pottery was highly prized because pottery vessels are among the most frequently found objects in burials throughout all phases of Nubian culture. This pottery was always made with great artistic style and pride, as can be seen in the lustrous hand-polished finish, delicate forms, and carefully painted plant and animal motifs and abstract designs.

Pottery as imports
Nearly any container you use in your home today would probably have been made of pottery in the ancient world. Similarly, any food or drink that was imported into Nubia was sent in pottery vessels. Egyptian goods were imported to Nubia in undecorated, utilitarian containers very early on, based on evidence from A-Group graves that contained large quantities of Egyptian wheel-made pottery containers. (Archaeologists have named the earliest culture yet known to have inhabited northern Nubia the A-Group since we do not know what they called themselves. The A-Group culture existed from about 3100 BC to sometime before 2800 BC, ending probably as a result of Egyptian raids sent by early pharaohs.)

An Egyptian text from Dynasty Six (2323-2150 BC; toward the end of the Old Kingdom in Egypt) mentions the export of ointment, honey, clothing, and oil “for the gratification of the Nubians,” suggesting that cosmetics and oil for anointing the body were highly sought-after products. Wine, transported in large amphoras, was also a common luxury import. Like the Egyptians, the majority of Nubians were beer drinkers; wine was for the elite. Nubians produced little of their own wine since grapes were hard to grow in their hot, dry climate. We know that items produced in both Nubia and Egypt, such as cereals, cheese, and beer, would not have been imported.

Archeological findings reinforce the accounts of Greek travelers who wrote about the kinds of foods they found in Nubia. They said that Nubians had no oil, just butter and fat, and that they also had no fruits except dates grown in the royal gardens.

Military
Like other countries in the ancient world, Nubia needed its own military force to defend towns, capital cities, and rulers against invading armies and to expand their power into neighboring territories. Nubia’s greatest military success
came with the conquest of Egypt under King Piye (about 730-716 BC), who then became king of both Egypt and Nubia. Nubian soldiers also fought other large-scale military battles with the Assyrians and Persians, as well as with a variety of warring nomadic groups from the desert areas that flank Nubia. Throughout ancient times (and even up to the Middle Ages), Nubians were renowned as skillful bowmen. They were often hired by Egyptians as well as by other countries of the ancient Near East to fight on their behalf. In some periods, Nubian soldiers stayed in Egypt and formed their own small communities, where they lived and eventually were buried.

Most of our information about the rulers of Nubia comes from ancient texts, scenes carved and/or painted on temple walls, and inscribed stelae of the Napatan period or later. These sources tell us that the ruler was all powerful. The ruler was not only the political leader, but also served as the head of the army and the chief priest in the temple rituals.

Stelae are especially useful for recounting major political or social events and royal edicts. Stelae set up by Taharka, the greatest of all known Nubian rulers of Egypt (690-664 BC), tell us about his military victories, about sporting events he sponsored, and even about how his mother came to visit for his coronation.

Choosing a ruler
In America today, our leaders are chosen by a democratic vote; in ancient times, the selection of a ruler was very different. Although we don’t know all the specifics, we do know something about how the process worked in the Napatan Period. Some archeologists say that the ruler had to be born to a queen; others argue that rulership was passed on by the father. The evidence is strong for both cases.

Women clearly played an important role in determining who took the throne. In Aspelta’s coronation text on a stela set up at Gebel Barkal, he lists the seven generations of women who came before him on his mother’s side of the family as a way of proving his royal heritage. Aspelta, who was probably Taharka’s great-grandson, was the king of Kush who ruled over much of what is now the northern Sudan in the early sixth century BC.

We do know that the ruler was chosen from among the children of one of the King’s brothers. In addition, evidence suggests that the ruler could be selected by military officials or by priests.

After the ruler was crowned, he or she would set out on a coronation journey to visit Napata and all the other major temple sites in Nubia. At each stop, the ruler would introduce himself or herself to the temple and the gods who were worshiped there. Then the king or queen would give orders to restore the temples and appoint new priests; by doing this, order would symbolically be created throughout the land. From Greek sources, we know that kings rarely appeared in public and were remote and unapproachable. The average person would have known them only through rare public events.

The mother and the sister of the ruler held a very special and high position in the society. They are frequently mentioned in inscriptions, and many artistic images can be found. The role of the queen as ruler in her own right was most evident in the Meroitic period. We know that queens ruled without a king at that time and that they had their own pyramids. In fact, many Nubian pyramid chapels contain images, carved in relief, of the queen conquering her enemies.
Royal iconography
In the Napatan period, inscriptions refer to Nubian rulers in traditional Egyptian terms. They were considered to be the son or daughter of the gods, and thus had the god-given right to absolute power.

Nubian kings and queens were distinguished by special clothing. During the Napatan period, kings wore the short royal kilt and a close-fitting cap with two rearing cobras (uraei) on the forehead, and a headband—with its two streamers hanging down the back of the head—tied around the forehead. Napatan and Meroitic rulers frequently wore the gold ram necklace, composed of one large and two smaller ram heads on a gold chain.

Kings and queens also wore elaborate jewelry. Sometimes they wore a whole series of bracelets, in addition to upper arm bands and numerous rings (sometimes as many as ten on each hand).

Nubia was a crossroads, a meeting place for those who wanted to purchase exotic trade goods from Nubia and regions farther to the south. This well-traveled trade route between central Africa and the Mediterranean coast is the reason that cultural influences of Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, and people from farther south in Africa can be found in Nubia. These influences appear in religious images, burial goods, and royal emblems, as well as in many purely decorative design motifs.

One image borrowed from Egypt is Hathor, the goddess of love, whose emblem, a woman’s face with cow’s ears, appears frequently on necklaces, bracelets, earrings, pendants, and even on pottery. The Egyptian ankh sign, which means “life,” is another image commonly found on Nubian jewelry, pottery, and even on the robes of the Meroitic rulers. Lotus flower designs, long associated with rebirth in Egypt, are also found throughout Nubian art.

Nubian rulers of the Napatan and Meroitic periods revived the Egyptian custom of pyramid burials. They sponsored great monuments and works of art inspired by Egyptian models, seeking to recreate for themselves the style and grandeur of Egypt’s glorious past. Not simply copies of the Egyptian type, Nubian pyramids had much steeper sides with underground burial chambers and large offering chapels with beautifully decorated walls. Some of the burial goods found in Nubian pyramids, such as shabtis, were also used by the Egyptians. Shabtis are small figures, carved or molded in the shape of a mummified person and inscribed with a text saying that the shabti would do any work that the gods asked the person’s spirit to do in the afterworld.

Nubian artists also looked beyond Egypt, to other Mediterranean cultures, for artistic ideas. Inspired by ancient Greek vase painting, Meroitic potters adapted classical motifs such as grapevines and laurel wreaths to decorate their vessels.

While Nubian artists borrowed many designs from their neighbors, they often made them distinctly Nubian by changing them in subtle ways. This is especially clear in some of the royal emblems adapted from Egypt. For instance, the Nubian kings wear two rearing cobras on his forehead, while the Egyptian kings had just one.
What is an Archeologist? Archaeologists are scientists who explore the past by excavating and studying the remains of ancient cultures and by carefully recording information about what they find. We have been able to learn a great deal about some ancient cultures because what the people left behind provides clues about how they lived. Archaeologists are responsible for uncovering and interpreting these clues. In Egypt and Nubia, for example, archaeologists have uncovered ancient towns, tombs, and temples.

When archaeologists are working at an excavation site, they follow certain procedures to make sure that the findings are carefully documented. First they make a map and take an overall photograph of the site. Next they take detailed photos of the excavation. They measure and draw plans of each step of the “dig” and make notes that describe the day’s activities and findings in a diary. They photograph the objects as they are uncovered. Finally, archaeologists record details about the objects they find in a book called a register. After archaeologists finish a dig, the artifacts are sent to museums, where the objects are cleaned, restored (if necessary), and displayed for all to enjoy and learn from.

George Reisner: Pioneer Archaeologist

For almost one hundred years, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston has had teams of archaeologists excavating ancient sites in Egypt and Nubia. George Andrew Reisner was among the most prominent of these archaeologists. He was responsible for finding some of the most important pieces for the Museum’s collections of Egyptian and Nubian art.

Reisner devised systems for organizing work and keeping records that became models for the field of archaeology. Without records, archaeology would be no more than treasure hunting. Each object on an ancient site is a clue to the past. Where it was found and what else was found with it are additional clues that can be even more important than the object itself. As Reisner’s assistant, Dows Dunham, wrote, “The process of excavating an ancient site...means the destruction of the site, the destruction of the evidence in one sense and it can only be justified if a complete and permanent record of every step in the process is made at the time. Reisner used to say the records of a well-constructed excavation should enable future scholars to reconstruct in every detail the conditions found by the excavator.”
Where is Nubia?
Nubia is a geographic region, not a country. It is located in the northeast corner of Africa, at the southern end of Egypt and the northern half of the modern country of the Sudan along the Nile river.

Like ancient Egypt it is separated into two parts, Lower Nubia in the north and Upper Nubia in the south. It is further divided by a series of rapids, called cataracts, which served as boundaries for different regions in Nubia. The First Cataract is at Aswan where Nubia begins and the last one, the Sixth Cataract, is near the city of Khartoum, the capital of the republic of the Sudan.

Where does the name Nubia come from?
Scholars still debate where the name Nubia came from, though some believe it came from the ancient Egyptian word for gold, *nub*, which would be fitting since Nubia held the ancient world’s richest supply of gold. Other names for Nubia included ‘the land of the bow,’ because the Nubians relied on hunting for food and developed incredibly strong skills in archery. In fact, there is evidence that the Nubians were so renowned for this skill that they were hired as mercenaries and as police forces by neighboring regions. Other terms included “Kush,” which is what the ancient Egyptians called two powerful kingdoms that rose up in Nubia to challenge Egyptian control of the Nile.

Why is Nubia important?
Like Egypt, the Kingdoms of Nubia were some of the first great civilizations to appear in Africa and they developed their own remarkable kinds of art and culture. Did you know that there are more pyramids in the Sudan than there are in Egypt? That the Nubian King Taharka is mentioned in the Bible? That the name Candace comes from the title of a Nubian Queen?

This packet offers a range of background information designed to introduce students to ancient Nubia through works of art in Lost Kingdoms of the Nile and in the Carlos Museum’s collections. We hope this introduction will encourage teachers and students alike to make further explorations in ancient Nubia. Download a full teacher reference packet and accompanying Powerpoint presentation at www.carlos.emory.edu.