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SOCIAL CLASS AND LOCAL TRADITION IN NUBIA: THE EVIDENCE FROM ARCHAEOLOGY

It is a common practice among both archaeologists and ethnologists to offer a single, generalized or “normative” description for each of the peoples or the cultures that they study, without taking account of differences between persons or class or regions. In the case of archaeology there is often no other possibility, since there is rarely enough evidence to recognize intracultural variations. However, this is not true in the case of northern Nubia, thanks to the wealth of data resulting from the three Aswan Dam surveys. For the Meroitic and later periods, in particular, two quite distinct sources of intracultural variation can be recognized: those based on class distinctions, and those based on localized cultural preferences. In this paper I will discuss some of the differences of both types, as they are revealed chiefly through archaeology.

THE EVIDENCES OF SOCIAL CLASS

We may safely assume, without reference to either archaeology or written texts, that the societies of ancient and medieval Nubia were not merely stratified but formally and legally stratified, with royalty at the top of the scale and slaves at the bottom. This was true of every human society from the early Bronze Age to the Industrial Revolution. But there are many kinds and degrees of stratification, and we must turn to texts or to archaeology to determine how many classes existed, how clearly were they differentiated, what were their distinguishing features, and how wide were the gaps between them. For much of the world such questions have been sufficiently answered by the ancient and medieval chroniclers, but this is emphatically not the case in Nubia, where reliable documentary accounts are mostly lacking. Archaeology however provides some very telling clues, especially for the Meroitic and later periods.

THE EARLIEST PERIODS

For the Neolithic, A-Group, and C-Group periods our social evidence comes almost exclusively from burials. If we exclude the always-ambiguous case of the so-called “A-Group

Pharaoh” (Williams 1980; Adams 1985), there is nothing among the thousands of excavated graves to suggest the existence of marked social distinctions among these tribal-level peoples. We can, as always, recognize substantial differences in wealth as reflected in the rich and the poor graves, but the difference is very largely in the quantity rather than the quality of their contents. Significantly, we can observe no differences in burial ritual which might suggest the existence of a distinct elite class.

The situation is obviously very much otherwise in the case of late Kerma, with its succession of incredibly opulent royal tombs. Nevertheless it seems possible to recognize, up to now, only two classes, the rulers and the commoners, though an additional class of slaves can surely be inferred. Kerma as we now understand it calls to mind especially the historically recorded Bantu kingdoms of Central and South Africa, whose despotic and often ruthless rulers maintained an extravagant lifestyle among a population otherwise composed only of peasant cultivators. We have of course to recognize an intermediate class of Egyptian factors at the town of Kerma, but these would appear to have been resident foreigners. The Kerma rulers, like the Bantu kings of later times, probably gained their position initially through the control of export trade.

For the long period of Egyptian domination, during the New Kingdom, we have surprisingly little evidence as to the structure of society. The dwellings that have been excavated are almost entirely those of Egyptian colonists rather than of native Nubians, while among the graves it is impossible to distinguish between those of Egyptians and those of Nubians. The elaborate graves of Heka-Nefer (Simpson 1963), Jehuty-Hetep (Thabit 1957; Säve-Söderbergh 1960), and Amenemhat (Säve-Söderbergh 1963) show us that a few Nubians were able to achieve high status in the colonial administration, but otherwise we remain in the dark in regard to the social status of the indigenous population. It seems likely that they were at first a recognizable underclass, but their social disadvantage disappeared or at least

lessened as they became more and more Egyptia-
nized in culture.

For the Napatan period the evidence is even
more insufficient. Apart from a few palaces,
almost no dwellings of Napatan age have been
uncovered. At least in Lower Nubia there is the
further problem that we are often unable to
distinguish graves of the Napatan period from
those of the New Kingdom. The royal tombs at
Barkal and Meroe are clear evidence of a small
ruling class, but for the time being we are able
to recognize only the same kind of two-class society,
of rulers and commoners, that we postulate for
Kerma.

THE MEROITIC PERIOD

When we reach the Meroitic period we are
presented with much more abundant and diverse
evidence, especially from Lower Nubia. To begin
with we have the continuation of the royal and
noble tombs, testifying to a distinct ruling class
which claimed divine sanction if not identity
[Fig. 2]. Although there are, at Meroe, distinct
cemeteries which have been designated respecti-
vely as royal and noble, there is nothing to suggest
that the rulers and the nobles were actually
separate classes. The individuals buried in the
West Cemetery at Meroe were simply lesser
members of the royal families, any one of whom
might under other circumstances have become
king (cf. Adams 1977: 307).

But in Lower Nubia we have for the first time
evidence of a distinct elite class, intermediate

between royals and commoners. The titled
bureaucratic officials buried at Karanog and at
Sedenga were provided with graves substantially
more elaborate than those of commoners, and
were accompanied by such distinctive imported
goods as inlaid wooden caskets, ornate bronze
and glass vessels, and fancy textiles — objects
very rarely found in the graves of commoners
[Fig. 1]. The graves were further distinguished at
the surface by the presence of *ba* statuettes,
offering tables, and inscribed stelae: all status
symbols belonging to a distinct class of literate
and wealthy officials. The evidence of texts
suggests that their offices were occasionally



Fig. 1. Inlaid chest from the cemetery of Karanog (From
Woolley and Randall-MacIver 1910: Pl. 21)



Fig. 2. The royal pyramids in the Meroe North Cemetery

appointive, but more often hereditary (see especially Török 1979).

For the social divisions of the Meroitic period, we have for the first time the additional evidence of housing. At the top of the architectural scale, obviously, are the great royal palaces of Meroe, Barkal, and Kawa, whose antecedents go back to Napatan times. However, these are not our only examples of elite housing. At several Lower Nubian communities, including Wadi el-Arab (Emery and Kirwan 1935: 108-122), Karanog (Woolley 1911: 26-40), Ash-Shaukan (Jacquet 1971), Arminna (Trigger 1967: 35-70), and Meinarti (Adams 1965b: 132), there were stoutly built, two-storey houses which were much more regular in plan and sturdier in construction than the peasant houses that surrounded them [Fig. 3]. They were not necessarily the residences of the titled officials whose graves we observe at Karanog; their scattered distribution suggests that they were more probably the dwellings of a local landed gentry, whose prominence was based not on bureaucratic status but on landholding. The fact that these buildings are often directly adjoined by flimsier and more irregular dwellings suggests that the occupants of the latter may have been dependents of the local magnates. Perhaps it was one of these grandees who was commemorated in the rather crude grave stela and the *ba* head that we found in an otherwise unremarkable cemetery in the Second Cataract.

The social gap between landed gentry and peasantry was probably not as great as in the case of titled officials. No recognizably elite goods have been found in their houses, nor are there especially elaborate graves in the nearby cemeteries. It is doubtful therefore that they constituted a formally distinct class, like the feudatories of medieval Europe. They may be compared rather to the so-called “rich peasants” of China – a *de facto* rather than a *de jure* class.

Even among peasant dwellings some differentiation is observable. The thin-walled but relatively regular, brick-built residential aggregations at Gaminarti (Adams 2004: 32-36; see Fig. 4) and Meili Island (Adams 2004: 39-42) contrast markedly with the incredibly rude and irregular stone huts at Kasanarti (Adams 2004: 37-39; see Fig. 5), which contained almost entirely handmade pottery. We have to consider therefore the possibility that an underclass existed even among the peasantry, as it demonstrably did in more recent times.

In sum, the structure of society in Meroitic times seems to have been considerably more differentiated than that of earlier times. Between the rulers and the ordinary folk we have to recognize both a class of wealthy, titled officials

and a local landed gentry. There are further evidences of differentiation within the peasant class itself, with the lowest stratum possibly consisting of landless sharecroppers.

THE BALLAÑA PERIOD

For the social situation in post-Meroitic times we can thus far speak only about Lower Nubia; there is simply not enough yet known about social conditions further to the south. Even for Lower Nubia the evidence is not as good as in either Meroitic or Christian times. As far as we can tell, however, the structure of society seems to have been pretty much a continuation of that in Meroitic times.

There was certainly still a class of highly despotic rulers, revealed to us by the excavations of Emery and Kirwan at Ballaña and Qustul (1935). The ruler is designated in Graeco-Egyptian texts as *basileus*, the Greek word for “king”, while below him were lesser feudatories referred to in the texts as *basiliskos*, or “little kings”. It is possible that these were the persons buried in the especially opulent “X-Group” tombs at Qasr Ibrim (Mills 1982), Gemai (Bates and Dunham 1927), and Firka (Kirwan 1939).

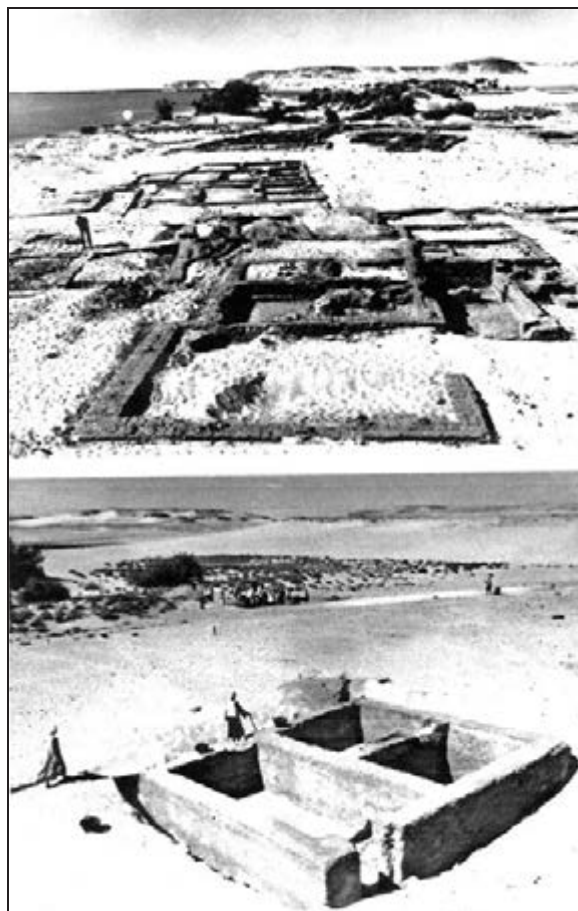


Fig. 3. Meroitic elite houses at Ash-Shaukan (From Jacquet 1971: Pl. 17)

The existence of a separate class of titled officials is so far attested only by Egyptian scribes, and is unconfirmed by archaeology. The writers mention a whole hierarchy of Nubian officials bearing such Byzantine titles as *domesticus*, *protector*, *curator*, *comes*, and *grammateus* (Török 1988: 47-74; Adams 2001a: 160-161), but we have so far been unable to identify either their dwellings or their graves. It is possible that some of them were the persons buried in the elaborate tombs at Gemai and Firka, but it is equally possible that their titles did not confer any special material privileges, as was the case of civil officials in Christian Nubia.

Housing conditions in the Ballaṅa period seem to have been generally poor for everyone, except possibly for the rulers whose dwellings were never discovered. The buildings were notably flimsy and irregular, employing odd and seemingly erratic combinations of brick and stone construction. We can nevertheless recognize, at Gezira Dabarosa (Adams 2004: 99-101) and at Meinarti (Adams 2000: 43-44), the dwellings of two persons who were perhaps comparable to the local landed magnates of Meroitic times. Both individuals occupied well-built brick houses, which were adjoined by flimsier and more irregular structures possibly occupied by dependents [Fig. 6]. The house at Gezira Dabarosa was further distinguished by the presence of a door-

way having cut stone jambs and a lintel, and a stone threshold in which votive grooves were cut, attesting to the exalted status of the inhabitant.

To all generalizations about Ballaṅa housing Qasr Ibrim stands as an exception and an anomaly that has yet to be unexplained. Most of the Ballaṅa houses so far excavated at this site are very stoutly built, square dwellings of stone with whitewashed interiors, which look like the work of professional builders [Fig. 7]. Many were apparently two storeys high, with storage facilities on the ground floor and possibly living quarters on the floors above, although this is not in any case actually preserved (see especially Plumley and Adams 1974: 214-227; also Adams 2001a: 170-171). The general nature of the community as well as the prevalence of storage crypts suggests the possibility that these were primarily commercial premises, and only secondarily dwellings. For this one community, therefore, we have to consider the possibility of an

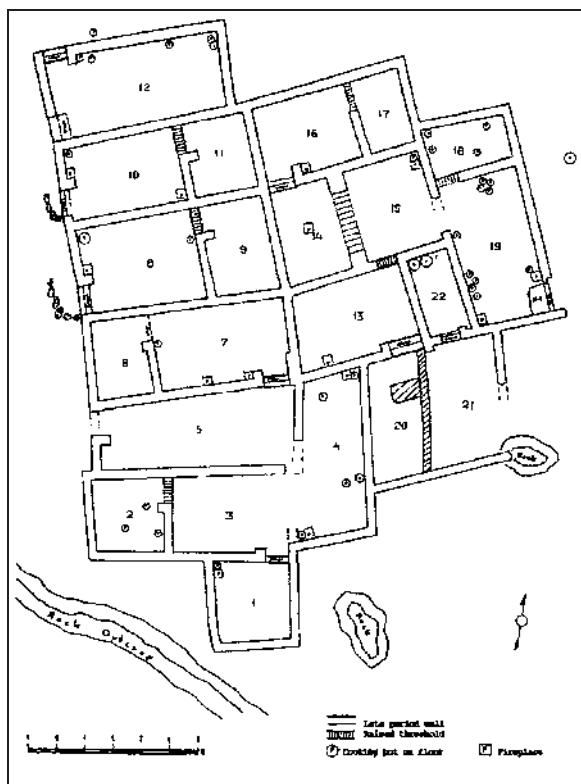


Fig. 4. Plan of Meroitic peasant houses at Gaminarti (From Adams 2004: Fig. 12)

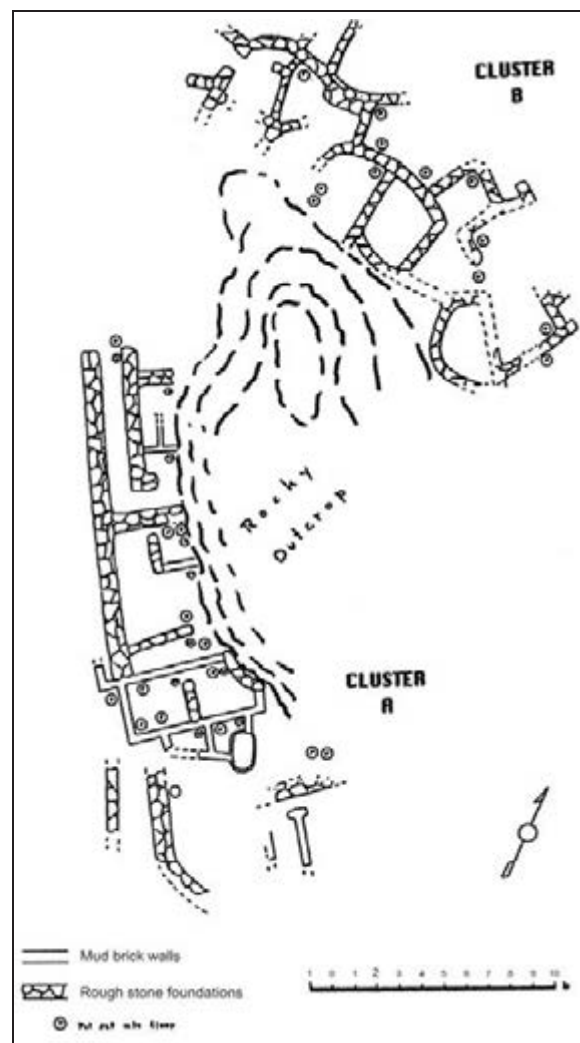


Fig. 5. Plan of Meroitic peasant houses at Kasanarti (From Adams 2004: Fig. 13)

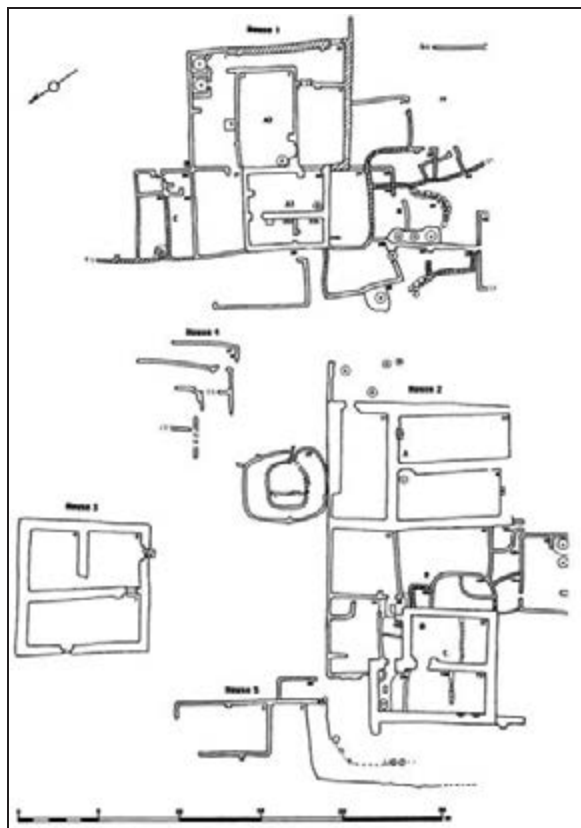


Fig. 6. Plan of Ballaṅa houses at Gezira Dabarosa (From Adams 2004: Fig. 35)

independent class of prosperous merchants, who are unattested at any other Ballaṅa site. There is a remote possibility that they were resident foreigners, like the merchants at Kerma, but the highly abundant material goods found in their houses are of purely Nubian types.

Putting all the pieces together, we may visualize for Ballaṅa times a complex yet possibly fluid society consisting of supreme rulers, secondary and dependent rulers, titled officials, local gentry, and rather impoverished peasantry, with perhaps a separate class of wealthy merchants at Qasr Ibrim. Yet the evidence for all these classes, except those at the very top and very bottom, is fragmentary and at times ambiguous.

THE CHRISTIAN PERIOD

In the beginning Christianity seems to have been in Nubia, as it was everywhere, very much a democratizing movement, which surely explains some of its appeal. The doctrine that “we are all equal in the eyes of God” was taken sufficiently seriously that differences in burial ritual almost wholly disappeared, even for the rulers. The only elite tombs that can so far be recognized are those of ecclesiastical officials, and they date almost entirely from the latter half of the Christian period. The numerous mortuary texts, both of



Fig. 7. Ballaṅa elite housing at Qasr Ibrim

men and of women, are remarkably uniform in their composition, with no emphasis on the status or the accomplishments of the deceased.

Another aspect of democratization can be seen in the bringing of state religion down to the level of the peasantry, through the building of churches in just about every settlement of any size, whereas the temples of earlier times had always been confined to a few elite centers.

In housing as in burial practice, social differences do not begin to appear until the latter part of the Christian period. Housing standards for everyone were generally very poor in the Early Christian period, as they had been in the preceding Ballaṅa period. In Classic Christian times they were very much better, but we still cannot clearly distinguish between elite and common houses. Neither the Eparch of Nobadia nor the Bishop of Ibrim, two of the most powerful and influential person in Lower Nubia, lived in houses greatly different from those of the ordinary folk (for the Eparch, see Adams 1996: 42-57; for the Bishop, see Adams, forthcoming; see also Fig. 8).

As a result, nearly everything we know about social differences, especially in the earlier Christian period, has come from texts, which happily are now abundant. From them we learn that there were now no fewer than three monarchies, though the rulers no longer claimed divinity or

absolute authority. Indeed the whole ecclesiastical establishment was outside their control. From the Classic Christian period we learn also that there were thirteen lesser kings under the “Great King” (Adams 1977: 464). In legal documents from Qasr Ibrim we find in addition the names of no fewer than forty different kinds of civil and ecclesiastical officials (Adams 1996: 246-248).

Yet almost none of this can be confirmed archaeologically. A few tombs of Makurian rulers may recently have been discovered at Banganarti (Żurawski 2002: 75-80), and residences of the Eparch of Nobadia and the Bishop of Ibrim have been identified at Qasr Ibrim (Adams 1996: 42-57;



Fig. 8. The Eparch's house at Qasr Ibrim

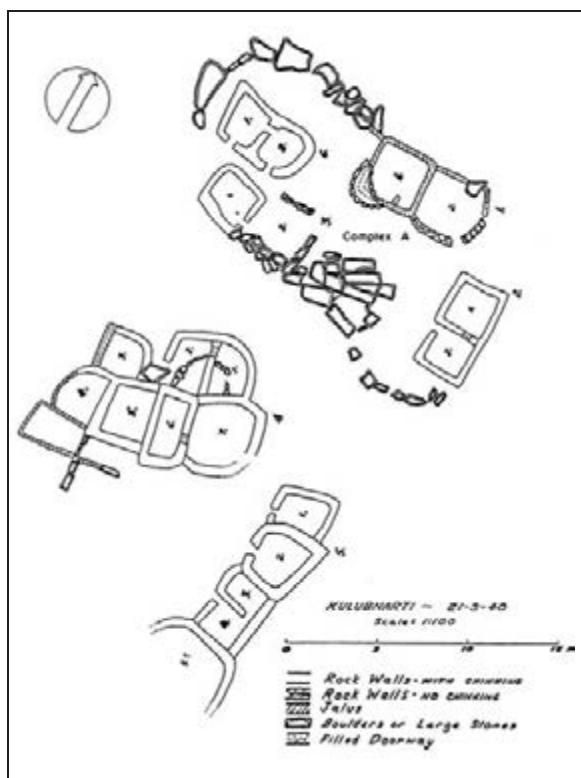


Fig. 9. Primitive Christian huts at Kulubnarti (From Adams 1994b: Map 7.4)

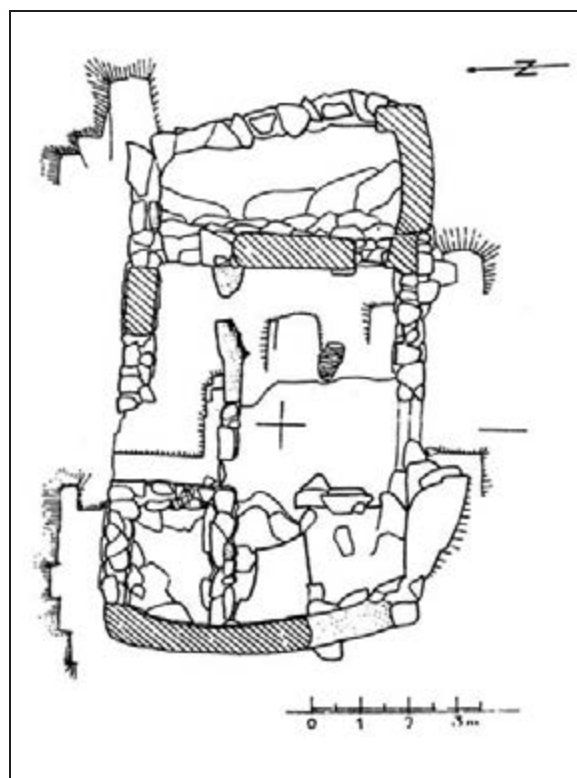


Fig. 10. Plan of a primitive church at Kulubnarti (From Dinkler 1970: Fig. 35)

Adams, forthcoming). With these exceptions, neither the dwelling place nor the burial place of any ruler or civil official has been identified among the scores of Christian Nubian sites so far excavated. The only elaborate tombs clearly recognizable are those of bishops, and they all date from the Classic and Late Christian periods.

Surprisingly, it is only at the bottom of the social scale that we can recognize any social differences in the archaeological record from earlier medieval Nubia. On Kulubnarti island



Fig. 11. Late Christian unit house at Meinarti

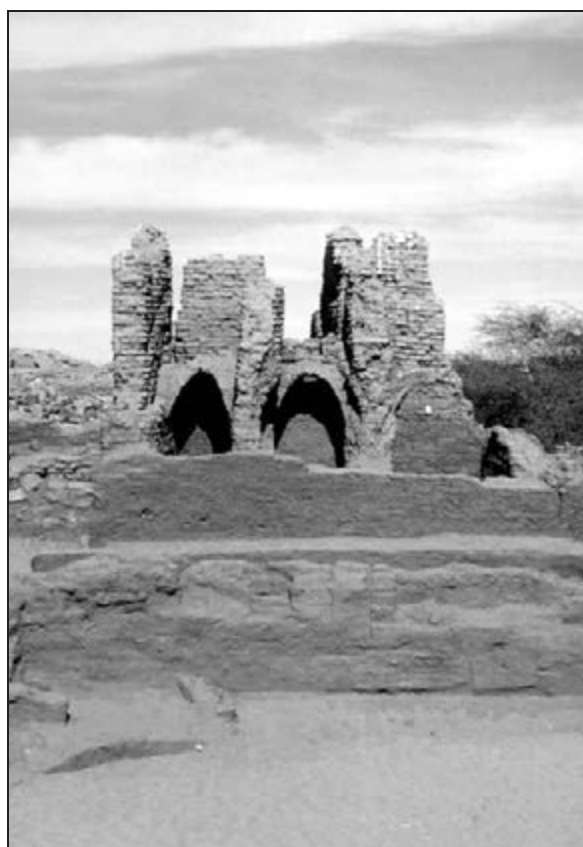


Fig. 12. Terminal Christian castle house at Kasanarti

and on the nearby mainland are two cemeteries of Early Christian date, both of which were excavated almost entirely by the University of Kentucky Nubia Expedition. Although the burial ritual was identical in the two places, the differences in pathology and mortality are striking. Individuals buried in the island cemetery had an average age at death of 10.6 years, as against 19 years in the mainland cemetery, and skeletal and dental pathologies were also conspicuously more prevalent in the island population (Adams *et alii* 1999: 48-49).

Coupled with the cemetery evidence, we have the presence of extremely rude stone huts, apparently of Early and Classic Christian date (Adams 1994b: 263-267; see Fig. 9), which contrast markedly with the well-built Classic Christian houses at Meinarti (Adams 2001b: 52-58) and Debeira (Shinnie and Shinnie 1978: 3-20). Even more telling however is the evidence of a small and highly irregular church, perched precariously on a sloping ledge above the riverbank (Dinkler 1970: 263-265; Dinkler 1985: 10-12; see Fig. 10). It is far and away the most primitive among the 130 known churches from northern Nubia, and I can only surmise that it was built by the impoverished islanders on their own initiative, on the only ground that was made available to them.

Taking these findings together, I think we may postulate for Kulubnarti the existence of a distinct, impoverished underclass, who very possibly were landless sharecroppers. Closely parallel situations have been observed in different parts of modern Nubia by Ali Osman and by Julie Anderson (for further discussion see Adams *et alii* 1999: 48-49, and Adams and Adams 2007).

In the later Christian period social differences become more archaeologically recognizable, as we seem to witness once again the emergence of a local landed gentry. They lived in well-built "unit houses" that were probably the work of professional builders, and were more substantial than the dwellings of ordinary peasants (Adams 1977: 492-493; see Fig. 11). In later times these local magnates moved into the even more elaborate, two-storey castle-houses that towered over the local villages from Qasr Ibrim to Dal (Adams 1994a; see Fig. 12).

The castle houses, like castles everywhere, are surely testimony to the politically and militarily disturbed conditions that prevailed in Nubia in the later Middle Ages. The castle-dwellers probably enjoyed their status partly on the basis of extensive landholdings, but also, like European feudal lords, because they could provide a degree of military protection for their less fortunate neighbors. In the post-Christian period, when

conditions were even more chaotic, some of them were to develop into true warlords.

In sum, I think we get a picture of a more fluid, and even a more democratic society in medieval Nubia than was true earlier. The social gaps between the classes were lessened, and the fact that most civil and ecclesiastical offices were appointive suggests also that a good deal of social mobility may have been possible.

The proliferation of bureaucratic titles (cf. Adams 1996: 246-248) is one of the most distinctive features of medieval Nubian society, contrasting as it does with both earlier and later periods. To some extent it almost surely bespeaks a higher level of literacy than was true in other eras – a circumstance that is suggested also by the fact that four different written languages were in use. It seems too that the medieval Nubians, like the English gentry, were obsessed with titles, yet archaeology does not suggest that the titles conveyed any special material benefit, at least as far as housing and burial were concerned.

ISLAMIC NUBIA

Islam is, in principle, an even more democratizing religion than Christianity, since it does not allow even for “rendering unto Caesar”. Notwithstanding, “Caesar” was very much in evidence in Islamic Nubia, in the person of the Ottoman tax-collector (*kashef*) in the north and the Funj Sultan

in the south. In the area between them, the rapacious *meks* of the Abdallab, the Shaiqiya, and half a dozen other groups were so many “little Caesars”. Under their rule, the mass of the population was incontestably very poor, due in part to a decline in trade and in part to the exactions of these same autocrats. The democratizing of society probably owed at least as much to that circumstance as it did to Islamic scripture.

In the area of the Dar el-Mahas we nevertheless have evidence of a class of warrior gentry, such as is attested nowhere else in Ottoman Nubia. These were the dwellers in the *kourfas*, the distinctive fortified manor houses of which over forty have been recorded between Kulubnarti and the Third Cataract [Fig. 13]. The existence of these strongmen is not reported in written histories, but they are well remembered in local tradition (Vila 1979: 71-120; Adams 1977: 338-339).

Archaeological evidence for post-Christian Nubia is otherwise scanty. Only two post-Christian sites of any consequence have thus far been excavated, at Kulubnarti and at Qasr Ibrim, and the latter is atypical because it was the residence of an Ottoman garrison force maintained by a subsidy from Cairo. At Kulubnarti, we can recognize only the same division between a single castle-dwelling magnate and an impoverished and poorly housed peasantry that had already emerged in Late Christian times. Where



Fig. 13. *Kourfa* at Amara East (From Vila 1979: Fig. 26)

in Late Christian times there had been four inhabited castle-houses, however, there was now only one. It had been converted into a giant *kourfa*, which included not only the elite residence but separate quarters for the owner's military retainers, a courtyard for his horses, and a loopholed watchtower (Adams 1994b: 81-101; see *Fig. 14*).

THE STATUS OF WOMEN

The high status of women within the royal families is well attested both for Kush and for Christian Nubia. At Meroe a few actually became ruling monarchs. In the Christian period we have no record of queens regnant, but we know that the king's mother, the *nonnen*, was a revered and titled personage who might at times be a power behind the throne. In Qasr Ibrim documents she is repeatedly mentioned immediately after the king among a long list of titled persons (Adams 1996: 231).

The evidence in the case of commoners is much less secure. We cannot recognize any females among the titled Meroitic officials buried at Karanog, nor among the bureaucrats of Ballaña times who are mentioned in demotic texts. Graves are not much of a help, because the majority are so thoroughly plundered that the sex of the occupant cannot be determined.

In the Christian period we still cannot definitely recognize any females among the long list of titled officials, apart from the King's Mother. This is not absolutely conclusive, because there are at least sixteen Nubian titles for which we have no translation, and about which we know nothing apart from their listing in the invocation to legal documents. From these same documents we do learn that women could own and inherit property, and engage in trade in their own names (Adams 1996: 251).

But it is largely tombs and tombstones that let us recognize that women could have a respected place in medieval Nubian society. Some of the largest tomb superstructures at Meinarti were those of women (Adams 2003: 44), and it is an extraordinary fact that two women are mentioned, in their tombstones, as the "owners" of churches, which in each case were at a considerable distance from Meinarti (Łajtar and Van der Vliet 1998; Adams 2003: 71). The implications of this claim are not clear; it might mean either that the ladies were the founders of the churches, or that they were entitled to the revenues from the Church lands.

WHERE ARE THE SLAVES?

Their presence is well attested in texts, and could in any case be inferred from the fact that slavery



Fig. 14. The castle at Kulubnarti

was an accepted condition in virtually every complex society of the Bronze and Iron Ages. It is an extraordinary fact however that in Nubia, and indeed in many other areas, they are invisible archaeologically. It might be suggested that their housing was so insubstantial and their graves so impoverished that there is nothing to be recognized, but this does not appear to fit the recorded facts in Nubia.

Texts suggest that slaves had an important role in the export economy – perhaps all the way back to Kerma times – but not in the local productive economy. This was in the hands of free or indentured peasants and local craftsmen, with perhaps some serfs on the royal and temple estates. While the number of slaves exported to Egypt was sometimes large, the number retained within Nubia was almost certainly small. To the extent that we have reliable evidence, mainly from the Christian and Muslim periods, they appear to have been almost entirely household servants and dependents, occupying a status not unlike that of poor relations. They are mentioned several times in that capacity in letters and legal texts from Qasr Ibrim, but we do not hear of any family owning more than one or two (Adams 1996: 251).

Most slaves probably therefore lived in the households of their owners. Moreover, perhaps because of their attachment to families, they seem to have been entitled to humane consideration at the time of death, and were buried in accordance with the same ritual considerations as everyone else. As a result, there are no recognizable slave graves, apart perhaps from the sacrificial burials in the royal tombs. There are plenty of Meroitic and Ballaña graves with no marking at the surface, but almost none that do not contain at least a couple of pottery vessels.

In sum, I think we may conclude that within Nubia slaves were more a legal class than a social class. Scattered in ones and twos among the wealthier households, they did not form distinct communities or develop a distinct subculture. It may have been otherwise in the royal households of Kush, but on these we can only speculate.

THE EVIDENCES OF LOCAL TRADITION

Given the vast geographical extent of early Nubia – more than three times the size of Egypt – it would be surprising indeed if there were no regional or local differences in cultural practice. Because excavation has so largely been confined to elite sites, however, we have so far been unable to recognize differences in everyday cultural practice before the Christian period. Such cultural

differences as have been noted in earlier periods, for example between the Ballaña and Tanqasi cultures (Adams 1977: 424-428), or between the Nobadians and the Blemmyes (Strouhal 1984: 269-270), would appear to reflect ethnic differences rather than true intracultural variations.

CHURCHES

For the Christian period however the evidence of local variations is abundant, particularly in Lower Nubia where so much excavation has been carried out. We can note, to begin with, some distinct local preferences in church architecture – as we can indeed just about everywhere in the world of Christendom.

Within a stretch of 25 km, to the north and south of Faras, there was a group of eight highly distinctive churches, which I have designated as Type 2a. They are so similar in most of their details that I suspect they were all designed by the same architect. They are distinguished, among many other things, by large size, elongate plan, overhead galleries above the aisles, a triumphal arch resting on monolithic columns, and an abundance of wall niches, including always three at the back of the apse. All the churches were built in Early Christian times, surviving in most cases into the Classic Christian period as well (Adams 1965a: 107-108).

Far to the north of Faras, in the immediate vicinity of Qurta, a small group of churches (my Type 2c) departed from normal practice in that they had rectangular or trapezoidal sanctuary chambers instead of the conventional apse. Perhaps they drew their inspiration from the never-discovered cathedral of Qurta, which may also have had a rectangular sanctuary, as did the cathedral of Philae, still further north. Although square or rectangular sanctuaries became the norm in Late Christian churches (Type 4), the churches near Qurta are the only ones having such a feature from the earlier Christian period. Apart from this one peculiarity they varied in a good many other characteristics, and certainly were not all built at the same time, or by the same designer. Dating is not secure in any case, but the evidence from surrounding or nearby settlements suggests an Early or Early Classic Christian date for the Type 2c churches.¹

These are indications that different local traditions in church architecture prevailed in the more southerly regions of Nubia – the Kingdoms of Makuria and Alwa. However, not enough churches have yet been excavated in either of these regions to allow us to recognize norms.

¹ This is a newly recognized type which I will describe in a forthcoming publication, *The Churches of Nobadia*.

MURAL DECORATION

In mural decoration as in building design, there may have been a distinct local canon in the most northerly part of Nubia. Church decorators everywhere evidently enjoyed considerable leeway both in the choice of designs and in their placement, but there was at least a more or less standard repertoire on which they drew. It included a figure of either Christ or the Virgin, flanked on either side by the Apostles; a Nativity; a head of Christ within a winged *mandorla*, with the symbolic heads of the Four Living Creatures projecting at the sides; a depiction of the three Hebrew youths in the fiery furnace at Babylon; an array of cavalier saints; and assorted, mostly full-length portraits of archangels and saints.

However, at least two northern churches, at Wadi es-Sebua (Monneret de Villard 1935: 84-89, Figs 71-73, and Pls 36-39) and at el-Oqba, seem to have departed from this tradition. Although the Virgin flanked by Apostles is present, there is no Nativity, no head of Christ within a *mandorla*, no Hebrews in the furnace, no cavalier saints and no protégé figures. Outside the sanctuary, the church of el-Oqba in particular seems to exhibit a whole range of scenes that are difficult to interpret, but are clearly not found in any church further south (Monneret de Villard 1935: 78-80 and Pls 33-35; Daumas 1965: 261-263 and Pls 34-39). It is noteworthy that both the churches of el-Oqba and Wadi es-Sebua, like the previously discussed churches of Type 2c, were found in the immediate vicinity of Qurta, and might reflect the wishes of its bishop. Whether they represent a more widespread tradition of painting in the north is impossible to determine, since no other decorated churches have been preserved from the most northerly part of Nubia.

HOUSING

Localized traditions in housing cannot be recognized before the Late and Post-Christian periods. The castle-houses of those times may be said to represent a somewhat restricted tradition, since they were prevalent only in the Second Cataract and the Batn el-Hajjar, although outlying examples were found at Qasr Ibrim, and possibly at Gebel Adda, Faras, and Serra. The most southerly castle-houses, from Tanjur to Ferka, differed from those further north in that there was no ground-floor entry to any of the rooms, while in the more northerly buildings some of the lower level rooms could be entered from ground level, and others only from above (Adams 1994a: 18).

But it is the *kourfas* of the Post-Christian period that represent the most distinctive local tradition in Nubian housing. These buildings, apparently confined entirely to the region

between Kulubnarti and the Third Cataract, consisted of a two-storey house similar to a castle-house; a large and high-walled adjoining courtyard; and one or more loopholed towers projecting from corners of the courtyard. Local tradition often ascribes these buildings to the Ottoman tax-collectors, or *kashefs*, but their number is too great to make such an identification entirely credible (Vila 1979: 71-120; Adams 1977: 338-339). In his journey through Nubia in 1813 Burckhardt encountered only one family of *kashefs* (Burckhardt 1819: 135-137), while Vila recorded 39 separate *kourfas* in his survey of the region between Dal and Nilwatti (Vila 1979: 71-120). My guess is that these buildings were the residences of local warrior-landlords rather than Ottoman officials, although one *kashef* did at times make use of a *kourfa* at Kulubnarti.

BURIAL PRACTICES

It is in Christian Nubian burial ritual that we observe the most clear cut evidence not merely of regional but even of highly localized traditions – a circumstance common to many parts of the world.

Superstructures

Not all Christian graves had any marking at the surface, but those that did so followed markedly localized tradition. Some kind of small, rectangular brick-built or stone-built mastaba structure was the rule everywhere from Meinarti northward, while graves to the south of Meinarti were



Fig. 15. Christian tomb superstructures at Meinarti (From Adams 2003: Pl. 11)

commonly marked only by a stone or brick pavement (Adams 1998: 19-21). But mastabas themselves were notably variable from region to region. From Faras northward the structure usually had a rounded top, resembling a loaf of bread, while from Faras southward to the Second Cataract it usually had a flat top. Cruciform mastabas occurred sporadically in a number of Lower Nubian cemeteries, but were common only in a very restricted area between Qasr Ibrim and Tamit. Rectangular mastabas having an embossed cross on the top were found only at two localities, at Tamit and at Meinarti, even though at the latter site they were the most common type (Adams 1998: 20-21; see *Fig. 15*). Meinarti was however unique among Christian sites in that no fewer than 25 different superstructure types were employed there, nearly all in Classic Christian times (Adams 2003: 43-48).

Grave shafts

Simple slot graves were by far the predominant form of Christian grave chamber, but graves having a lateral niche, a continuation of Ballaña practice, were not unknown. They were much more prevalent to the south of Debeira than they were anywhere further north, and at Kulubnarti they comprised over 20% of all the excavated grave chambers. The niche when present was nearly always on the north side of the grave shaft. Bottom-niche graves, in which the body was placed within a recess in the bottom of the shaft, were very rare except in a small area around Taifa, where they were the predominant type (Adams 1998: 26-27). A tradition apparently unique to Kulubnarti was the digging of grave shafts having neatly squared corners (Adams *et alii* 1999: 17, 36). There is no obvious explanation for this nicety, since the form of the shaft could not be seen once the grave had been filled.

Body coverings

Bodies were commonly but by no means always protected by a covering of stones or of bricks.

A practice found only in the area from Meinarti southward was the provision of a special covering for the head, consisting of two upright stones or brick on either side of the skull, and one laid across the top (Adams *et alii* 1999: 28).

Body positioning

Extended dorsal burial was the norm everywhere in Christian Nubia. In the area north of Debeira it was nearly universal, except in two cemeteries at Arminna where a high percentage of burials were resting on their sides. Burials on both the left and the right side occurred, with the latter being somewhat more numerous.

South of Debeira burials on their sides were found with considerable frequency. Between Debeira and the Second Cataract they were more often on the right than on the left side, while further south there was a heavy preference for the left side (Adams *et alii* 1999).

CONCLUSION

This brief survey, with its heavy emphasis on the Christian period, serves to point up how little we still know about everyday life in pre-Christian Nubia. Our lack of knowledge about earlier times reflects in part the poorer preservation of settlements, but even more the concentration on elite and monumental sites that is so often a condition of expedition funding. If we happen to have an abundant record for the Christian period, and for Lower Nubia, it is thanks very largely to the special circumstances of the Aswan Dam salvage campaigns, which not only permitted but dictated a comprehensive excavation program of non-monumental and non-elite sites. We may hope therefore that at least the current Fourth Cataract Dam survey may produce a similar data base, from which to draw conclusions about cultural traditions in the more southerly regions of Nubia. In the meantime, I hope that this brief survey has at least served to draw attention to what has been a somewhat neglected field of investigation.

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