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LIFE AND DEATH ON THE NILE

Bones are like old books in strange languages. Learn how to read them and they have wonderful tales to tell.

In the Beginning

This book is the story of life and death, health and disease of three ancient Nubian communities. The first community was Meinarti. It sat astride the Nile River on what is today the Egyptian-Sudanese border. The river was the economic artery connecting Egypt and interior Africa to the Mediterranean basin (Adams 1977). Meinarti was a town of merchants, tradesmen, bureaucrats, and farmers. The second community was Kulubnarti, a tiny hamlet of freehold farmers eking out a living on the west bank of the Nile some 80 miles to the south of Meinarti in the most isolated and hostile of Nubia's environments. Their descendants live there today in the village of Kulb.¹ The third was a shantytown of landless, itinerant laborers living on an island adjacent to the west bank little more than a mile from the Kulubnarti folk they served. The three villages together span some 1,500 years of Nubian history beginning 350 years before the Common Era (CE) (the birth of Christ) and extending to the middle of the twelfth century.

While our subjects have provided us little more than bones, teeth, and desiccated flesh, they tell a tale of wealth and poverty, chance, and opportunity universal to the human condition. It's a tale best told from anthropology's most time-honored perspective—ethnography or, in our case, bioethnography.

If anthropology had an origin story it could start with a simple sentence like this: *in the beginning there was ethnography*. All of the areas of the discipline—including archaeology and physical anthropology—go back to ethnography. Ethnography has been anthropology's window into other

cultures and the home base from which anthropologists have unraveled the complexities of human culture, adaptation, and evolution. All anthropology has been built on the foundation laid by the early ethnographers.

The wonder of a great ethnography is its capacity to give us an intimate understanding of other people—their hopes and dreams, the values and beliefs that guide their lives; the setting in which they live; their patterns of subsistence, kinship, social organization, religion, and ideology that constitute *that complex whole* envisioned over a century ago by E. B. Tylor (1871).

We mention this because contemporary biological anthropologists, particularly those who study skeletal remains, have often moved away from their ethnographic roots. As a result, it has become increasingly difficult to find what we call a *bioethnographic* window on ancient cultures and the people who created them. It seems as though wide-ranging treatments comparable to the *Indians of Pecos* (Hooton 1930) or the *Stone Age of Mount Carmel* (Garrod et al. 1939) have become increasingly rare. This isn't to say skeletal analyses have fallen into a dark age—far from it. Modern analytical techniques combined with a new interest in population ecology have created a florescence of research in paleodemography, paleopathology, bone growth and development, and functional morphology (Armelagos 2013). While the technical quality of such research has never been higher, there have been consequences. Human and cultural remains are less often treated as integrated historical phenomena, but rather as material for a series of separate, highly sophisticated analyses.

The trend is not, however, inevitable. Indeed, the abundance of information available today has created a rich potential for what might be termed a new “bioethnographic” approach in which the biology and culture of ancient people are integrated into the cultural historical process. Synthetic treatments such as Clark and Brandt's *From Hunters to Farmers* (Clark and Brandt 1984), Cohen and Armelagos's *Paleopathology at the Origins of Agriculture* (Cohen and Armelagos 1984, 2013), Larsen's *In the Wake of Contact: Biological Responses to Conquest* (Larsen 1994), and his *Bioarchaeology of Spanish Florida* (Larsen 2001) are excellent examples. Our hope is to continue in that tradition by creating a bioethnography of three Nubian communities.

Nubia

Nubia is a land between the cataracts—what we call rapids. It begins in Egypt at the 1st cataract of the Nile (the town of Aswan) and extends

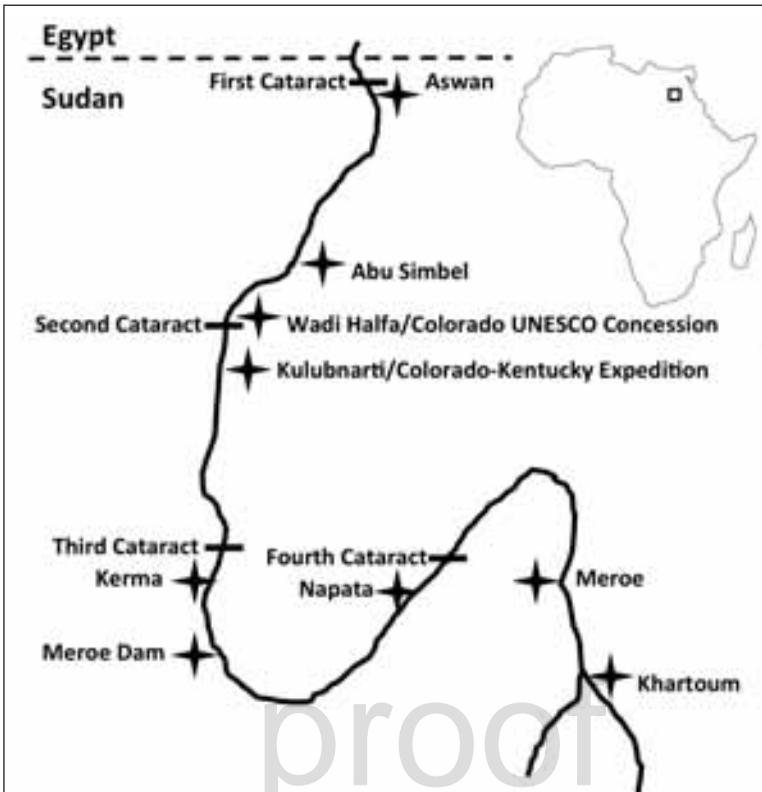


Figure 1.1. Map of Sudanese Nubia.

southward across the Egyptian-Sudanese border to the 4th cataract near the Sudanese capital of Khartoum. It is a region rich in history as well as archaeological treasures, and yet unlike Egypt, the archaeology of Nubia has never captured the imagination of the general public.

The problem has been Nubia's image. Appearance has always trumped importance. William Y. Adams, the world authority on ancient Nubia, describes Nubia as "a hot, dry and barren land of few resources and limited subsistence potential" (Adams 1977:19), but he goes on to tell us that "poor as it was and is, however, the Nile Valley between Aswan and Khartoum offered, for millennia on end, the only way across the great desert barrier of the Sahara."

Adams's definitive volume on ancient Nubia is titled *Nubia: Corridor to Africa* (Adams 1977), and the title is apt. Nubia was Egypt's land of gold as well as slaves, ivory, and other riches. The treasures of interior Africa



Figure 1.2. The Buhen temple.

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moved northward down the Nile through the lands of Nubia. Nubia would remain a vital economic corridor until the advent of the great camel caravans in 300 CE. Nubia also provided legions of soldiers for Egypt's armies—soldiers famous for their deadly skill with the long bow.

It's not surprising that Egyptian pharaohs fought to extend control farther and farther southward into the lands of Nubia, and it's also not surprising that Nubia is today home to large numbers of pharaonic monuments, temples, and tombs proclaiming royal dominion.

Nubia could, in a sense, be thought of as two corridors laid end to end. Lower Nubia extends southward from Aswan to Wadi Halfa, with Upper Nubia extending southward from Wadi Halfa to near Khartoum. The Nile passing through Lower Nubia is broad, slow moving, and productive for the human population inhabiting its banks. As the Nile passes into Upper Nubia, it becomes increasingly wild and fast-flowing. Its channel becomes strewn with rocks, making navigation increasingly difficult. The populations of Upper Egypt have always remained huddled along the river, extending only as far as irrigation would permit (Adams 1977).

With the flow of goods through Nubia naturally came a flow of people and ideas. Roman legions passed into sub-Saharan Africa through Nubia,

and indeed one can still see Roman ruins far into Sudan. There can be no doubt that Romans and others passing through Nubia left their genes along the Nubian corridor, and that should not be understood as their Levi pants! Given this continuous flow of peoples and cultures, it's not surprising that Nubian populations and cultures "are neither wholly Mediterranean nor wholly African: since earliest times they have presented a unique blend of the two" (Adams 1967:12). You need only look at Nubian villagers of today to appreciate that fact.

There is one final point that needs to be made. Nubians are often portrayed in ancient Egypt as servants and slaves. A servile position wasn't always the case. Egypt was ruled by a succession of Nubian pharaohs from 760 to 656 BCE. Their seat of power was Napata at the 4th cataract—far to the south of Egypt. Modern Nubians rightly consider themselves to be the descendants of pharaohs.

We should point out that the influence of population centers at Nubia's southern extreme has been poorly understood until recently (Edwards 2004). We are only now beginning to appreciate the importance of the ancient Kingdom of Kush with its capitals near the 4th cataract to the history of Nubia.



Figure 1.3. Kulb village women and children.



Figure 1.4. The Aswan Low Dam.

So why Nubia? William Flinders Petrie, a pioneer in scientific archaeology, made his first visit to Egypt in 1880. The Egypt Exploration Society was founded two years later. But it would be some 20 more years before a serious interest in Nubian archaeology developed. Even then, Nubian archaeology remained in the shadow of Egypt (Edwards 2004). Why did it take so long? It comes down to the old adage: “you only miss it when you lose it,” or, in this case, are about to lose it. Archaeology in Lower Nubia has been the result of dam building at Aswan. Each dam has been larger than the one before it. Construction on the first began in 1899 and was completed in 1902. It was built in order to increase food production and generate electricity. Unfortunately, silt that had formerly renewed soil along the river now accumulated behind the dam—raising the level of the reservoir. The dam was enlarged twice to solve the problem—once in 1908 and again between 1929 and 1934.

In order to salvage as much of Nubia’s archaeological and human remains as possible, two archaeological surveys were organized. Staffed by scientists from around the world, the surveys were the largest salvage programs of their day. Physical anthropology would play a vital role in both surveys. The first began in 1907 and was first directed by George A. Reisner and then by C. M. Firth (Reisner 1909; Firth 1912, 1915, 1927). The second