

A NEW KUSHITE HISTORIOGRAPHY: THREE RECENT CONTRIBUTIONS TO NUBIAN STUDIES¹

STANLEY M. BURSTEIN

For almost two hundred years Nubian Studies was treated as a sub-discipline of Egyptology. Not surprisingly, histories of Kush written in this tradition were strongly Egyptocentric in their emphases. During the last quarter of a century, however, Nubian Studies has emerged as a distinct discipline in its own right. The three books reviewed in this article reflect this transformation.

Kush occupies a privileged place in African historiography. While study of the ancient history of much of the interior of Africa has barely begun², ancient Kush is the subject of an extensive and rich historiography and for good reason. Here alone in Sub-Saharan Africa exists textual and archaeological sources of the type familiar to ancient historians. Also, unlike other African states, classical and patristic texts contain significant information about Kush, its institutions and culture and its relations with Pharaonic and Greco-Roman Egypt. Not surprisingly, therefore, Kush has attracted the interest of archaeologists and ancient historians, since James Bruce's identification in 1772 of the site of Meroe, the last of the Kushite capitals. László Török's *The Kingdom of Kush: Handbook of the Napatan-Meroitic Civilization*—the first full-scale history of Kush to appear in almost a quarter of a century—is a distinguished addition to this literature. *The Kingdom of Kush* is one of the volumes in the *Handbuch der Orientalistik* series; and like the other volumes in this important series, it is first and foremost a reference work intended to provide scholars with a survey of contemporary scholarship in its field. The time is ripe for such a survey. Nubian studies have flourished during the last three decades. Thanks to the 1960s UNESCO campaign to save the archaeological record of lower Nubia, archaeological evidence for the region expanded greatly, while new critical editions and translations of the rel-

¹ Török, László 1997: *The Kingdom of Kush: Handbook of the Napatan-Meroitic Civilization* (Handbuch der Orientalistik, Erste Abteilung, Der Nahe und Mittlere Osten, 31), E. J. Brill: Leiden–New York–Köln, 590 pp., ill. ISBN: 90-04-10448-8. Török, László (with contributions by Inge Hoffmann and István Nagy 1997: *Meroe City: An Ancient African Capital John Garstang's excavations in the Sudan*, 2 vols. (Occasional Publications, 12), Egypt Exploration Society: London, 287 pp., ill. ISBN: 0-85698-137-0. Rose, Pamela (with a contribution by Penelope Wilson) 1996: *Qasr Ibrim: The Hinterland Survey*, Egypt Exploration Society: London, 162 pp., ill. ISBN: 0-85698-133-8.

² A pioneering example is Christopher Ehret: *An African Classical Age: Eastern and Southern Africa in World History, 1000 B.C. to A.D. 400*, Charlottesville 1998.

evant classical and Egyptian sources have been published in the series *Fontes Historiae Nubiorum*.³

The Kingdom of Kush provides a comprehensive review of the data and main problems of Nubian studies within the framework of a detailed chronicle of Kushite history from the end of Egyptian domination of the region ca. 1100 BC to late antiquity. In seven lucidly written chapters Török discusses: the historiography and geography of Kush, the emergence of the Kushite state, the Twenty Fifth Dynasty, the intellectual foundations of the Kushite state, Kush from the end of the Twenty Fifth Dynasty to the mid-third century BC, and the period of Meroitic domination. Full and valuable discussions of the textual and archaeological evidence introduce each section of the book and numerous tables compactly summarize large amounts of data such as the extant monuments of various Kushite kings, their titularies, known toponyms, and attested royal cults. Full notes and an extensive bibliography round out the work and provide a convenient guide to contemporary scholarship. *The Kingdom of Kush* is, however, more than an authoritative reference work. It is also evidence of the profound transformation of Nubian studies during the past three decades, and a synthesis of the multifaceted work of one of the scholars primarily responsible for that transformation.

For most of the past two centuries Nubian studies constituted a sub-discipline of Egyptology. Geography and the obvious Egyptian influence on ancient Nubian culture made this disciplinary orientation inevitable. These same factors also ensured that Egyptologists would be the founders of the scholarly study of Kush and its culture. The achievements of these pioneers were considerable, and they still remain fundamental to the scholarly study of Kush. Thanks to the work of scholars such as Richard Lepsius in the mid-nineteenth and George Reisner in the early twentieth centuries, much of the essential textual and archaeological evidence for Kush was collected and organized, and the basic chronological framework for Kushite history was established.

The limitations of this scholarly tradition are also clear. The history of Kush, as written by these scholars, was strongly Egyptocentric in orientation. Kushites appeared primarily as passive rather than active participants in their own history. Moreover, in accordance with the tendency of 19th and early 20th century scholars to interpret history in terms of supposed differences between races, Kushites were assumed to have been incapable of significant cultural activity. Changes in the archaeological record and developments in Kushite history were explained, therefore, by invoking invasions of new ethnic groups. The only thread uniting the otherwise disconnected episodes of Kushite history was contact with Egypt. As for Kushite culture, it was treated as little more than a pale colonial version of Egyptian culture. The general thrust of such interpretations is evident in George Reisner's characterization of Kushite history as "one of loss, not of gain—of the gradual fading of the

³ Tormod Eide, Tomas Hägg, Richard Holton Pierce, and László Török (edd.): *Fontes Historiae Nubiorum: Textual Sources for the History of the Middle Nile Region between the Eighth Century BC and the Sixth Century AD*, 3 vols., Bergen 1994–1998.

tradition of the arts and crafts and of the knowledge of the Egyptian language and the sacred texts.”⁴ Periodic renewal of contact with Egypt temporarily slowed but could not reverse the inevitable decline.

The 1960s UNESCO campaign did more than expand the database for Nubian studies. It was also the catalyst for the emergence of a new Kushite historiography. The scale of the project meant that scholars from many other disciplines besides Egyptology participated in the campaign and, more important, continued after its completion to identify themselves as “Nubiologists”. At the same time the disintegration of the European empires in general and the emergence of an independent Republic of the Sudan in particular encouraged the creation of a nationalist historiography in which the ancient history of the upper Nile valley played a major role. The results achieved during this revolutionary phase in Nubian studies were summarized in the American anthropologist William Y. Adams classic *Nubia: Corridor to Africa*.⁵ Adams traced the cultural history of Nubia in detail from antiquity to the present. His culture historical approach with its deliberately “Nubiocentric” emphasis succeeded for the first time in establishing the existence of a distinctive Nubian cultural tradition independent of Egypt and delineating its main characteristics, thereby finally disposing of the invasion model of Kushite history. There were, however, losses as well as gains in this new approach to Kushite history. Culture history privileges a culture’s “Little Tradition” over its literate “Great Tradition”. This meant that in the case of Kush emphasis was placed on the study of those aspects of Nubian culture that were widely diffused in the general population and relatively resistant to change such as settlement patterns, burial customs, and pottery traditions. Kushite elite and literate culture, which had been at the center of the work of the field’s Egyptological pioneers, on the other hand, was marginalized. The result was a vision of ancient Kush in which its political and intellectual history was largely ignored.⁶

The Kingdom of Kush represents the culmination of almost three decades of productive scholarship by Török devoted to the goal of restoring the study of Nubia’s elite culture to a central place in Nubian studies. His strong grounding in art history and Coptology and his involvement in the *Fontes Historiae Nubiorum* project well prepared him for the analysis of the textual and iconographic evidence relevant to his project. Not surprisingly, as these sources were produced by and for Kush’s religious and governmental elite, the primary focus of *The Kingdom of Kush* is the history and development of the Kushite state. During the past quarter of a century Török sketched out the outlines of the main themes of *The Kingdom of Kush* in a

⁴ George Reisner: “The Pyramids of Meroe and Candaces of Ethiopia”, *Sudan Notes and Records* 5, 1922, 178. Cf. William Y. Adams: “Paradigms in Sudan Archaeology”, *Africa Today* 28, 1981, 15–24; and idem: “Invasion, Diffusion, Evolution?” *Antiquity* 42, 1968, 194–215.

⁵ William Y. Adams: *Nubia Corridor to Africa*, Princeton 1977, 4–6.

⁶ Cf. Adams (Above n. 5) 96–98.

series of important monographs⁷ and articles⁸ dealing with political and administrative organization, royal regalia, and political ideology.

As outlined in *The Kingdom of Kush*, the Kushite state developed in five phases. During the first phase of Kushite history, which occupied the second half of the second millennium BC, Egypt seized control of Nubia, and fostered the Egyptianization of Nubian political and religious institutions and the Nubian elite, who administered them. During the second phase of Kushite history—late eleventh century BC to mid-eighth century BC—formal Egyptian administrative and religious institutions disappeared and Kush fragmented into rival chiefdoms. The underlying Egyptian orientation of Nubian culture survived, however, and reemerged in the third and formative phase of the history of the Kushite state, during which the chieftains of the “El Kurru” dynasty reunified Nubia and united it with Egypt under the rule of the Egyptian 25th Dynasty (ca. 750 to ca. 650 BC).

It was the events of the second half of the eighth century BC, when Kashta and Piye intervened in Egypt and were recognized as Pharaohs by the priesthood of Amon at Thebes that, according to Török, determined the basic themes of all later Kushite history. In collaboration with the priests of the dynastic god Amon-Re these monarchs actively fostered the Egyptianisation of Kushite culture and the creation of a distinctive Kushite royal ideology, what Török calls the “Kushite myth of the State”. According to this ideologically charged view of Kushite history, the Kushite monarchy was established by a covenant concluded between the first Kushite king Alara and his divine father Amon-Re in which Alara devoted his sister to Amon-Re in exchange for the kingship of Kush. This covenant was renewed at the beginning of the reign of each subsequent king, when the king retraced the stages of the creation of the Kushite state at the time of his coronation by visiting the four principal Amon temples of his realm and being recognized as king by Amon in each of them.

Once formulated, the “Kushite Myth of the State” remained at the center of Kushite political and intellectual life for the rest of antiquity, although its details underwent further development and elaboration. So, during the fourth phase of Kushite history, which extended from the mid-seventh to the mid-third century BC, the Kushites adapted their institutions and ideology to the new situation created by the loss of Egypt and the restriction of their realm to Nubia. The fifth and final phase of Kushite history—mid-third century BC to ca. fifth century AD—began with the establishment of a new dynasty based at Meroe and ended with the disappearance of

⁷ László Török: *Economic Offices and Officials in Meroitic Nubia (A Study in Territorial Administration of the Late Meroitic Kingdom)* (Studia Aegyptiaca, 5), Budapest 1979; idem: *The Royal Crowns of Kush: A Study in Middle Nile Valley regalia and iconography in the 1st millenia B.C. and A.D.* (Cambridge Monographs in African Archaeology, 18), Oxford 1987; idem: “Geschichte Meroes. Ein Beitrag über die Quellenlage und den Forschungsstand”, in: *ANRW* II.10.1, Berlin–New York 1988, 107–34 f; idem: *The Birth of an Ancient African Kingdom: Kush and Her Myth of the State in the First Millenium BC* (CRIPEL Supplement, 4), Lille 1995.

⁸ The most important are collected in László Török: *Meroe: Six Studies on the Cultural Identity of an Ancient African State* (Studia Aegyptiaca, 26), Budapest 1995.

the Kushite state in late antiquity. Its central features were the renewal of Egyptian influence in Kush through contact with Greco-Roman Egypt, and the strengthening of the Nubian aspects of Kushite culture.

The Kingdom of Kush is a remarkable synthesis, full of suggestive insights and new interpretations of familiar data. Three aspects of this magisterial work are particularly impressive. The first is Török's use of a model involving the selective appropriation and reinterpretation of foreign cultural elements by Kushites to explain the role of Egyptian and Greek influence in the development of Kushite culture. In this way Török evades the sterile dichotomy between imitation and borrowing that has typified previous discussions of relations between Egypt and Kush. The result is an interpretation of the relationship between Egypt and Kush that recalls that of Greece to Rome or China to Japan, one in which the focus of analysis is the function of foreign elements in Kushite culture, not their origin. The second is his adoption of a periodization of Kushite history that reflects more accurately the course of Kushite political and intellectual history than previous systems in which external factors—specifically, invasions, Egyptian or barbarian, provide the pegs on which Kushite history depended. The advantages of Török's approach are particularly clear in his account of Aspelta which emphasizes internal developments and not the supposed crisis caused by Psamtek II's Nubian campaign in 593 BC as central to understanding this important reign (pp. 367–371). The third, and most impressive, is his masterful reconstruction of Kushite royal ideology in the fifth chapter of *The Kingdom of Kush*. This chapter—itself a small monograph—is an exemplary demonstration of how to integrate textual and iconographic evidence. Török also establishes in it for the first time the main themes of Kushite intellectual history.

Not all aspects of his account are equally secure. Particularly problematic is his discussion of “Kushite dynastic ideology” (pp. 255–262). The importance of royal legitimation on the basis of female-succession is a well-attested feature of Kushite history. Török makes an important contribution by clearly and conclusively demonstrating that chronological reconstructions cannot be based on this fact. He also argues, however, that the Kushites recognized a parallel “Egyptian-type patrilineal succession” principle in addition to the female-succession principle. As evidence he adduces the Kushite king's status as son of Amon-Re and the claims made in Kushite texts that the king was heir to the legacy of Alara. Neither argument is persuasive. The latter carries no necessary implication of patrilineal descent from Alara while the former rests on a misunderstanding of Egyptian kingship ideology. Although all Pharaohs were sons of Re, Egyptian history and texts such as *Papyrus Westcar* leave no doubt that a king's divine sonship did not necessarily presuppose a genealogical connection between him and his predecessor.⁹ In this connection, the fact

⁹ In fact, insistence on the lineal descent of a king from his predecessors as central to the legitimation of a king first appears in the Ptolemaic period; cf. John Baines: “Kingship, Definition of Culture, and Legitimation” in: David O'Connor and David P. Silverman (edd.) *Ancient Egyptian Kingship* (Probleme der Ägyptologie, 9), Leiden–New York–Köln 1995, 40.

that Aspelta believed that the creation of a fictitious female succession line was an essential part of legitimizing his claim to the throne confirms the centrality of the female succession principle to Kushite royal ideology.

The Kingdom of Kush is a magisterial synthesis of current scholarship that will provide a firm foundation for future study of the Kushite state. This is particularly true of Török's treatment of the Napatan period, less so that of the Meroitic period which is compressed into one chapter and lacks the clarity and depth of analysis characteristic of the rest of the work. The result is an account that, while rightly emphasizing the continuities between Napatan and Meroitic culture, understates the extent and significance of the innovations that occurred in Hellenistic Kush. Phenomena such as the emergence of new gods and temple types, the adoption of the practice of retainer sacrifice, and the creation of the Meroitic script combined with the expansion of settlement throughout the Kushite realm suggest that this was, in fact, one of the most creative and dynamic periods of Kush's ancient history. The deficiencies of this part of *The Kingdom of Kush* are particularly surprising since the magnitude and importance of these developments emerge clearly in Török's remarkable account of John Garstang's excavations at Meroe in *Meroe City: An Ancient African Capital* (1, pp. 33–38).

As the capital of Kush for almost six hundred years, the ruins of Meroe contain critical evidence for understanding Kushite history and culture. John Garstang excavated at Meroe on a truly mammoth scale between 1909 and 1914, exposing much of the "royal city" as well as important structures outside the walled enclosure including the city's principal Amon temple and the so-called Sun Temple. World War I, however, interrupted publication of the excavation's final report, leaving knowledge of its results limited to the contents of the sketchy preliminary reports and the inadequate first volume of the final report.¹⁰ In the meantime, much of the key evidence including objects and some of the excavation diaries were dispersed or lost through neglect or destroyed during World War II (1, pp. 1–14).

With the cooperation of the School of Archaeology and Oriental Studies at Liverpool University, Török has finally provided scholars with a comprehensive summary of the surviving evidence for Garstang's Meroe excavation. The result is a book—*Meroe City: An Ancient African Capital*—which is not easy to read or use but was well-worth writing. Although it is not the report Garstang would have written, its form reflects his methods and approach to archaeology. In particular, his emphasis on monumental structures and the discovery of inscriptions combined with an excavation strategy involving rapid exposure of wide areas of the site precluded the development of a comprehensive vertical or horizontal stratigraphy for Meroe. *Meroe City*, therefore, does not take the form of a conventional chronologically arranged site report but consists of a detailed catalogue of structures supplemented by catalogues of textual finds, unprovenanced finds, tombs, and pottery.

Despite the limitations imposed on Török's work by the deficiencies of Garstang's original excavation strategy, *Meroe City* represents a major addition to our knowl-

¹⁰ J. Garstang, A.H. Sayce, F. Ll. Griffith: *Meroe City of the Ethiopians*, Oxford 1911.

edge of Kushite history. I mention only two examples. Garstang's material confirms Meroe's role as an important royal center from early Napatan times (I, pp. 25–30) and provides strong support for the recent suggestion that the city was originally founded on riverine islands and that its development was influenced by changes in the local hydrography of the Nile (I, pp. 23–25).¹¹ *Meroe City* is a salvage operation, rescuing for scholarship the results of a major excavation long thought lost. *Qasr Ibrim: The Hinterland Survey* is an exemplary example of something that is all too rare: the prompt publication of a well-conducted and significant archaeological project.

As is well-known, Qasr Ibrim and its environs comprise the sole remaining archaeologically accessible region in Lower Nubia. Between 1986 and 1992 Dr. Pamela Rose and her team surveyed part of the desert plateau area east of Qasr Ibrim. The focus of the survey was settlement remains about one kilometer east of the fortress located on both sides of a road running northward through the survey area toward Qasr Ibrim. 543 separate individual sites—both settlement and mortuary in character—ranging from mere rubble scatters to substantial dry-stone structures were identified and studied. In addition over one hundred incised outlines of footprints, almost half of which included brief Meroitic or Greek inscriptions, were discovered clustered near a dip in the road between the settlement area and Qasr Ibrim.

Rose argues on the basis of the ceramic evidence that the settlement was founded in the Hellenistic Period with limited occupation continuing into the Meroitic and Post-Meroitic Periods (pp. 148–151). Further precision is unfortunately not possible. Rose suggests a second century BC–first century BC date for the settlement as whole, but the limited epigraphical evidence can equally plausibly be interpreted as supporting a first century BC–early first century AD date.¹² The combination of Meroitic domestic wares with Egyptian wares in the sherds collected does, however, indicate a predominantly Nubian population, but one with access to goods imported from Egypt, perhaps by way of Qasr Ibrim.

While *Qasr Ibrim: The Hinterland Survey* provides significant information concerning Nubian settlement in Lower Nubia during the late Hellenistic Period, it also raises new questions. So, for example, the purpose of the settlement, the nature of its relationship with Qasr Ibrim, or the reason people—many of them literate in Greek or Meroitic—left memorials of their visit at this remote spot all remain unclear. Rose reasonably suggests that the spot may have had local religious significance for pilgrims attracted to the Amon oracle at Qasr Ibrim, but admits that clear answers to these and the other questions posed by the results of her survey are lacking (p. 113).

¹¹ Cf. Rebecca Bradley, "Varia from the City of Meroe", in *Meroitic Studies* (Meroitica, 6), Berlin 1982, 163–170.

¹² Footprints 21 and 21a carried dates of Year 20 and Year 43 respectively (the suggested reading of Year 53 in 21a cannot be verified from the photographs), which Rose (pp. 112–113) interprets as referring to 150–149 BC and 127 BC. Dates of 60 BC and 14 AD have been proposed, however, on the basis of the style of writing by Georges Nachtergaeel: "Empreintes de Pieds aux Abords de Qasr Ibrim", *ZPE* 19, 1997, 188.

Clearly, however, future interpretations of Qasr Ibrim also will have to take into account its possible relations with its desert hinterland.

These three books bear witness to the recent emergence of Nubian studies as a discipline in its own right with its own distinctive scholarly tradition and problematic. *The Kingdom of Kush* is a comprehensive and reliable guide to the goals and achievements of this new discipline. Together with its predecessor, *Nubia: Corridor to Africa*, it provides an account of the history and culture of Kush that is unrivaled in its depth and sophistication anywhere else in Subsaharan Africa. It is, however, an account that is based primarily on the interpretation and reinterpretation of evidence that has long been known. Future progress will not be possible without the addition of new evidence. *Meroe City: An Ancient African Capital* and *Qasr Ibrim: The Hinterland Survey*, each in its own way, do precisely that and make clear the essential contribution publication of full and reliable reports of archaeological excavations and surveys, both old and new, can make to the continued health of the field.

California State University
Department of History