

Ancient Nubia: Egypt's Rival in Africa

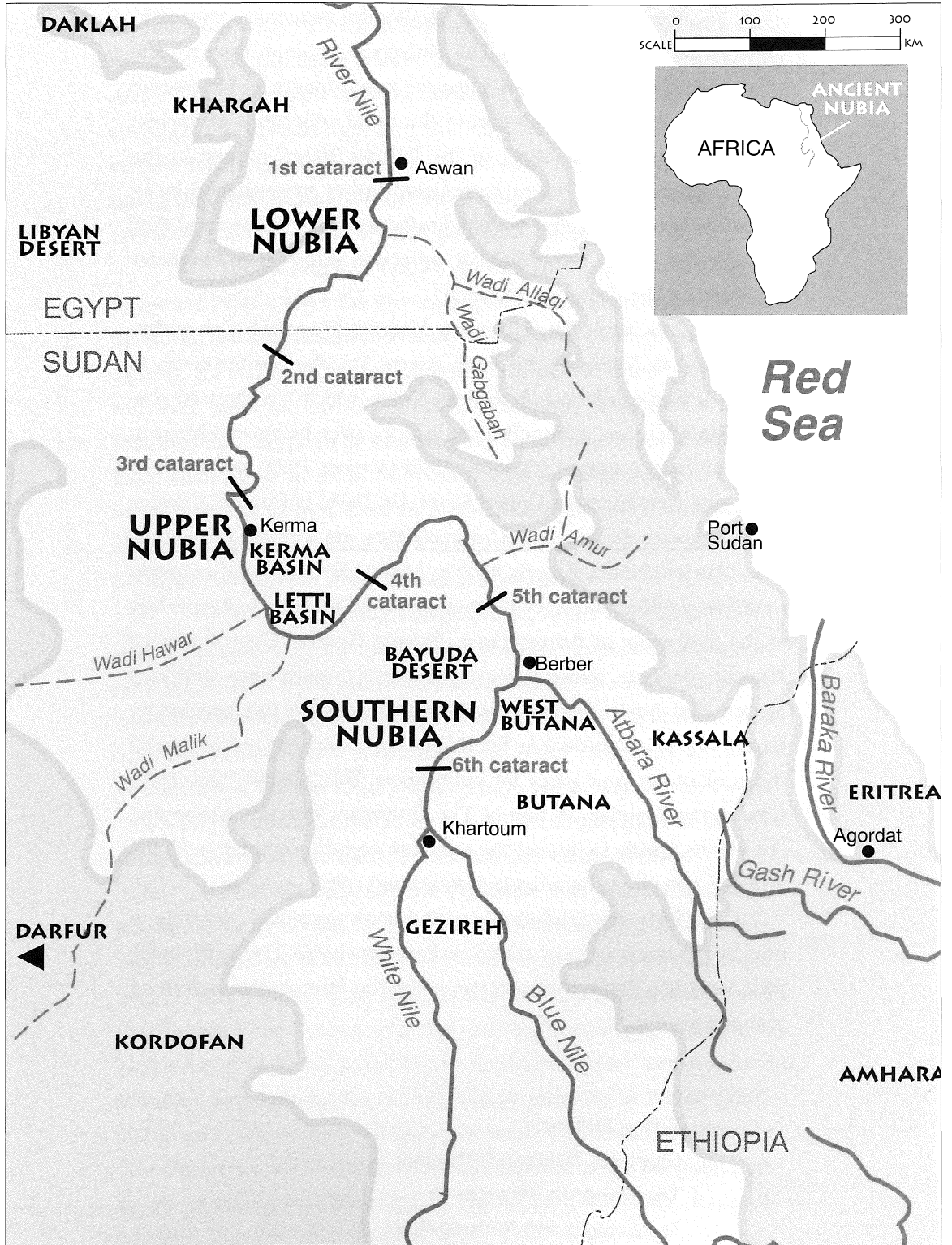


Fig. Intro.1

Map showing principal regions and significant sites of Nubia and contiguous regions. Inset: Nubia and Africa.

An Introduction to Ancient Nubia

Nubia and Egypt

The Nubian and Egyptian civilizations are the two oldest yet known in Africa. They shared the same river, the Nile, and a common frontier over which contact and interaction ebbed and flowed for thousands of years. Inevitably, Nubian and Egyptian history are closely intertwined, but, in the final analysis, the two civilizations were very different from each other. Both the Nubian world view and modes of cultural expression were always unique, even when Egyptian art, language, and concepts became part of the cultural vocabulary used by the Nubians. Moreover, Nubia was typically the rival, rather than the dependent, of Egypt, as the two powers competed endlessly for territory and trade routes in what I call below the “Lower Nile” river system.

This book is about ancient Nubia, during its Bronze Age (ca. 3000–1000 B.C.) and Napatan-Meroitic period (ca. 1000 B.C.–A.D. 350). One point this book makes, with which some scholars would disagree, is that Nubia had a civilization—that is, was in “an advanced stage of social development”¹—throughout most of the Bronze Age, as much as in Napatan and Meroitic times. This does not mean that either Nubia or Egypt always displayed political unity and cultural uniformity; on the contrary, political fragmentation and cultural diversity extending over long periods occurred in both lands, yet each represents a civilization.

Geographically (Fig. Intro.1), Nubia extends from the Sixth to the First Nile cataracts,² and Egypt from the latter to the Mediterranean. Internally, Nubia consists of Southern Nubia; central, or Upper, Nubia; and northern, or Lower, Nubia; and Egypt, of Upper (southern) and Lower

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(northern) Egypt. The Nubian Nile is often called the “Middle Nile,” but historically it is more useful to see Nubia and Egypt sharing a single environment, the “Lower Nile,” from Khartoum to the Mediterranean.

Most Nubians and Egyptians lived on the narrow floodplain, but their powerful riverine civilizations influenced, and often controlled, much of the vast deserts flanking them. With some exceptions, the Egyptian deserts were empty of people; but the semideserts flanking much of Nubia supported substantial nomadic populations, which played important roles in Nubian history.

“Nubia” and “Nubian,” for the periods covered in this book, refer only to geographical locations, not to the ethnicity or language of the peoples involved. Nubia is a word of uncertain origin. By 1400 B.C., Egypt was already known as *Aigyptos* to Greek-speakers, and as *Misr* (its modern Arabic name) to the Semitic world; but Nubia, as a country’s name, does not occur before the third century B.C.³ The Christian Nubians (A.D. 540–1500) spoke Nubian, and hence were “Nubians,” and the language itself does go back into the Bronze Age. Nevertheless, many, perhaps most, of the “Nubians” discussed in this book may not have been Nubian speakers, and their precise ethnic status is unknown.⁴

The Discovery of Nubia

Ancient town and cemetery sites attest to Nubian civilization, as do written records of the Nubians and others. However, European scholars knew little about the monuments of far away Nubia until, in the nineteenth century, travelers and scientific expeditions published the records of their visits to that land.

Most of Nubia lies in the modern Sudan, and after the Sudan came under joint control by Egypt and Britain in 1898, research into ancient Nubia developed along two very different lines. Lower Nubia, shared between Egypt and Sudan, became a periodically expanding reservoir for the Aswan dam and hence experienced several major campaigns of salvage archaeology. Its archaeology is now the best known in the entire Nile Valley.

In contrast, Upper and Southern Nubia have been much less thoroughly explored. Numerous foreign projects have worked at individual sites, encouraged first by the British and then, after 1956, by the

independent Sudan; but large-scale archaeological surveys have begun only in relatively recent times. Of the projects, George Reisner's were the most important. He established the basic, hitherto unknown archaeological sequence for Lower Nubia. Later, for the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Reisner excavated at Kerma, perhaps the most important Nubian Bronze Age site; and he explored the royal cemeteries of the Napatan and Meroitic kings, establishing the basic chronology and historical outline for these rulers.

Many other archaeologists have worked in Nubia, but in the context of this book, the pioneering excavations (1907–1910) of David Randall-MacIver and Leonard Woolley in Lower Nubia are notable. This work, undertaken for The University Museum of the University of Pennsylvania, produced most of the artifacts illustrated in this book, and the sites they excavated are prominent in it because they were especially significant in Nubian history and culture.

Randall-MacIver was an important figure in African archaeology, having suggested in 1905 that the great stone buildings at Zimbabwe (thirteenth–fourteenth century A.D.), in Rhodesia (modern Zimbabwe), were built by Africans, not “superior” foreigners. White supremacists disliked Randall-MacIver's suggestion, but it has proved to be correct. In Lower Nubia, Randall-MacIver and Woolley studied a major Bronze Age Nubian settlement at Areika (chapter 4); only one other comparable in size and complexity has ever been excavated. They were also the first to excavate on a large scale at one of the fortresses (Buhen) implanted by Egypt in Nubia during ancient “colonial” times (chapter 5). Finally, at Karanog, Randall-MacIver and Woolley excavated a town (and its cemetery) that was the capital of the Meroitic governors of Lower Nubia in the second and third centuries A.D. This site is unique among excavated sites in Nubia (chapter 7).

Many important discoveries remain to be made about ancient Nubia, more so than in better-explored Egypt, but the evidence available already suggests many ideas about early Nubian history and culture. However, current theories disagree in two, most important ways. Was Bronze Age Nubian society tribal and small in scale, or were large-scale chiefdoms and states typical? And was the Napatan-Meroitic kingdom socially complex but weakly structured, or was it more strongly unified than many scholars think?