The name of Meroë, the mysterious city deep in Africa, was known to the classical world through a number of historical traditions and legends, Herodotus, relying on information supplied by travellers in Upper Egypt, described it in the fifth century BC:

After …forty days' journey on land one takes another boat and in twelve days reaches a big city named Meroë, said to be the capital city of the Ethiopians. The inhabitants worship Zeus and Dionysus alone of the gods, holding them in great honour. There is an oracle of Zeus there, and they make war according to its pronouncements, taking from it both the occasion and the object of their various expeditions…

Elsewhere he describes the 'Table of the Sun' which was allegedly the main object of Cambyses' expedition against Nubia (cf. Ch. 10):

The Table of the Sun is said to be a meadow, situated in the outskirts of the city, where a plentiful supply of boiled meat of all kinds is kept; it is the duty of the magistrates to put the meat there at night, and during the day anyone who wishes may come and eat it. Local legend has it that the meat appears spontaneously and is the gift of the earth.

Meroë was still flourishing 400 years after Herodotus, for it is mentioned by various authors of the Roman period, of whom the most important are Diodorus Siculus, Strabo, and Pliny. None of them visited the city in person, but the relative accuracy of their information - as well as the frequent mention of Meroë by other contemporary writers - is testimony to the regular intercourse which existed between imperial Rome and its southernmost neighbour. If we consider also the classical influences in Meroitic culture, and the truly extraordinary quantities of foreign-made goods which are found in Meroitic archaeological sites, we can begin to appreciate the special and distinctive character of the Meroitic age. Nubia as never before and rarely since was a part of the ancient world oikoumêne. The monumental expressions of Meroitic civilization - the temples, the tombs, the great mural reliefs - are virtually the same as those of Napatan times. Yet the underlying social and economic basis appears significantly different. Meroitic civilization is no more the simple and direct culmination of Napatan civilization than is Ptolemaic Egypt the climax of the pharaonic ages. Each represents a major cultural renaissance after centuries of stagnation and decline. The revitalizing force in each case was the same: contact with, and partial integration into, the classical world. Pharaonic Egypt and Napatan Kush were parochial civilizations; Ptolemaic Egypt and Meroitic Kush were provincial expressions of a world civilization.

The Meroitic renaissance probably reached its peak in the first century AD - long after the decline of Napata and the southward shift of the main centres of power and wealth in Kush. In the next two centuries the
southern kingdom in turn suffered a rapid decline. The great upheavals and population movements which finally engulfed the Roman Empire were beginning to stir in Africa as well as in Asia, affecting the vassal states along the Empire's frontiers long before they overwhelmed its centre. Meroë may have been one of the early victims of that process. The great city seems to have been largely abandoned by the fourth century AD, and its name was soon forgotten. No memory of it survived in local tradition, and the 'City of the Ethiopians' was lost to the world's knowledge until the revival of classical learning made it known once again through the pages of Herodotus and Strabo. Even then it was often dismissed as fable: not until the end of the eighteenth century was the legend of Meroë invested with any substance. In 1772 the quixotic explorer James Bruce came upon the 'heaps of broken pedestals and pieces of obelisks' near the modern village of Bagrawiya, and wrote in his journal that 'it is impossible to avoid risking a guess that this is the ancient city of Meroë'.

The subsequent discovery of the remains at Napata, while verifying beyond question the existence of an ancient Nubian civilization, left some doubt as to which of its two main centres was the 'capital' known to Herodotus. The matter was not finally settled until 1910, when excavations by the University of Liverpool Expedition encountered the name Meroë in numerous inscriptions in the southern city.

Since its original discovery by Bruce, the 'City of the Ethiopians' has had a chequered archaeological history. In the 1830s an unscrupulous doctor named Ferlini systematically ransacked the royal pyramids and even, by his own account, knocked the tops off several of them. Reputable investigation had to wait until nearly a century later, and even then its beginnings were not auspicious. The excavations of Budge in 1903 were hardly more scientific than those of Ferlini, while the five-year campaign of the University of Liverpool (1910-14), directed by John Garstang, produced little for posterity but a series of brief interim reports which appeared at the end of each season. No definitive reports were ever issued, and the original field notes and collections are long since dispersed and largely inaccessible. As Shinnie somewhat charitably observes, 'The excavations were carried out in the wholesale way traditional in those days in the Nile Valley, and it is very difficult to extract from the annual reports of the excavation a proper description of those parts of the site which were excavated.'

The rather limited trial excavations undertaken by Shinnie himself between 1965 and 1971 remain up to now the only properly scientific investigations ever carried out in this most important of Nubian town-sites. The ordinary cemeteries of Meroë were also excavated in large part by the Liverpool Expedition, and have been reported only in cursory fashion. The three so-called royal cemeteries have fared somewhat better, after their initial plundering by Ferlini, for they were largely spared by the Liverpool group. All of them were excavated with customary thoroughness by the Harvard-Boston Expedition in the 1920s, and the results have recently been published in a series of monumental volumes issued by Dows Dunham, who has devoted half a lifetime to the publication of Reisner's unfinished work.

It is fortunate for the archaeologist that the Meroitic was an urban age, and has left us many town remains besides those of its capital city. In the south, the important city of Musawwarat es-Sufra has been the scene of several years' recent investigations by a German expedition. In the north, Meroitic remains (unlike those of the Napatan period) are abundant in Lower Nubia and the Batn el Hajar, and have therefore received the same systematic attention as have other archaeological sites in the region of the Aswan reservoirs. Several Meroitic villages and innumerable cemeteries have been excavated in whole or in part. Thanks to this fact as well as to the inherent richness of its remains, the culture of Meroitic times is far better known than is that of any earlier period in Nubian history.

The documentary record of Meroitic times remains, however, as spotty as ever. Our external sources are no longer arrogant and boastful Egyptians, but inquiring and sometimes admiring Greeks and Romans. They furnish a good deal of objective description which the Egyptians never deigned to record, but what they gain
in objectivity they lose in originality, for none of the classical authors ever saw Nubia at first hand.

The classical authors were not always as critical as they should have been and much of what was recorded was merely hearsay. They are in conflict on many points and it is significant to find one of them - Diodorus Siculus - advising the reader not to trust their accounts of Ethiopia too implicitly because most of them seemed to him either too credulous, or else purveyors of fantasies invented as a diversion.  

There exists also an 'internal record' of the Meroitic period, for some time in the second century BC the Nubians began, for the first time in history, to write their own language. For their earliest inscriptions they borrowed the Egyptian hieroglyphic characters of earlier times, but these were soon simplified and streamlined into a cursive, purely alphabetic script of twenty-three characters (Fig. 44). The phonetic values of most of the characters are known, yet the language expressed in this long forgotten alphabet continues to baffle scholars despite fifty years' intensive study. It may belong, as does modern Nubian, to the general Sudanic family of African languages, but it shows no close affinity to any known speech of today. Thus, as Shinnie remarks

Meroitic has, with Etruscan, the distinction of being one of the two ancient languages the phonetic values of whose signs can be read with reasonable certainty, but the meaning of whose words cannot be understood. This is a great barrier to a complete understanding of Meroitic history and culture, and until this language has been successfully read and the inscriptions translated, much of the story of Meroë will remain unknown.

If, then, our picture of Napatan times was long on history and short on cultural description, our picture of Meroitic times must be rather the reverse.
THE ORIGINS OF MEROË

The great city which has rightly given its name to the Meroitic age appears from the surface to be the largest community of ancient Nubia. It stands upon an undulating terrace of gravel and silt immediately overlooking the east bank of the Nile and its floodplain, which is here very narrow. The ruins confront the eye as innumerable mounds of earth thickly strewn with broken brick and fallen building stone, as well as great heaps of iron slag. Only here and there can the buildings excavated at the beginning of the century be made out; all of them are in very denuded condition. The townsite is thickly dotted over with acacia trees, for it lies within the rainfall belt. Eastwards from the town a bare and eroded gravel terrace rises gradually towards a line of low, flat-topped desert hills two or three miles distant. Here, at the foot of the hills, are the famous pyramids of Meroë; between them and the town are the 'non-royal' cemeteries and a few additional buildings, some excavated and others not (cf. Fig. 45). A short distance south of the ruins is the broad, dry bed of the Wadi Hawad, an ephemeral stream which carries much of the seasonal runoff from the great Butana Steppe.

The locale of Meroë was reported by Diodorus and several of his contemporaries to be an island, and the name 'Island of Meroë' has survived to modern times. It has been and continues to be a source of misunderstanding, for the city stands high and dry upon the east bank of the Nile, and not upon an island in its midst. The 'island' referred to is the Butana Steppe, an area more than 120 miles wide which lies between the Nile and its eastern tributary, the Atbara River (Fig. 46). (In similarly metaphoric fashion, modern Sudanese apply the Arabic word for island, Gezira, to a vast tract lying between the Blue and White Niles above their confluence at Khartoum.)
Fig. 45. Sketch map of Meroë and vicinity
The city of Meroë is only one of several important Meroitic settlements in the area between the Fifth and Sixth cataracts. It appears, however, to be considerably the oldest of the group, and was presumably the 'mother-colony' from which Kushite settlers later spread out to the east and south. Up to now, Meroë is the only Nubian settlement upstream from Napata itself which can be dated back to Napatan times (cf. Ch. 10). Between the two cities lie 300 miles of the Nile Valley in which there are few important remains of the Meroitic or any other period. It is thus an intriguing question why advancing civilization should at this point have jumped over so large an intervening tract, to establish itself far upstream from its previous limit of penetration at the Fourth Cataract.

Many writers have stressed the environmental advantages of the 'Island of Meroë'. Dunham, for example, has written that

… Meroë lay further south, within the area of annual summer rains. While less advantageously placed than Napata for control of trade with Egypt, it was more favorable for cattle raising and was closer to the sources of wealth from the central and southern Sudan. But more important than these factors was the extensive iron smelting industry, of which the great slag heaps in the immediate vicinity of Meroë still give evidence. 27

Napata and Meroë - the northern and southern districts in which Kushite civilization originally flourished - are in reality separated by no more than one and a half degrees of latitude (Figs. 46, 47), and the climatic difference between them is correspondingly slight. It is also true that the area of Nile floodplain available for cultivation at Napata is at least as great as that at Meroë. If the southern district enjoys any environmental advantage, it is not so much because of increased local rainfall or soil resources as because the Butana Steppe, the hinterland of Meroë, is traversed by a number of large watercourses whose headwaters lie considerably farther south in the rainfall belt, so that they seasonally carry a substantial runoff. Within these wadis, in the season immediately following the rains, sizeable catch-crops of millet can be and are today
grown by semi-nomadic peoples who also graze large herds of cattle over the Butana grasslands. Strabo tells us that such peoples formed a large proportion of the subjects of ancient Meroë, and we can also observe that ruined Meroitic cities are dotted over the western portion of the Butana Steppe, at distances up to sixty miles from the banks of the Nile. Thus, Ali and Shinnie have argued that the basis of Meroitic settlement and prosperity in the southern region was the exploitation not of the Nile Valley but of the Butana hinterland, in a mixed economic system based as much on pastoralism as on agriculture (cf. Pl. XIIIa).

The conspicuous slag heaps of Meroë have been much remarked, and caused the great philologist A. H. Sayce to describe the place as 'the Birmingham of ancient Africa'.

Without excavation, however, it is impossible to estimate the size and importance of the Meroitic iron industry, or to date its origin. Enormous quantities of slag might have accumulated in the production of a relatively small amount of usable metal; they might also have accumulated over a very long period of time. It is necessary to point out too that the locality of Meroë enjoys no special advantage for a smelting industry; low-grade ores are found throughout the sandstone regions of the northern Sudan, and the timber necessary for smelting can only have come from the acacia groves which are found everywhere along the Nile. The industry could therefore have developed in any existing population centre; most probably it followed rather than led to the growth of Meroë as the major city of Kush.

![Fig. 47. The Meroitic empire in the third century AD](http://www.yare.org/brian/books/AdamsWY/ch11.htm)
bypasses the upper Dongola Reach and its adverse winds. Meroë represents a further and much more significant extension of this overland trade. The city lies at the upstream end of a great desert road which cuts across the Bayuda Steppe, by-passing both the Fifth and Fourth Cataracts and the contrary winds of the Abu Hamed Reach (Fig. 46). Almost certainly, it was the development of this overland route which enabled commerce and civilization to break through the longstanding barrier of the Fourth Cataract and to reach the central Sudan.

Meroë, then, owed its existence at first to the Bayuda Road. The desert route became the lifeline connecting the northern and southern districts of Kush, and Napata and Meroë were its termini. Once established, the southern city became also the main staging point for overland trade not only with Napata, but ultimately with Egypt as well. Napata and Kawa declined snore and more to the status of entrepôts.

Even if we had no direct evidence of the existence of the Bayuda Road, we could infer it from the almost total absence of Meroitic remains along the Nile between Meroë and Napata. We have in addition, however, the stele of Nastasen, describing his progress across the desert when he came from Meroë to Napata for his coronation (cf. Ch. 10). At the wells of Fura halfway across the Bayuda Steppe, there are the ruins of a stone fort which has been attributed to the Meroitic period, though its origin remains far from certain.

Beyond Meroë, a number of trade routes extended far into the interior of Africa. From this point southwards the Nile was navigable without interruption virtually to the farthest reaches of the Sudan, the Sixth Cataract at Shabaloka presenting only a very minor obstacle. The presence of a Meroitic village site at Abu Geili (Fig. 47) suggests that riverain commerce carried far up the Blue Nile and possibly also the White Nile, above their confluence at modern Khartoum. South-eastwards from Meroë across the Butana Steppe ran the historic trade route to the highlands of Abyssinia - the road travelled by the army which may finally have destroyed the Nubian city (cf. Ch. 13). Still another route led eastwards by way of the Sinkat Pass to the ancient Red Sea port of Suakin. It was probably the convergence of these trade routes which in time brought Meroë to the position of political and economic supremacy within the Kushite empire, just as in the late Middle Ages it was the convergence of the same roads which led to the rise of Shendi, twenty-five miles south of Meroë, as the great entrepôt of Sudan caravan trade.

If Meroë owed its beginnings to the Bayuda Road, its final ascendency - and the eclipse of Napata - were due in all probability to the development of still another overland trade route. This was the famed Korosko Road to Egypt. Leaving the river at Abu Hamed and rejoining it far downstream in Lower Nubia, it by-passed the entire great bend of the Nile and its innumerable hazards to navigation (Fig. 47). The route was certainly known as far back as New Kingdom times, for it was in large part the same road which led to the Wadi Cabgaba goldfields. The 'boundary stelae' erected by Thutmose I and Thutmose III at Kurgus, near its southern terminus, probably testify to the existence of the Korosko Road in the early XVIII Dynasty (cf. Ch. 9). It was apparently not until Meroitic times, however, that the desert road became the main link between the Central Sudan and the Mediterranean world.

The early history of traps-Saharan caravan trading is obscure. Although greatly facilitated by the introduction of the camel (probably in the last century BC its beginnings certainly go back several centuries earlier. The Egyptians had employed donkey caravans to bring goods from Nubia as far back as the Old Kingdom (Ch. 7), but they were at heart a riverain people who preferred to use boats when they could. Carthaginian merchants brought gold and carbuncles from southern Libya, apparently employing donkeys, oxen, and even horses for transport. In Africa as in Asia, however, it seems to have been the indigenous desert dwellers who first developed caravan trading on a large scale, thus turning from simple nomadism to mercantile
entrepreneurship. In the last millennium BC their activities largely redrew the economic and political map of the Near The great desert 'seas' became increasingly navigable, and new colonies, new civilizations, and finally new empires grew up along their 'shores'.

Sabaea in South Arabia, Meroë in the Sudan, and Carthage in North Africa were early beneficiaries of the caravan trade; it found its climactic expression a thousand years later in the great empire and civilization of Islam.

The advent of the caravans ended the age-old dependence of trans-Saharan commerce upon the Nile. While the river route remained important for centuries to come, it no longer monopolized the traffic in the products of tropical Africa. From that moment we can trace the decline in Nubia's economic fortunes which has continued into modern times.

While we know little about the first development of caravan trade over the Korosko Road, it had evidently become the main economic link between the Sudan and Egypt by the last century BC. Its development was a boon to Meroë, for it shortened the distance to Egypt by more than half as well as avoiding the worst navigational hazards of the Middle Nile. As the hub of a network of inland trade routes, the southern city retained its importance as a staging area for the caravan trade. Napata and Kawa, on the other hand, were now largely by-passed. What economic importance they retained was probably chiefly connected with the export of dates, which do not grow well in the rainfall belt farther south. The Korosko Road, then, was in all probability the largest single factor contributing to the supremacy of Meroë and the eclipse of Napata. As a result we can look upon the later phase of the Kushite empire as an important turning point in African history: it is at the same time the last of the great Nilotic empires and the first of the 'empires of the steppes' which arose in the wake of the caravan trade.

The selection of Meroë as the favoured residence of the later Napatan kings may be cited as one additional factor contributing to the rise of the southern city and the decline of Napata. A number of writers have interpreted the 'transfer of the capital' (cf. Ch. 10) as evidence that Meroë had already supplanted Napata as the economic centre of Kush, but this is not necessarily the case. It might be evidence only of the monarchy's desire to escape from the entrenched influence of the priesthood of Amon at Jebel Barkal. History abounds in parallel cases, beginning with the attempt by Akhenaton a thousand years earlier to escape from the selfsame priesthood, by removing the pharaonic court from Thebes to Tell el-Amarna The royal courts of China, Persia, and the Islamic Empire were notoriously peripatetic for the same reason, and even some of the mighty Caesars found it expedient to reside far from Rome, to be free from the dictates of the Senate and the Praetorian Guard. The localities favoured by these monarchs were frequently unimportant prior to their selection as royal residences.

We saw in Chapter 10 that the 'constitution' of the Kushite state rested upon a delicate balance of power between the monarchy and the priesthood, with all its latent potential for rivalry and intrigue. We know of at least two occasions, in the reigns of Aspalta and of Arkamani, when the power struggle broke out into open conflict. This persisting tension within the state may well have been the factor which first induced the Napatan kings to reside across the river from the main religious centre at Jebel Barkal (cf Ch. 10), and later to remove themselves altogether from its proximity by establishing their principal residence at Meroë. The result was a kind of geographical compromise between church and state, which persisted during the centuries when Napata remained the religious 'capital' while Meroë was the secular 'capital'. Since the control of wealth was largely in the hands of the monarchy, however, the removal of the royal court can only have benefited Meroë at the expense of Napata.
So long as the ruins of Meroë remain largely unexcavated it will be fruitless to speculate further about the date and the reasons for the city's rise. Whatever survives from its early history lies buried beneath the accumulated debris of later centuries, and very little of it has been brought to light. From chance finds in the town and from the indirect evidence of its cemeteries we can be reasonably sure that the settlement goes back to the time of Piankhi, that it was a place of sufficient importance to a royal inscription in the time of Aspalta, and that it was the preferred residence of some of the last Napatan kings. We cannot, however, identify it as the spiritual centre of Kush until it became also the locus of their cemeteries. For this reason the reign of Arkakamani, the first ruler to be buried at Meroë, has been selected in this work to mark the beginning of the Meroitic era.

MONARCHS AND MONUMENTS

According to the chronology of Reisner, forty generations of kings and queens ruled at Meroë and were buried in its royal cemeteries. Our knowledge of all but a handful of them begins and ends with their tombs. Their dates, their achievements, and even in many cases their names are unknown to us; were it not for their pyramids we could not even be sure that ancient Kush was always a monarchy. From this it should be apparent that Reisner's great historical scheme is not so much a dynastic chronology as it is a developmental study of the royal tombs, from which the existence of a succession of rulers is inferred. It is impossible even today to discuss the Meroitic monarchy in any other context than that of its funerary monuments.

The royal cemeteries of Meroë are situated in the desert two to three miles east of the city. Unlike the other Kushite royal monuments they are not conspicuously visible from the riverbank, for the pyramids blend into the background of higher desert hills which rise just behind them. Approached more closely, however, the largest and best preserved of the pyramids take shape as an impressive, serried rank along the crest of a rocky desert ridge, rising perhaps 100 feet above the surrounding gravel plain (Pl. XIIIb). From the summit of the ridge, other and smaller pyramids, are seen scattered rather irregularly along its eastern flank. This group of tombs comprises the so-called North Cemetery of Meroë. Looking southwards across a broad, sandy wadi, the much more destroyed pyramids of the South Cemetery can be seen at the top of another stony ridge, about 250 yards distant. The West Cemetery, which is not conspicuous from its surface remains, lies between the two pyramid groups and the remains of the town (Fig. 45).

The physical separation of the North, South, and West Cemeteries has some social and historical significance, as we shall note in a moment. The three nevertheless represent a continuum of historical development, and can be treated for all practical purposes as a single burial complex. As a group, they present the largest collection of pyramids anywhere in existence.

The South Cemetery at Meroë is considerably older than the northern; it was the burial place at least of the upper-class families of the town from the days of Piankhi. By the time the rulers of Kush chose it for their burial place, however, most of the suitable building sites had been exhausted, and as a result only three kings and six royal consorts found room for their pyramids there. This group of tombs is thus unique among the royal cemeteries of Kush in that it comprises only a few genuinely royal monuments surrounded by a much larger number of humbler tombs nearly two hundred in all. Reisner described it as 'an old family cemetery which became a royal cemetery when the heads of the family became rulers of the kingdom'.

After the third royal interment in the South Cemetery, it was necessary to choose a new burial site about 250 yards further north. In this North Cemetery all or nearly all of the remaining Meroitic rulers were buried until
the end of the dynasty. Unlike its neighbour, the North Cemetery is the most exclusively royal of all the Kushite cemeteries; all but six of its forty-four tombs are believed to be those of actual reigning monarchs or crown princes. Retainers, lesser nobility, and even the queens consort were relegated to the West Cemetery, situated in the gravel plain below the royal pyramids. The West Cemetery therefore contains no tombs of reigning monarchs; it is nevertheless classed among the royal cemeteries of Kush because it was the burial place of lesser members of the royal family and other nobility. The common people of Meroë were buried in a series of cemeteries immediately beyond the outskirts of the city, which have been excavated but never published.

The pyramids at Meroë continue the evolutionary development begun at El Kurru and Nuri (Ch. 10). The tombs in the South Cemetery, while not identical to those at Nuri, are reasonably close to them in size and design. In both places the superstructure is stair-stepped, and rests upon a conspicuously projecting foundation course. The same characteristics are found in what are presumed to be the first four tombs in the North Cemetery. Beginning in the fifth generation, however, a structural innovation appears. The faces of the pyramid are still stair-stepped, but the comers are now dressed off to a smooth and continuous slope (Pl. XIVa). The corner-dressed pyramids, as I will call them, represent the most distinctive achievement of the Kushite royal tomb. There are ten of these structures at Meroë and eight at Jebel Barkal (to be discussed presently). In addition to their embellished corners they have unusually large and elaborately decorated chapels adjoining the east face of the pyramid, and most have three underground chambers. Their typical arrangement and decoration is described by Reisner:

> The first room of the three was a small ante-chamber on the walls of which were inscribed the paragraphs of the 125th Chapter of the Book of the Dead [cf. Pl. XIVb]; the second room was very wide across the axis of the pyramid and bore the 'Negative Confession,' also from the Book of the Dead; the third room, a long one, contained the actual burial. The greater part of the offerings were in the third room but they also overflowed into the other two. This three-room type continued in use as the traditional form of the king's tomb for five centuries (600-100 BC).

It will be noted that the three-room royal tomb reproduces, in miniature, the layout of the typical Kushite temple (cf Figs. 40, 41). The outer offering chamber of the tomb corresponds to the forecourt of the temple; the transversely extended second chamber takes the place of the great pylon gate, and the inner, burial chamber represents the sanctuary. In the largest of the burial chambers pillars of rock were left, either standing free or adjoining the side walls, to help support the roof. In a few tombs there are painted scenes in Egyptian style in addition to the hieroglyphic inscriptions.

Subsequent changes in the architecture of the royal tombs were nearly all of a degenerative nature. After about ten generations the pyramid with dressed corners was abandoned; there was a return at first to the simpler form of stepped pyramid, and then to the still older smooth-faced pyramid which had characterized the early Kushite royal tombs at El Kurru (Ch. 10). The later pyramids, however, had only a facing of dressed stone over a poorly constructed inner core of rubble, and the last three or four were built of brick. From the time of the corner-dressed pyramids onwards there was also a continual reduction in the size of both superstructures and burial chambers. Some of the last of the royal pyramids measured no more than twenty-three feet on a side - 'miserable little red-brick copies of the fine earlier pyramids of masonry', as Arkell describes them. The burial chambers were hardly more than rough-hewn caves, without decoration.

The objects found in the Meroitic royal tombs convey only a hint of their original wealth, for every one of the
chambers had been thoroughly plundered. Even so, the abundance and variety of goods left behind by the robbers is astonishing. In the later tombs we can also observe another kind of offering, which harks back to the mortuary practices of a much earlier time. 'In almost all these tombs evidences were found of sati-burial, that is, the burial of the hareem and of servants with the king in order that their spirits might serve him in the other world.'  

Sacrificial burials were found also in some of the largest 'private' tombs in the West Cemetery. In most cases plunderers had so disturbed the remains that it was impossible to ascertain the original burial position or even the number of the sacrificed retainers. The largest number of sati burials which could be identified in any one tomb was six - a relatively modest figure in comparison with the wholesale human sacrifices of both earlier and later times (Ch. 8 and Ch. 13). Sacrificial burials of dogs, camels and horses were considerably more common than were human interments; their remains were found chiefly on the stairways leading down to the burial chambers.

Reisner believed that the royal cemeteries were established at Meroë when the pyramid-field at Nuri was 'full', the earliest of the southern tombs being the direct successor of the last tomb at Nuri. This theory left unexplained the little cluster of pyramids which stands in rather forlorn isolation in the desert west of Jebel Barkal. They are unquestionably later in date than any of the other tombs in the Napata district; their closest typological amities are not to Nuri or El Kurru but to some of the pyramids at Meroë. There seems little doubt, in fact, that the cemetery at Jebel Barkal is in part contemporary with those in the south, which makes it difficult to explain in terms of a single, uninterrupted royal succession. A further complication arises from the fact that the Barkal pyramids are themselves divided into two distinct clusters of rather different type. One group comprises corner-dressed pyramids comparable to the best of those at Meroë; the other is made up of plain, stepped pyramids.

Superstructures of the size and type found at Jebel Barkal are associated only with the tombs of reigning monarchs at Meroë, and it therefore seems reasonable to assume that the Barkal pyramids are also those of kings and queens. Nevertheless only one royal name, that of Queen Nawidemak has been found in any of the twenty-three Barkal pyramids. The others, like many of the later pyramids at Meroë, cannot be definitely associated with any known ruler.

The anomalies of the Barkal cemetery have been explained in several ways. Reisner envisioned two short-lived rival dynasties which had been set up at Napata, one immediately following the emigration of the main ruling family to Meroë and the other 150 years later. This was, typically, the theory which offered the most logical explanation for the typology of the Barkal pyramids, rather than that which best fitted the external evidence. Contemporary texts, in fact, make it certain that there were rulers at Meroë whose fiat was acknowledged both at Napata and at Kawa during the times when the supposed rival dynasties held sway. As a result Macadam has rejected Reisner's 'First Meroitic Kingdom of Napata', preferring to view the plain pyramids at Jebel Barkal as part of the mainstream of Kushite cemetery development, intermediate in time between Nuri and the South Cemetery at Meroë. Dunham has taken just the opposite tack, accepting the first rival dynasty at Napata but rejecting the second. The corner-dressed pyramids at Barkal are viewed by him as the tombs of legitimate rulers at Meroë who for one reason or another preferred burial in the hallowed ground of their earlier ancestors. Hintze, whose *Studien zur Meroitischen Chronologie* is the most recent important work on the subject, has come out in favour of Reisner's original scheme, but has since been forced to modify a good part of his own chronology in the light of his discoveries at Musawwarat es-Sufra. As Gadallah remarks, 'it appears that Meroitic chronology will remain for a long time subject to changes and modifications whenever new evidence appears'. The continuing debate can only serve to illustrate how
much we have still to learn about even the most essential features of the Kushite monarchy. 69

While the correct succession of the Meroitic kings need not greatly trouble the cultural historian, the question of unity or division within the state is of course important to our understanding of the social and political tenor of the times. So long as we have no more reliable guide than the typology and presumed sequence of the pyramids we can never hope to answer it; we can only observe that the history of other regions furnishes many parallels to the situation originally envisioned by Reisner. Very few multi-centred empires have persisted for as long as did Kush without coming unstuck at least once or twice, and the tendency of many was to come unstuck at the same places again and again. Egypt, Mesopotamia, and China all present examples of repeated disintegration and reunification.

Unlike the empires just named, ancient Kush was not put together by the forcible unification of ethnically and socially distinct regions. In the beginning it was a compact socio-political unit administered from a single centre at Napata. It nevertheless became a multi-centred empire after the establishment of extensive colonies in the Meroë region, and more particularly after the migration thither of the royal court, leaving the priesthood of Anion still entrenched in its ancient seat at Napata. That this geographical separation of the spiritual and temporal powers was fraught with danger of political schism appears self-evident. In a sense the monarchy had abdicated the historic role as patron and protector of the Anion-cult which had brought it to power five hundred years earlier (cf. Ch. 10). We should therefore have no difficulty in envisioning, as did Reisner, that someone arose or was created to fill the vacated seat of royal power at Napata.

While the coexistence of two royal powers thus seems a logical possibility, the relationship between them poses a more difficult problem. A number of alternative explanations suggest themselves. On one hand, we can easily imagine the priests of Amon setting up a puppet dynasty in retaliation for the emigration of the legitimate rulers. The proximity of its tombs to the sacred precinct of Anion might be significant in this regard; at the very least it suggests that the individuals buried at Jebel Barkal enjoyed the special favour and support of the priesthood. At the same time we have to acknowledge the absence of any suggestion of strife within the Meroitic state, while the architectural similarity of the pyramids at Jebel Barkal and at Meroë seems to indicate close communication between the two groups of rulers. If contemporaneous dynasties did indeed rule at Meroë and at Napata, then, it seems that they did so by mutual consent.

What might have been the terms of their agreement? Was there a temporary division of the empire, similar to that which was made in the Roman Empire when it became too unwieldy to govern from a single centre? Or, as seems more probable, were the Napatan monarchs vassals of the Meroites, under the kind of feudal arrangement which was already familiar in Egypt and the Near East? Or, finally, were the Napatans simply viceroys or satraps of the southern monarchy? Whatever the explanation, there is much besides the Barkal pyramids to suggest that Napata remained a political power centre long after the emigration of the main ruling family to Meroë. Both Strabo 70 and Dio Cassius 71 regarded it as the Nubian capital in 23 BC, when it was attacked and pillaged by a Roman army. Millet believes that in the second and third centuries AD the whole of northern Nubia, from the Fourth Cataract to the Egyptian frontier, was a semi-autonomous region governed by a line of hereditary viceroys at Napata. 72

ROYAL INSCRIPTIONS

Only about a dozen Meroitic kings have left any account of themselves other than their tombs. One of the earliest and best known of them is Arkamani, who is probably to be recognized as the Ergamenes of Diodorus Siculus. 73 He is important historically as the first Nubian king who established formal relations
with the Ptolemaic rulers of Egypt - a circumstance which will be discussed more fully in the next chapter.  
His dates have been the subject of a good deal of dispute, but most writers place him in the latter half of the third century BC.  
According to Diodorus he had a smattering of Greek learning; how he came by it is not specified. The same author relates that Arkamani slew the priests of Anion at Jebel Barkal and put an end to their historic power of life and death over the Kushite monarch. The pyramid of Arkamani is probably the third of those built in the North Cemetery at Meroë; its chapel is remarkable for containing one of the last intelligible texts in Egyptian hieroglyphs inscribed on any Meroitic funerary monument.  
Subsequent inscriptions are in Meroitic hieroglyphics or Meroitic cursive, or, not infrequently, in meaningless imitations of Egyptian hieroglyphics.

Several rulers of the second and first centuries BC left dedicatory or commemorative inscriptions in the temples of Meroë and Napata. All of them are in the Meroitic cursive script, and their subject matter can be made out only vaguely if at all. The longest and best known of the group is the 'Great Stele' of Queen Amanirenas and her son and co-regent Akinidad, found in one of the temples at Meroë. It seems to be in part an account of military operations, one of which may have been against the Roman army of Petronius which attacked Napata in 23 BC (see Ch. 12).  
The great builders of the Meroitic era were King Natakamani and Queen Amanitere, whose joint reign probably coincides more or less with the lifetime of Christ. They were apparently co-rulers for life, and their names never appear in royal inscriptions except in conjunction with one another. From their various dedication stelae it appears that they undertook major restorations in the Great Temples of Amon both at Napata and at Meroë and in several other temples, as well as building at least two wholly new temples in the southern city of Naqqa. They are associated in their inscriptions with three different crown princes; apparently the first two died in infancy. A third son, Sherkarer, lived to succeed them. His only known monument is a victory stele carved on a rock at Jebel Qeili, far out in the grassland of the Butana Steppe (for the location see Fig. 46).  
It shows the king receiving the blessing of the sun god and triumphing over unnamed enemies, and is remarkable for its conjunction of Egyptian, Hellenistic, and perhaps oriental artistic influence (Fig. 48).  
It is the most southerly Meroitic royal monument yet known, and also the last royal inscription of any consequence in the history of Kush. The kingdom as a whole was neither impoverished nor culturally backward during the first and second centuries AD, but its rulers must have been undistinguished, for almost no record survives of them. Of the twenty or more kings who followed Sherkarer, fewer than half can be named (cf. Table VI).

It should not be supposed that the textual history of Kush ends with the royal inscriptions. As of now the bulk of our documentary material from the Meroitic period comes not from the region of the capital but from the far northern frontier of the empire, in the immediate vicinity of Aswan. Here a large number of scribes - Greek and Egyptian as well as Nubian were employed in the service of various Meroitic officials, and they have left a veritable library of graffiti on the walls of the Lower Nubian temples. Fortunately for the historian many of these are in Greek and Egyptian demotic rather than in Meroitic, and can be read without much difficulty.  
However, they have little to say about the kingdom far away in the south; their concern is for people and events closer at hand. Discussion of them is therefore best reserved until we consider the whole important question of Meroitic reoccupation in Lower Nubia, in Chapter 12.
THE CITIES OF THE STEPPELANDS

The ruins of Meroë may cover an area up to a mile square, though their full extent has never been determined. We have no idea of the layout of the town as a whole; the Liverpool Expedition concentrated on a few of the monumental buildings and did not sample the intervening areas. Red (burned) brick was certainly used extensively as a building material, for fragments of it litter the unexcavated mounds of the city. However, we can hardly doubt that, as in all periods of Nubian history, the bulk of the humbler buildings were of mud (unburned) brick.

Of the excavated parts of the site, which can be described after a fashion from the brief published reports, the largest and most interesting is the so-called Royal City. This was a walled precinct more or less rectangular in shape, some 300 yards long and about half as wide. Within the walls was a veritable labyrinth of buildings, most of them monumental in size and ornamentation, which were presumed by Garstang to be the main installations of the royal family (Fig. 49). Except for the enclosure wall itself there was very little building in stone; most of the buildings were of mud brick, though many had an exterior facing of burned brick. (The use of this material as an exterior veneer is explained by the location of Meroë within the rainfall belt. Burned brick was almost never employed in sites further north because its resistance to erosion was unneeded.) The buildings in the Royal City had been repaired and rebuilt innumerable times, bespeaking a very long and complex history of occupation.
Near the centre of the royal enclosure were two very large square buildings, nearly identical in size, which were believed to be palaces. Other buildings were interpreted as magazines, audience chambers, and domestic quarters for the palace staff. There was also a little prostyle temple: ‘… its interior walls are covered with stucco and decorated in barbaric fashion with gorgeous colours. The scenes represent the King and Queen of Ethiopia, their officials, and maybe, their allies, as well as a number of captives of foreign race. In front of this temple was found the famous bronze head of Augustus, frequently illustrated in books on Nubia, which is variously interpreted as a gift from the emperor and as part of the loot from a Nubian raid on the Roman temples at Philae.

The most unexpected and by far the most distinctive feature of the Royal City was the so-called Roman Bath. It lacks the heating apparatus and other technical refinements of Roman baths in Europe, but its classical inspiration is nevertheless unmistakable.

It consists of a large brick-lined tank with an elaborate system of water channels leading into it from a well nearby. A ledge running round the upper part of the tank was decorated with plaster figures and medallions, as well as water spouts in the form of lion heads. All these features were painted, and traces remain of frescoes on the stump of an upper wall. Both the general design and the ornate decoration strongly suggest that this was a place of recreation, and it must surely have been a swimming bath, a provincial variant of the wellknown feature of Mediterranean life of the period.

Adjoining the royal enclosure on its eastern side was a smaller enclosure surrounding the Temple of Amon (Fig. 49) - the southern equivalent of the great temple at Jebel Barkal. That it was intended as a rival and perhaps a successor to the northern temple is suggested by the fact that it is nearly comparable in size (nearly 500 ft long) and to some extent in plan; it is the only temple of Meroitic times which retains the elongate, multiple-court arrangement of the largest Egyptian and Napatan temples. In all aspects of construction and decoration, however, the Temple of Amon at Meroë is far inferior to that at Napata.
The temple was constructed largely of brick, the facing bricks alone being fired, with columns, pylons, and doorways faced with dressed blocks of sandstone. It consists of an outer hall of peristyle type showing signs of at least two periods of building. In the middle of the hall was a small stone shrine with the names of Netekamani and Amanitare on the walls, and to the west of it a stone dais, or pulpit, with steps and engraved scenes of bound and kneeling prisoners. Beyond this court was a series of smaller ones leading to the sanctuary in which was an altar decorated with religious scenes. The so-called Hall of Columns is an unusual feature and its purpose is not clear. The pillars were painted with blue and other colors on white stucco, and at the west end is a raised dais approached by a short flight of steps.  

There is unfortunately no clue as to when the Temple of Amon was originally built. Its restoration by Natakamani and Amanitere suggests that it was at least several decades old in their time, about the beginning of our era. In the immediate vicinity of the Amon Temple, the University of Calgary Expedition in 1976 found traces of four additional temples the presence of which had been previously unsuspected.

The Liverpool Expedition excavated four other temples and shrines at Meroë: the so-called Isis, Lion, and Sun Temples and the Shrine of Apis. All of them are situated at or beyond the outskirts of the main settled area. They are small, stone buildings of one or two rooms, typical of later Meroitic temples and in no way comparable to the great Amon Temple. (The characteristics of the Meroitic temple will be discussed more fully in later pages.) The most interesting of the lesser temples is the 'Sun Temple', whose plan is shown in Fig. 50. As Shinnie describes it:

The temple was surrounded by a temenos wall of red brick with stone-faced doorways as in the Amon Temple. Inside this enclosure a ramp led to a platform with a colonnade enclosing the sanctuary. The outside wall of this platform was decorated with a series of reliefs, now very much disintegrated. The sanctuary was approached by a flight of stone steps, and its floors and walls were covered with blue glazed tiles. That there had also been reliefs on the walls of the corridor surrounding the sanctuary is shown by a surviving portion depicting a royal figure and three cartouches which give the name of Akinidad …

Because of its location in a 'meadow' outside the city, and the finding in it of a stone block inscribed with a solar disc, this building has been somewhat imaginatively identified as the 'Table of the Sun' of which Herodotus wrote (see above).

The famous slag heaps of Meroë are a series of very large mounds strewn over with discarded matrix and other refuse from smelting operations. They have been the subject of a great deal of discussion and the basis for much historical speculation. Dunham has identified the iron industry as the foundation of Meroitic prosperity, and other writers have confidently spoken of Meroë as the centre from which ironworking spread to all the peoples of tropical Africa.
A. H. Sayce set the tone for much of the later historical speculation when he wrote in one of the early reports on Meroë that

… Mountains of iron-slag enclose the city mounds on their northern and eastern sides, and excavation has brought to light the furnaces in which the iron was smelted and fashioned into tools and weapons. Meroë, in fact, must have been the Birmingham of ancient Africa; the smoke of its iron-smelting furnaces must have been continually going up to heaven, and the whole of northern Africa might have been supplied by it with implements of iron. Where the Egyptians used copper or bronze, the Ethiopians used iron. There was no copper or bronze age, apparently, in the Sudan; its inhabitants passed from the age of stone into that of iron.  

In spite of this confident assertion we remain almost totally ignorant of the nature and significance of iron-working at Meroë or anywhere else in the Sudan. After the excavation of several thousand Meroitic graves, however, we can be reasonably certain that iron tools were far from abundant during this period; they were in fact much less common than bronze tools. In an article appropriately titled 'The Myth of Meroë and the African Iron Age', Bruce Trigger has recently concluded that

…While iron objects appear in the Sudan early in the twenty-fifth dynasty, an iron-working industry does not appear to have been established there before the fourth century BC, and throughout the Meroitic period most of the iron objects that were produced were small ones, used mainly as light weapons and for household purposes. Only after the decline of Meroë did iron become an essential part of the technology of the northern part of the former Meroitic empire …

After Meroë, the two most important cities of southern Nubia were Musawwarat es-Sufra and Naqa, situated between forty and fifty miles south-west of the royal capital (Fig. 46). These settlements are located not along the banks of the Nile but twelve to eighteen miles inland, in the valleys of two great wadis which drain the western Butana Steppe. The town remains at Naqa are nearly as extensive as those of Meroë itself, and the place also boasted at least seven temples, all in stone. As a group they are the best built and the best preserved structures of the Meroitic period. The Lion Temple of Natakamani and Amanitere is famous for its exterior reliefs, which epitomize the somewhat hypertrophied Meroitic-Egyptian style of carved decoration (Fig. 51). The little 'kiosk' temple which stands just in front of it exhibits a remarkable combination of
Egyptian and Graeco-Roman architectural influences (Pl. XVa) It is unlike any other temple in Upper Nubia, but bears a considerable resemblance to the 'Kiosk of Trajan' on the island of Philae, close to Aswan. The numerous temples at Naqa mark this as one of the most important religious centres in ancient Nubia as well as a town of the first magnitude. Two large cemeteries are also located near by. All of these remains are unexcavated at the present writing.

![Fig. 51. Meroitic temple reliefs, Lion Temple, Naqa](image)

*The scene shows King Natakamani and Queen Amanitere worshipping the lion-god Apedemak (shown with three heads)*

Ten miles to the north of Naqa lies Musawwarat es-Sufra, in many ways the most extraordinary site in all Nubia. Here there seem to be no town remains and no cemeteries; only a cluster of monumental, stone buildings. The largest and most conspicuous by far is the Great Enclosure - a labyrinthine cluster of open plazas, corridors and chambers which has no parallel in Nubian or Egyptian architecture (Fig. 52). Recent excavations here by the Berlin Academy of Sciences have done much to clarify the plan of the enclosure, but have shed no light on its origin or purpose. The acres of bare, beautifully smooth sandstone walls are entirely devoid of reliefs or inscriptions, though they have been an irresistible temptation to graffito-writers from ancient to modern times. Shinnie describes the site as follows

![Fig. 52. Plan of the Great Enclosure, Musawwarat es-Sufra](image)

The 'Great Enclosure' consists of a number of buildings and walled enclosures surrounding a temple built on a platform, rather similar in lay-out to the Sun Temple at Meroë. On stylistic
grounds, this central temple appears to belong to the first century AD or a little earlier, but there are no inscriptions other than secondary graffiti, which are plentiful. This temple is surrounded by a colonnade, some of whose columns have interesting reliefs. Outside the colonnaded temple is a series of corridors and ramps which connect the various parts of the complex, and which are not known from any other Meroitic site. The number of representations of elephants in the sculptures suggests that this animal played an important part at Musawwarat es-Sufra; the large enclosures may have been designed to herd them in, the ramps being for their convenience since they could more easily negotiate them than they could steps. It may be that here was a center for the training of elephants for military and ceremonial purposes. The remarkable wall terminating in the figure of an elephant is unique and is further evidence of the importance of this animal.

Although the notion that the beautifully constructed open courts at Musawwarat were designed as elephant pens sounds somehow far-fetched, it is difficult to propose a more logical explanation for them. Some of the war elephants employed by the Ptolemaic rulers of Egypt - and perhaps also by the Carthaginians - were certainly obtained by expeditions sent to the Sudan, and presumably into Meroitic territory. Ptolemy III is reported by Agatharchides to have established an 'elephant-port' named Ptolemais Theron ('Ptolemais of the Wild Beasts') on the Red Sea coast somewhere near modern Suakin. Since elephant-hunting in the wide-open spaces of the central Sudan would have been an uncertain and time-consuming business, we can well imagine that the agents of Ptolemy might have been happy to deal with native middlemen. The traffic in live elephants could thus have become a small but lucrative sideline for the dwellers of the Butana. One of the reliefs at Musawwarat shows, incidentally, a king riding an elephant (Fig. 53).

The function of the Great Enclosure was certainly in part religious, for it incorporated at least two and possibly three temples amid its corridors and courts, and its walls bear a large number of graffiti naming the lion god, Apedemak. The other known buildings at Musawwarat are nearly all of a religious nature; they include three more small temples of the rather simple plan characteristic of the later Meroitic period. There is also a walled compound (the 'Little Enclosure') enclosing a group of what seem to be ordinary dwelling rooms - the only evidence of actual habitation on the site.

Notable among the ruins of Musawwarat are the remains of an enormous hafir or man-made depression intended to catch and hold the runoff from the Wadi es-Sufra. Such structures, ancient and modern, are common throughout the Butana region and are the only sources of water during the nine-month rainless season. Without them year-round habitation at places like Musawwarat and Naqa would have been impossible. The Great Hafir at Musawwarat is however by far the largest of those known, huge enough perhaps to provide water for a herd of elephants. It is over 1,600 feet across and 20 feet deep, the sides being built up above ground level with material excavated from the bottom, and then partially reinforced and faced with stone. The shape is more or less round, with an intake channel leading away to the east. A second, smaller hafir is located close to the Great Enclosure.
Musawwarat and Naqa, though by far the largest, are not the only Meroitic settlements in the dry Butana Steppe. More than a dozen other sites have been found, at distances up to sixty miles from the banks of the Nile. Many are, like Musawwarat, associated with ruined hafirs. At Basa, a group of carved stone lions was ranged around the perimeter of the reservoir, as if guarding the precious water supply. There are ruined temples in at least four of the Butana sites in addition to those at Musawwarat and Naqa. These colonies, made possible by considerable feats of hydraulic engineering, are the only permanent settlements which the Butana Steppe has ever supported; they offer a unique sidelight on the vigour and prosperity of Nubian civilization in the last centuries BC and the first century AD.

It has been suggested that the Butana sites were administrative and religious centres for the pastoral segment of the Meroitic population, but this is not supported by the evidence of their distribution. The known remains are all in the western part of the Butana, whereas the best grasslands lie farther to the east. Ancient hafirs abound in both areas, and cannot be regarded as distinctive of Meroitic settlement. It is notable that all of the 'inland' Meroitic sites lie along three great wadis which carry a large part of the Butana runoff. Probably, then, they reflect a temporary extension of agriculture into the hinterlands, perhaps during a period when the seasonal rainfall was a bit higher than it is today. It is worth recalling that the alluvial resources of the Nile itself are not particularly abundant in the vicinity of Meroë.

Forty miles upstream from Meroë, on the east bank of the Nile, are the ruins of Wad ben Naqa. This place is sometimes identified as the 'riverport' for the city of Naqa, since it lies at the mouth of a wadi coming down from the inland city. Recent excavations here uncovered an enormous square building, nearly 200 feet on a side, strongly resembling the palaces at Meroë and also identified by the excavators as a royal residence (Fig. 54). It was built entirely of brick; the exterior walls were faced with burned brick and plastered over with white stucco. The building had at least two storeys, although only the lower floor was preserved. The long, narrow plan of the interior rooms suggests that they were covered by brick vaults - a method of roofing characteristic of Meroitic public buildings.
If Vercoutter's designation of the palace is correct, we must recognize Wad ben Naqa as another sometime residence of the Kushite royal family, probably in the first century BC and the first century AD. Other buildings on the site include two small temples and an enormous round structure of brick, like a huge silo, whose purpose is entirely unknown. There is also evidence of a considerable town, but it has not been excavated.

Wad ben Naqa completes our list of known Meroitic cities in the central Sudan. Smaller communities, however, were widely scattered up and down the Nile as well as in the Butana Steppe. There may have been an important Meroitic settlement at Soba, not far from modern Khartoum, for a carved stone lion of Meroitic origin was found there some years ago. Far upstream at Sennar, on the Blue Nile, are the remains both of a cemetery (Makwar) and a sizeable village (Abu Geili) of Meroitic times, and there is no reason to suppose that settlement did not extend continuously along the river between this point and the main population centres in the Island of Meroë.

The ruins at Sennar are up to now the southernmost known remains of the Meroitic period. How much farther the kingdom or its influence might have extended to the south and to the west has been the subject of a great deal of speculation. As Vercoutter has pointed out, there are no geographical barriers to prevent the spread of agricultural civilization as far as the great Sudd marshes of the southern Sudan. However, the whole region to the south of Sennar remains terra incognita to the archaeologist. To the west, the evidence which has been adduced for Meroitic influence in the steppelands of Kordofan and Darfur (western Sudan) is of such a speculative nature that it probably should not be taken too seriously. The ultimate limits of Kushite cultural expansion into Africa will only be determined by systematic exploration. For the time being we are compelled to accept Sennar as the Meroitic highwater mark, and indeed as the southernmost point to which any purely Nubian civilization penetrated.

It is a curious fact, so far unexplained, that all of the known Meroitic remains of southern Nubia are located to the east of the Nile. Even the extensive cemeteries of Jebel Moya, in the region between the Blue and
White Niles (Fig. 47), are not unmistakably Meroitic in character, although many of the graves contain objects of Meroitic manufacture. We are unavoidably reminded of Ptolemy's statement (c. AD 150) that the west bank of the Nile was occupied by another people, the Nubae, who were not subject to Meroë. As unlikely as this proposition seems, it cannot be wholly disregarded in the light of archaeological evidence now available.

To the north of Meroë, a few Meroitic sites have been found in the Nile Valley as far downstream as Berber, seventy-five miles below the capital city. None of them has yet been systematically investigated. Between Berber and Napata are no known remains of either the Napatan or the Meroitic period. As we noted earlier, Napata itself had probably become a cultural and economic backwater by Meroitic times; Haycock speaks of it even in the early seventh century BC as '… a town full of aged buildings crumbling into ruin, which the kings did not care to visit often because they were importuned by the priests … to pay for urgent repairs'. Yet this was not the end of its story, for the Barkal temples were extensively repaired by Natakamani and Amanitere, and at least one new temple and two or three other buildings were added to the Barkal complex in Meroitic times. Parts of the townsite and cemetery at Sanam are also of Meroitic date.

Kawa, too, was a place of considerable importance in the later Meroitic period, and was the site of still another 'palace', though it is hardly comparable to those at Meroë and Wad ben Naqa. In the few areas of the town which were investigated, remains of Meroitic houses overlay those of the Napatan period.

The stratigraphic evidence here, as well as at Sanam and Jebel Barkal, points to a marked revival of building activity around the beginning of the Christian era, after several centuries of virtual stagnation. As a result there are clearly distinguishable Napatan and Meroitic occupation levels in most of the sites which belong to both periods, with very little to connect them except for the continued use and repair of the older temples. The stratigraphic evidence clearly points to two quite distinct florescences of the Kushite civilization.

Downstream from Kawa, the effects of the Meroitic Renaissance are apparent also at Argo Island (? Pnubs) and in the Abri-Delgo Reach. At Argo, the temple of Taharqa (cf. Ch. 10) was extensively rebuilt, and its exterior was adorned with two colossal standing figures (Pl. XVb). These activities are naturally attributed to Natakamani, known from other contexts as the great builder and re-builder of Meroitic times, Atiye (Seddenga), recently suggested as the burial place of Taharqa himself, is mentioned in several texts as an important locality of the Meroitic period. This is so far attested archaeologically only by a cemetery and a small group of brick pyramids surrounding the tomb attributed to Taharqa. A few miles downstream, however, there was a fairly impressive Meroitic temple at Amara East. It was, fortunately, visited and sketched by several travellers in the nineteenth century, for nearly all trace of it has disappeared in modern times. Texts of the Meroitic period mention no settlements between Seddenga and Faras, and only a very few sites were found in this region by the High Dam surveys.

Evidently the barren and unproductive Batn el Hajar was the region last and least affected by the Meroitic Renaissance; much of it probably remained as deserted as it had been since the days of Egyptian rule. By contrast, the area from the Second Cataract northward to the Wadi Allaqi is almost continuously dotted with Meroitic remains. These northern settlements cannot, however, be viewed simply as the frontier outposts of a southern kingdom expanding gradually northwards. They represent in many ways a distinct and detached Meroitic province with a history, an economy, and even a culture of its own, which we shall discuss in Chapter 12.
Many aspects of Meroitic everyday life have not been touched on in the foregoing survey. However, our knowledge on this subject has come so largely as a result of the excavation of Meroitic sites in Lower Nubia that it seems best to defer a consideration of the humbler aspects of Meroitic culture, and an interpretative summary of the period as a whole, until the following chapter. Before we turn our attention to the north, however, a few further characteristics of Meroitic life and society in the steppelands remain to be considered.

**MEROITIC RELIGION**

Like so many other aspects of life in Upper Nubia, the religion of Meroë must be largely inferred from its monumental remains. Shinnie has aptly summarized the state of our current knowledge:

> Until we can read the language, the sources for an appreciation of Meroitic religion are restricted to the temple reliefs and what little the classical writers tell us. The information given by these writers is not very helpful, since they showed little understanding of how the beliefs of others could differ from those they themselves held, and frequently attempt … to identify local gods with their own. [cf. the passage from Herodotus quoted at the beginning of this chapter.]

A study of the many deities depicted in the monuments reveals that the Meroitic people derived most of their religious ideas from Egypt, and the majority of their gods and their iconography always remained closely similar to those of the Pharaohs. But they did have gods of their own which had no Egyptian counterparts, and one at least of these, Apedemak, became the most important god of the Island of Meroë.

The earlier Meroitic kings certainly regarded allegiance to Amon as a main element in their tenure of the throne and we know from the inscriptions … the veneration in which he was held. The inscriptions are not only in the Egyptian language, but, in the religious ideas which they reveal, show complete conformity with Egyptian thought. It may be that this official religion, derived as it was from the religious observances of the earlier Egyptian occupation, was restricted to the royal family, their court, and the temple priesthoods.

The Meroitic kings were not remarkable for their temple-building activities, except for the one great outburst of building and re-building in the reign of Natakamani and Amanitere. For the rest, the royal funerary monuments far outnumber and outshine all other religious memorials, while among civic buildings the palaces at Meroë and Wad ben Naqa are conspicuously larger than are the temples. The typical Meroitic temple is in fact a relatively modest affair, comprising a single rectangular chamber entered through a massive pylon-gate. The Lion Temple at Naqa (PI. XVa) is the best surviving example today. Essentially the same plan is reproduced on a smaller scale by the mortuary chapels adjoining the royal pyramids. Some of the large temples had four or six interior columns supporting the flat, timbered roof. In a few cases the sanctuary was screened from the body of the temple by an interior partition, and in a few others there was a walled forecourt in front of the main pylon-gate. Two notable exceptions to the usual plan are the Sun Temple at Meroë and the temple within the Great Enclosure at Musawwarat, both of which had an interior colonnade surrounding a free-standing walled sanctuary in the middle of the building. This style of architecture is described as 'peripteral'; it is believed to represent one of a number of Asiatic influences in the culture of Meroë (see below).

The most interesting features of the surviving Meroitic temples, as well as of the pyramid-chapels, are their carved wall reliefs, best exemplified once again by the Lion Temple at Naqa (Fig. 51). The stylistic canon and the scenes portrayed are unmistakably Egyptian in origin, but there are distinctive local touches. The
massive proportioning of the human figure is characteristic of later Meroitic decoration; Dunham aptly characterizes one relief of a queen as showing '… a truly mountainous royal lady … positively weighed down by her ornaments as she sits in state on her lion throne'. Other innovative touches are representations of the lion god with three heads and with the body of a snake, and various other composite, mythical beasts among the reliefs at Musawwarat.

Among the religious monuments of Kush the temples of Amon are undoubtedly pre-eminent both in size and in number. The names of the Meroitic kings, with their continued repetition of the 'amani' element, would certainly indicate also that the worship of this Theban deity remained central to the state ideology until the end of the kingdom. It is worth noting, however, that all of the Amon temples except possibly that at Meroë seem to have been built in Napatan times. Amon figures among the reliefs in the purely Meroitic temples, but he is no more prominent than are a number of other deities. This might suggest that organized religion in the Meroitic period was less exclusively a royal affair than in Napatan times, and had to serve the needs of other elements in the population besides the ruling house.

Second in importance to Amon, at least in the Meroë region, was the lion god, Apedemak, who has no Egyptian equivalent. As we have already noted, there were lion temples at Meroë, at Musawwarat, at Naqa, and probably at Basa. The worship of Apedemak seems to have been particularly important at Musawwarat, where he is mentioned in numerous graffiti as well as in long, formal prayers inscribed in good Egyptian hieroglyphs on the walls of his recently excavated temple. The terms in which the god is addressed are significant: 'Thou art greeted, Apedemak, lord of Naqa; great god, lord of Musawwarat es-Sufra; splendid god, at the head of Nubia. Lion of the south, strong of arm. There is a suggestion here that the lion god was a local tutelary of the Meroitic south (where lions were fairly common until the last century), and it is noteworthy that we seldom hear of him in Lower Nubia. The prominent place accorded the temples of Apedemak in the southern cities would thus represent an important concession to local religious tradition.

The sun god represented in the great victory stele at Jebel Qeili (Fig. 48), and to whom the Sun Temple at Meroë may have been dedicated, remains something of an enigma. Like Apedemak he is not recognizably an Egyptian deity, but he figures much less prominently in the surviving Meroitic religious texts than does the lion god. His worship at Meroë may be evidence of the spread of the Persian Mithraic cult, which was becoming popular in many parts of the Roman Empire at about the same time. It is another of the oriental influences which many scholars profess to recognize in the culture of the Meroitic south.

Isis, the Egyptian manifestation of the age-old Mother Goddess, appears frequently in Meroitic temple reliefs, and there were temples dedicated especially to her at Meroë and at Wad ben Naqa. These probably represent the southward spread of religious influence from Ptolemaic Egypt, where the fertility goddess emerged as the most popular deity in the country under Greek rule. Her worship was for all practical purposes the state cult both of the Ptolemaic and of the Meroitic provinces of Lower Nubia, as we shall observe in the next chapter. She does not seem to have achieved quite the same prominence in the Meroitic south, where older religious traditions lingered longer and died harder. Isis was, however, important in connection with the mortuary ritual of the Meroites, as she was also in Egypt. To quote Shinnie once again:

Some confirmation of Herodotus' view concerning the cult of Isis and Osiris for funerary purposes can be seen in the very large number of funerary offering tables with invocations to these gods. Since Osiris was the traditional god of the dead and Isis his wife, here once more Egyptian ideas can be seen to dominate. Many of these offering tables show the goddess Nephthys and the god Anubis, both concerned with the cult of the dead in Egypt, pouring
libations. Although the form of these offering tables and the inscriptions are Meroitic, the theological ideas embodied are Egyptian.  

It seems hardly necessary to add that mortuary ritual must have played an important and perhaps even dominant role in the religious life of Meroë, as it did throughout the history of ancient Egypt and Kush. This is the one area of religious observance which we can be sure, from the evidence of the cemeteries, was common to all levels of Meroitic society, and not just to the court and the nobility. The lavishly furnished royal tombs have already been described in earlier pages. The richest of the 'private' tombs in the West Cemetery at Meroë, though smaller in size than the royal tombs, are hardly less opulent. They too are equipped with small pyramids or mastabas, encircling walls, mortuary chapels, and sometimes multiple underground chambers. By contrast, the burial chambers of the ordinary citizens are often of a very simple nature. Yet the abundance of goods found even in the humblest provincial cemeteries from one end of Nubia to the other bears witness to the fact that elaborate mortuary ritual was no monopoly of the upper class. (A more detailed consideration of Meroitic burial practices, which are known to us chiefly from cemeteries in Lower Nubia, will be found in the next chapter.)

THE SOCIETY AND CULTURE OF THE MEROITIC SOUTH

The excavated monuments and the unexcavated town-sites permit us to make only a few summary generalizations about social and cultural conditions in the Meroitic steppelands. To begin with, we can observe that settlement was more urbanized than in any previous period. The process of urbanization was of course not new; town life in Nubia had begun under the Egyptian New Kingdom, and in Napatan times Sanam and Kawa were both important urban centres. Yet the town remains of the Meroitic period are far more numerous and more extensive than are those of earlier times. Even the humblest villages exhibit a surprisingly congested plan, indicating that social nucleation among the peoples of the Nile had reached that degree of development which had long been characteristic of the Near East (see 'Town and village life' in the next chapter).

A number of corollary inferences can be drawn from the urbanized character of Meroitic society. One is the growth of a sizeable middle class, whose power and wealth perhaps increased at the expense of the monarchy. This is attested also by the number of wealthy 'private' tombs in the West I Cemetery at Meroë and at Seddenga and elsewhere. As Haycock has remarked,

…the later royal sequence of [Meroë] North is the main source of evidence for the argument … that there are no rich tombs after the early first century AD. Yet it should be pointed out that … despite steady decline in the size of the tombs and their construction, some were still well equipped with objects … These tombs date roughly between the second half of the first century AD and the end of the third. Private tombs, probably of the second to third century AD were often very lavish indeed, and contained large numbers of objects influenced by Graeco-Roman traditions. Possibly what was happening was not a process of general impoverishment, but simply that complete royal autocracy was giving way before the growth of a rich and powerful nobility; thus the economic gap between rulers and ruled may have become smaller than at any time since the establishment of the Napatan dynasty.  

The social transformation here envisioned is probably symptomatic in turn of an economic transformation. As we saw in earlier chapters, the prosperity of Kush always depended to a large extent upon export trade, and the spread of Kushite civilization to the steppelands was probably due in large measure to the extension
of overland trade routes. Yet for centuries the means of distribution were monopolized by the ruling family and a small governing elite, who reaped nearly all the benefits of Nubia's foreign commerce. This picture was radically altered in Meroitic times. The volume of goods moving southwards along the Nile and over the desert caravan routes was conspicuously larger than in any previous period, and it was reaching a far wider consumer market. Even the little provincial cemetery at Sennar, at the farthest limit of the Meroitic empire, abounded in bronze, glass, and other luxury goods which were largely of foreign manufacture. Such extensive enterprise was surely no royal monopoly; it can only signify the activity of a host of private entrepreneurs. In sum, material prosperity in the Meroitic period was far more broadly based than in earlier times, and an active middle class must have grown up along with an active mercantile economy. Here more than anywhere else we recognize the Greek touch transforming the ancient civilization of the Nile.

Because we know, up to now, so little about village life in the Meroitic south, it is difficult to generalize about the agrarian economy of the region. The remains which are known to us in such places as Abu Geili are certainly those of sedentary agriculturalists rather than of pastoralists. Even in the Butana Steppe, the urban character of most of the known settlements makes it probable that they were supported by the development of agriculture in the nearby wadis rather than by animal husbandry in the surrounding grasslands. Strabo's description of Nubia mentions the cultivation of millet, which in later times has become the principal staple grain of the Sudan (cf. Ch. 2). His account furnishes our first evidence of millet cultivation south of Egypt; it may very well have been the introduction of this heat- and drought-resistant cereal which made possible the extension of agriculture from the Nile floodplain into the steppelands.

We have good reason to believe that farming in New Kingdom and Napatan times was organized at least partly on a manorial basis, the landholders being in many cases the great temple establishments (Chs. 9-10),

Whether the more numerous but much smaller temples of the Meroitic period were similarly endowed with manorial estates is uncertain, but seems at least a reasonable supposition. It is unlikely that they were supported entirely by royal largesse, and they do not seem to have engaged to any great extent in trade. At the same time, the relatively small population of Nubia, and the great expanse of potentially arable land in the south, make it certain that a large part of the population - perhaps a substantial majority - were small free-holders, as in all periods of Nubian history.

Strabo also states, as do several later classical writers, that a great many of the subjects of Meroë were poor nomadic pastoralists. This description could not possibly refer to the sedentary, urbanized population whose remains are known to us archaeologically. It can only mean that the Meroitic kingdom exerted some degree of control over the desert pastoralists during that part of the year when their annual migrations brought them to the edge of the settled region. Very possibly a kind of symbiosis existed between farmers and nomads, as has so often been true in the history of the Middle East. Even today the settled farmers of the Shendi region are able to graze considerable numbers of cattle over the Butana grasslands by employing their nomad neighbours as herdsmen. Yet the pastoralists of today remain poor and backward, and it seems unlikely that their ancestors in ancient times made much of a contribution to the social or economic life of the Kushite empire. Both Strabo and Pliny were particularly impressed with their poverty.

If pastoral nomads contributed little to the civilization of Kush, however, we have nevertheless to recognize that the 'cattle cult' still flourished with considerable vigour among the sedentary farmers. While it is by no means as dramatically manifest as in the C Horizon (Ch. 6), representations of cattle and cattle-herding were popular decorative motifs on pottery and bronze vessels, as well as in the royal tomb reliefs. Cows are
usually shown with udders of exaggerated size, and one bronze bowl depicts a milking scene. The quantities of cattle bones recovered in the recent excavations at Meroë show that meat as well as milk was important in the Meroitic diet. Animal husbandry therefore played some part in the life of the Meroitic farmer, whether directly through his own enterprise or indirectly through his contacts with the Butana nomads.

Finally, and connected also with the socio-economic transformation of Nubia, we can observe the emergence of powerful provincial officials both in the old Napatan province and in Lower Nubia. The polity of Meroitic times became much more decentralized than in any previous period since the establishment of dynastic rule. This was perhaps inevitable in view of the fragmentation of the kingdom into three geographically separate districts, but it surely reflects also the increasing wealth and power of the independent bourgeoisie. The provincial officials in the north may have begun as bureaucratic appointees from the royal household, but as the lower and authority of the monarchy declined they seem to have ended as semi-autonomous, hereditary governors. We can thus observe in the later Meroitic period the beginnings of Nubia's first genuinely feudal society. Its development was to be much more pronounced in the post-Meroitic era (Ch. 13).

The transformations which set apart the social, political, and economic life of Meroë from the Nubia of earlier times can nearly all be traced directly or indirectly to the influence of classical civilization. The same is true in other areas of culture as well. Architecture, mural decoration, and the domestic arts are still basically Egyptian, but with Hellenistic overtones; in each case they mirror fairly closely the contemporary developments in Egypt under Ptolemaic and Roman rule. At Meroë, however, we have also to recognize a small group of extraneous influences which do not appear to be of European origin. These are the so-called oriental influences which many scholars have recognized in the Meroitic culture.

Meroitic elements which have been attributed to an eastern origin include the sun god, and particularly the form of his representation at Jebel Qeili; the peripteral temples perhaps also associated with the sun god; the cult of the elephant (if such it was) at Musawwarat; the three-headed and snake-bodied representations of Apedemak at Naqa; the introduction of hafirs and of cotton cultivation into the Nile Valley; and the form of certain tripod bronze vessels which are common in Meroitic graves. So strong indeed is this hint of Indian artistic elements in some of the art of Meroë, that it has led Vercoutter to say that he considers Meroitic art to be 'tout aussi indiansant qu'égypsisant'.

In fact, the cumulative effect of the oriental influences at Meroë is trivial indeed when compared to the Egyptian and even the Graeco-Roman influences, and the foreign origin of some of the elements has been denied altogether. What is more to the point, they are 'bits and pieces' which do not add up to an integrated complex, and certainly do not point back to a common place of origin. The different elements might have entered Nubia at different times and over various routes, including from Egypt. India and Persia had after all been a part of the world oikoumène since the conquest of Alexander, and many oriental ideas were afloat in the late classical world. War elephants were ridden by European Greeks and Romans no less than by Carthaginians and Ptolemies, and Mithra was worshipped in far-away Britain and Germany as well as in sunnier climes.

Maritime trade was flourishing in the western Indian Ocean, and many oriental goods found their way to the Mediterranean countries, as well as perhaps more directly to Abyssinia and Nubia, by way of the Red Sea. On the whole the oriental influences to be seen at Meroë are probably no more numerous nor more significant than those to be seen at Rome itself; they are only more conspicuous in the isolated desert cities where they are not surrounded by a welter of conflicting styles and influences.