DYNASTIES AND EMPIRES

8 TRANSITION TO EMPIRE

THE NUBIAN KINGDOM OF KERMA

In the days of the Moorish caravan trade, the wealth and power of West African kingdoms were legendary. Yet when European trading vessels began calling at West African ports in the Age of Exploration, they found the coastal districts poor and culturally backward, and their rulers no more than petty chieftains. The mighty kingdoms, they learned, lay in the steppe and savanna lands far in the interior. Thereafter the guiding policy of the colonial powers was to establish relations with, and ultimately control over, the great inland domains.

The experience of Egypt in ancient Nubia was similar. The pharaoh was at first conscious only of the impoverished lands immediately beyond his borders, whose people and resources hardly justified the effort of colonization. Later he became aware that much richer lands lay beyond. Increasingly he turned his attention to Upper Nubia and its rulers; relations with them became the key to Egyptian policy, and ultimately domination, in the south.

Who were the southern people, whose wealth and power so far outstripped their Lower Nubian neighbours? For the time being we can give only a verb, incomplete answer. Upper Nubia has not yet been systematically explored, and archaeological work has been confined to a handful of monumental sites and cemeteries. None of these can be dated with certainty to a time earlier than the Second Intermediate Period. We therefore know nothing definite about the origins of the Upper Nubian people, and little enough about their culture even in its heyday.

For a thousand years, our evidence for the existence of a thriving culture and society in Upper Nubia is inferential. From the late Old Kingdom we have Harkhuf's account of the Land of Yam, whose location is unspecified but which can hardly have been elsewhere than in Upper Nubia. From the Middle Kingdom we have the indirect but nevertheless suggestive evidence of large-scale trade with the south as attested by the Second Cataract Forts. But it is not until a still later date, perhaps following the initial abandonment of the forts, that we can recognize archaeologically a culture which might correspond both to Yam and to the conjectural Upper Nubian kingdom with which XII Dynasty Egypt traded. This culture is known to us chiefly from one spectacular site, Kerma, from which it has taken its name.

As we shall observe presently, the dates both for the beginning and for the end of the Kerma Culture are undetermined. However, there seems to be little doubt that its climax of development occurred during the period of Hyksos domination in Egypt; that is, in the latter part of the Second Intermediate Period. The Kerma people were, then, contemporary with the later C Horizon. It is hardly surprising to discover that the two cultures have much in common, pointing in all probability to a common ancestry.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE KERMA CULTURE

No habitation sites of the Kerma people have yet been identified; for the time being our knowledge of the purely indigenous aspects of their culture comes entirely from cemeteries. Once again, we are obliged to
recognize and distinguish the Kerma Culture primarily by its pottery and its burial customs (cf. Ch. 5).

The Kerma people, like the Lower Nubians, made pottery of several kinds. Their larger and coarser utility vessels are almost indistinguishable from those of the C Horizon. They also made black polished bowls with incised, white-filled decoration, again paralleling the Lower Nubian tradition. At Kerma, however, such pottery constituted only a small percentage of the ceramic complex. The most abundant and most distinctive of luxury wares was a black-topped red ware, conforming to the general Nubian tradition but achieving, in the hands of the Kerma people, a refinement never approached in the pottery of the A and C Horizons. So finely made is Kerma ware that Reisner, its discoverer, mistakenly believed that it had been made on the wheel (and therefore that it was really the product of Egyptian craftsmen, since the potter's wheel was then unknown to the Nubians).  

The best of the Kerma black-topped pottery has extremely thin walls and sharp rims, recalling those of the 'variegated hematitic' ware of the A Horizon (Ch. 5). The vessels have a glossy, jet black interior and rim, the black band usually extending downwards for about an inch over the vessel exterior. The lower exterior is a deep red. In most cases the black upper body and the red lower body are separated by a narrow, irregular strip of a whitish metallic colour. This feature is not found in any of the other blacktopped wares of Nubia, and its origin and purpose have been the subject of much discussion.

The most typical vessel form in Kerma black-topped ware is a roundbottomed, wide-mouthed beaker (Fig. 29), which has no parallel in the pottery industries of Lower Nubia. These vessels are found 'nested' together in clusters in nearly every Kerma grave, sometimes numbering dozens in a single grave. So common are they that the black-topped ware as a whole is sometimes designated as 'Kerma Beaker Ware'. However, it occurs in various other shapes such as hemispherical bowls and a distinctive form of spouted pot (Fig. 29).

The mortuary practices of Kerma have much in common with those of the C Horizon. The grave pit proper is a rather shallow square or rectangular excavation with rounded corners (Fig. 29). The dead were laid on the right side, in a contracted position, facing north. Mortuary offerings are
Fig. 29. Typical Kerma grave and mortuary offerings

abundant within the tombs. Usually toilet articles and other personal belongings are arranged close to the body, while pottery vessels containing food and drink line the chamber walls. Sacrificial rams are very often included with the burial. After filling, the grave was covered by a round tumulus of earth marked at the edge by a ring of stones. In many cases a row of ox skulls was ranged around the southern edge of the tumulus.

While the above practices belong to a common and probably Nubia-wide tradition, five characteristics distinguish the Kerma burials from those of Lower Nubian peoples:

BED BURIAL

In nearly every Kerma grave which has not been plundered beyond recognition, the main burial is found reclining on a native bed (angareeb) of the type still used in Nubia (see Ch. 2). This custom is encountered only very rarely in graves of the C Horizon. It has, however, a long subsequent history in Nubia, as will be seen in later chapters.

KERMA POTTERY
Trade vessels of the distinctive Kerma black-topped pottery are occasionally found in non-Kerma graves in Lower Nubia and even in Egypt, but they are a near-universal feature of genuine Kerma graves, and usually occur in large clusters.

DOMED TUMULI

The round tumulus, or grave mound, is a common feature of Upper and Lower Nubian burials. As we saw in Chapter 6, however, the typical 'C-Group' tumulus is cylindrical in shape, being built up within a vertical retaining wall of masonry. The Kerma tumulus is dome-shaped, sloping downwards from a low crown to the level of the ground in all directions. The ring of stones delimiting the tumulus is only a few inches high; it is primarily decorative and perhaps to protect the edges of the mound from erosion. In many Kerma graves the encircling ring of stones is dark in colour, while the surface of the mound within the ring is covered with white or yellow pebbles. Kerma tumuli are even more variable in size than are those of the C Horizon; the largest of them are far larger than anything found in Lower Nubia.

RAM SACRIFICES

Sacrificial animals - mainly sheep and goats - are found occasionally in the graves, and even more often in independent sacrificial pits, within the cemeteries of the C Horizon. They are a consistent feature of Kerma burial, occurring always within the grave chamber itself. Usually they lie directly in front of the bed on which the corpse rests; in one or two instances they were placed on the foot of the bed itself. As many as six sacrificial animals have been found in the same grave.

More distinctive than any of the foregoing are:

HUMAN SACRIFICES

A surprisingly large number of Kerma graves- at least of those dating from the heyday of the kingdom - contain the bodies of one or more sacrificial victims who were buried at the same time as the 'owner' of the grave. They were found even in the small and unimposing cemetery at Mirgissa, to be discussed later, but much more consistently and abundantly at Kerma itself. Many relatively small and humble graves contained one or two sacrificed retainers, while the largest of the royal tombs may have had four hundred. From the positions of the bodies, Reisner concluded that they had been buried alive and had died from suffocation. The formal differences between the C Horizon and the Kerma culture are, as will be seen, of a relatively minor sort. The two are at the very least 'cultural cousins', and may very well have diverged from a common ancestry in the A Horizon. The most significant differences between them, however, are seen not so much in form as in the relative scale and intensity of their development. In order to appreciate this difference it is necessary to consider the great archaeological site of Kerma, which has no counterpart in Lower Nubia.

THE SITE OF KERMA

Modern Kerma is a straggling village of several thousand inhabitants situated on the east bank of the Nile at the extreme northern end of the Dongola Reach - the most fertile region in Upper Nubia (see Ch. 1). Not only is the floodplain here exceptionally broad, but the area available for cultivation is tremendously increased by the presence of a former channel of the Nile, the so-called Kerma Basin, which is annually flooded at the high Nile. This is one of the few places in the Sudan where natural basin irrigation, of the type characteristic...
of ancient Egypt, can be practised. Here, within sight of the modern village, would appear to have been the earliest seat of autocratic power in ancient Nubia.

The archaeological site of Kerma was excavated between 1913 and 1916 by George A. Reisner, and was the first major enterprise undertaken by the Harvard-Boston Expedition in the Sudan. It has been more fully reported than any of Reisner’s subsequent Nubian excavations. Even so, large areas of the site have never been explored, and a considerable part of the excavated material is still unpublished.

The site of Kerma as investigated by Reisner comprised two major areas. About a mile and a half from the riverbank, and not far behind the line of modern houses, was a great, decayed mass of mud brick locally known as the Western or Lower Deffufa (a Nubian term for any upstanding brick ruin). Two miles farther east, across an open clay plain (now mostly under cultivation), was a large necropolis and also the remains of a second brick building, the Upper Deffufa.

The Western Deffufa, which first claimed Reisner’s attention, is one of the most extraordinary structures in Nubia, and the only one of its kind in existence. As originally constructed it was a solid rectangular mass of mud brick more than 150 feet long and 75 feet wide, and probably stood to a height considerably greater than the 60 feet which are still preserved (Pl. Villa). Within this solid mass there were no interior apartments; only the remains of a narrow, winding stairway which had evidently led to the top of the structure (Fig. 30). The stairway within the building began at a height several feet above the ground; it was continued downwards to ground level by a projection westwards from the main mass of the building. At the first landing the stairway was widened to form a sort of guardroom the only space within the solid mass of brickwork which could be described as a room.
After the original building of the Lower Deffufa, two additions were made which added a kind of salient to its eastern face. Both, like the original building, were nearly solid brick, and both probably rose to the full height of the original structure so as to enlarge the platform at the top. However, the earlier and larger of the two additions contained two small rooms, entered through doorways at ground level, and also two vertical shafts which had no lateral openings (Fig. 30).

The character of the Deffufa brickwork is unmistakably Egyptian. It shares with the Middle Kingdom Forts the regular use of timber bonding: large, rough-hewn beams set horizontally in tile brickwork at right angles...
to the faces of the wall. The Deffufa is certainly not a fortress, however, and in fact bears no resemblance to any other known building of Egyptian design.

The western face of the Deffufa was adjoined by an irregular cluster of brick rooms which appeared to have been rebuilt and enlarged several times. Here again the extreme straightness and evenness of the walls suggests Egyptian work. The abundant refuse found within these western rooms furnishes the one real clue as to the date and function of the Lower Deffufa. Most conspicuous were fragments of 565 mud seal-impressions of Egyptian type, which had been affixed to pots, baskets, and some sort of wooden container. There were also fragmentary remains of many objects of Egyptian manufacture, such as alabaster ointment jars (twenty-five of them bearing the name of the Old Kingdom Pharaoh Pepi I), other and larger stone vessels, faience and pottery vessels, beads and stone crystals for making beads, and pieces of bronze. Except for the ointment jars these objects were mostly of Middle Kingdom or later types, according to Reisner.

Also represented in the refuse from the Western Deffufa were various kinds of raw materials:

While the seal-impressions stand in a way for the administrative activities of the Egyptian occupation, the raw materials and the unfinished products stand for the manufacturing activities. The raw materials found consisted of several lumps of keriak used for polishing pottery, lumps of red color used for the red wash on pottery, one large and several small lumps of copper oxide used for coloring faiences and other glazes, lumps of resin, a block of mica for mica ornaments, Several large deposits of rock crystals and carnelian pebbles of the same materials as those found in the stone beads, and fragments of ostrich eggshell from which small disc-beads were made. Many pebbles stained with green glaze were also found, which had been used as setters in glazing faiences. Polishing pebbles for pottery and bivalve shells for dressing pottery forms occurred in small numbers. Quantities of unfinished or misfired black-topped beakers, some misfired faience vessels, and many partly finished beads, several apparently cracked in glazing, were also recorded. The sum of the evidence is that the manufacture of pottery, faience, glazed quartzite, beads, and mica ornaments at the Lower Deffufa was carried on during the period of the ... cemetry at the Upper Deffufa and produced the same types of objects as those found in that cemetry.

...Many points are not determined by the evidences at our disposal Never. theless, the main point stands out that the Deffufa was the Center of a consider. able business, whether storage or otherwise, in more or less valuable commodities. But there were undoubtedly other activities concerned - the trade for the products of the more southern lands, and the receipt and despatch of goods from and to Egypt.

Here surely is one of the depots or 'factories' from which emanated that great Nile trade, which Egypt was at such pains to protect on its downstream passage.

That the Lower Deffufa was designed and constructed under Egyptian supervision seems evident from the nature of the brickwork. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that the origin of the Upper Nubian trade was in Egyptian hands. The permanent Egyptian colony at Kerma may have been quite small, since no unmistakable Egyptian graves have been found here, whereas they are prominent at all of the Second Cataract Forts. The resident Egyptians at the Deffufa were probably for the most part clerks, who recorded the arrival and departure of cargoes and perhaps supervised the work of a group of local craftsmen making Egyptian-style beads and faiences for the local market. As the evidence from the eastern cemetery shows (see below), they lived and worked under the patronage of a local ruler who was the real controlling force in tile Nile trade.
All of the foregoing interpretation is based on the finds within the western rooms of the Lower Deffufa. It does nothing to explain the great, solid mass of brickwork which towers above them. This has customarily been regarded as some sort of defensive arrangement, and the complex as a whole has been called a fortified trading post. Yet the great Deffufa makes no sense as a fortification; it defends nothing but itself, and it contains nothing. While the resident merchants and officials might possibly take refuge from attack on its upper platform, a building more vulnerable to siege would be difficult to imagine. Its one exit could be barred by a mere handful of armed men, and the occupants would be reduced by thirst in a matter of days.

Up to a thickness often or twelve feet, the size of brick walls may indeed be an indication of their defensive nature. Beyond that point, however, nothing is gained by additional mass. Thickness of walls, relative to the area enclosed, can be consistently related to only one functional requirement: height. Given this consideration, it seems apparent to me that the Kerma Deffufa was designed as an enormous watchtower, rising perhaps to two or three times the height to which it is now preserved.

The purpose of such a structure is not difficult to visualize. If, as has been suggested, the upbound cargoes arrived only at infrequent intervals, and in large convoys, it would undoubtedly be to the advantage of the king and his officers to have first news of the coming of the boats, so as to have loading parties ready for them and to forestall competition from private entrepreneurs. Since there are no mountains in the vicinity of Kerma, an elevated position could only be constructed artificially. Admittedly this does not account for the additions to the eastern face of the Deffufa - a mystery which may never be resolved.

THE ROYAL CEMETERY

The great eastern cemetery at Kerma covers an area perhaps a mile long and half a mile wide. In all probability it contains several thousand graves, although large parts of it have not been surveyed to this day. The number of graves excavated by Reisner in his three seasons of work is not specified in any of his reports, but it can only have been a fraction of the total. Of those excavated, 388 have been individually reported; many others, particularly in the northern part of the cemetery, remain unreported.

The essential features of mortuary practice at Kerma were virtually the same in every grave excavated, and conform to the general plan which we have already described. The grave furniture too was remarkably consistent in form if not in quantity. Enormous variability, however, was found in the overall size and complexity of the Kerma graves. It was primarily on this basis that Reisner divided them into four groups: great tumuli, minor tumuli, subsidiary graves, and independent graves.

THE GREAT TUMULI

The great tumuli numbered only eight examples, which were ranged more or less in a line at the southern edge of the cemetery. These structures are without parallel among the funerary monuments of Nubia. The largest of them is nearly 300 feet in diameter, and its interior chambers are far more extensive than are those of any Egyptian pyramid. To complete the picture of barbarian magnificence it may be added that the number of human sacrifices in Tumulus X at Kerma - 322 by actual count, and perhaps as many as 400 before plundering - is larger than in any other known tomb of any civilization.

The internal conditions encountered in the great tumuli are thus described by Reisner:

The chief burial lay on the south side of the grave, usually on a bed, on the right side, with the legs slightly
bent at the knees, the right hand under the cheek and the left hand on or near the right elbow. The body was apparently clothed in linen, with the usual weapons and personal adornments. On the bed was placed, as a rule, a wooden headrest, an ostrich-feather fan, and a pair of rawhide sandals. At or on the foot of the bed were also placed certain toilet articles and bronze implements. Near the bed and around the wails of the pit were arranged a large number of pottery vessels.

The chief burial and the grave furniture occupied only a small part of the floor area of the grave. The rest was taken up by other human bodies, ranging from one to twelve or more in number, and the bodies of one to six rams. The positions of these human bodies did not follow strictly any one rule; the majority were on the right side; of these again a majority lay with the head east; but almost every possible position occurred. The extent of the contraction varied quite as much - from the half extended position of the chief body to the tightest possible doubling up. Some even were on the back and some on the stomach. The hands were usually over the face or at the throat, sometimes twisted together, sometimes clutching the hair. In only a few cases was a person seen who lay in the attitude of the chief person, but in a number of cases a modification of that attitude was seen.

The chief body appears always to have been covered with a hide, usually an ox-hide, and in some cases at least the hide covered the sacrifices as well. It will be recalled by Egyptologists that in the letter of Amenemhat III to Sinuhe, the king, after promising Sinuhe a princely Egyptian burial, goes on to say: 'Let not thy death take place in a foreign land, let not the Bedouin make thy funeral procession, let thyself not be placed in the hide of a ram.'

The three largest of the great tumuli, designated as Ill, IV, and X, had special peculiarities of their own. In each of these cases the mass of the tumulus was given a certain rigidity by a 'core-structure' of enormously long, straight, brick walls whose only purpose was apparently to provide a kind of skeleton for the mound (cf. Pl. VIIIb). A long, unbroken corridor ran across the entire width of each mound, while the remaining wails of the core-structure emanated from it at right angles. The main burial chamber opened directly onto the south side of the corridor near the centre of the tumulus (Fig. 31). Sacrificial burials were found primarily within the transverse corridors, which were therefore designated by Reisner as sacrificial corridors.

**SUBSIDIARY BURIALS**

Subsidiary burials are a feature of all but two of the great tumuli, and also of a few of the minor tumuli. They are burials without grave-mounds of their own, but intruded through the surface of the existing tumuli at some time after their completion. The nature and distribution of these graves show that they were not simply random intrusions by disrespectful posterity, for they were carefully placed in such a way as to avoid disturbing the main burial chamber or damaging the core walls. In Tumulus III, the grave chambers for all of the subsidiary burials were made by running short cross-walls between the already existing walls of the core-structure so as to form small brick chambers (Fig. 31). Reisner has suggested that the very large size of many Kerma tumuli was intended deliberately to leave
Fig. 31. Plan of the internal brickwork skeleton in Tumulus I11, Kerma

room for such burials. The largest number of them encountered in any one tumulus was 102. Although lacking superstructures of their own, the subsidiary burials are often remarkably rich in their own right, and many are accompanied by human sacrifices.

THE MINOR TUMULI

The minor tumuli are smaller versions of the great tumuli, without sacrificial corridors or masonry core-structures. In nearly every case there is only a single rectangular or square burial chamber excavated
into the alluvium, containing the main burial, the grave goods, and sacrificial burials when present. The tumuli in these cases are still far larger than is necessary to cover the grave proper, varying in diameter from about 75 to more than 150 feet. However, only a few of them include subsidiary graves. Minor tumuli occurred sporadically in many parts of the Kerma cemetery, but were most conspicuously clustered at the south end, in close proximity to the great tumuli.

**INDEPENDENT GRAVES**

Independent graves was the designation given by Reisner to interments which either lacked superstructures or had tumuli only large enough to cover the grave pit. Some of the poorest (and earliest?) of these had an oval rather than a rectangular pit, like graves of the A Horizon (Ch. 5). Even in very small graves the standard Kerma mortuary equipment was regularly encountered:

.. a rectangular open pit, a bed-burial under the hide, accompanied by one or more human sacrifices clothed in cloth tunics and leather skirts, a ram, a dagger of the peculiar Kerma form, a headrest, a fan, a pair of sandals, a number of black-topped beakers, bowls, and pots, and a number of jars of other wares.  

Independent graves were found in every part of the Kerma cemetery. At the south end they were scattered around and among the larger tumuli, while at the north they were apparently the only form of grave present. Reisner noted that animal sacrifices were most abundant in the northern graves, where they largely replaced human sacrifices.

**MORTUARY BUILDINGS**

In addition to its tumuli great and small the Kerma cemetery contained the remains of two massive brick buildings reminiscent in some respects of the great Lower Deffufa. One of them, which still stands to a considerable height, is in fact known as the Eastern or Upper Deffufa. The second of the cemetery buildings was found in much more denuded condition, but was closely similar in plan to the first. Both consist of two long chambers connected by a narrow passage between them and a second passage to the outside. A row of columns down the centre of each room apparently supported a ceiling of transverse beams (Fig. 32). Both structures had massive brick walls, exceeding 30 feet in thickness. One of them - presumably the earlier - had grown by accretion from a smaller nucleus, while the second had been built from the beginning in its final form. The seemingly earlier building also included a narrow inside stairway leading to an upper storey or to the roof. The inner rooms of both buildings bore the remains of painted decoration in red, black, and yellow. The paintings are
Fig. 32. Plan of the Upper (Eastern) Deffufa, Kerma

unmistakably Egyptian in style and theme, showing familiar scenes of human and animal activity.

The two great buildings are situated near the southern end of the Kerma cemetery, in each case just to the north of one of the largest of the tumuli. Reisner not unnaturally concluded that they were mortuary chapels associated with the great tumuli, each one having perhaps served over a long period of time and in conjunction with several successive tombs. The interior chambers had been thoroughly plundered in antiquity, but a great mass of broken objects found in the vicinity might have been cleared out by the robbers. A large number of mud sealings, similar in type and date to those found at the Lower Deffufa, suggested to Reisner that one of the cemetery buildings had been sealed shut and re-opened many times.  

As in the Lower Deffufa, the massive walls of the mortuary chapels (?) are suggestive of extraordinary height. Perhaps their summits were lookout stations for the cemetery watchmen. Certainly keeping watch over so large a cemetery, with its undulating surface of large and small tumuli, would have been a difficult job at ground level.

Much smaller mortuary chapels (?) were found associated with six of the minor tumuli at Kerma. These were small, square chambers of brick situated just off the edge of the tumulus, more or less along its southern side. Presumably they were for the deposit of commemorative offerings subsequent to the closing of the grave, although all of them had been ransacked in antiquity. Such chapels are associated with many tombs of the late C Horizon in Lower Nubia. but they were apparently an uncommon feature of Kerma burial practice.

PROBLEMS OF INTERPRETATION AND CHRONOLOGY

Reisner's interpretation of the Kerma finds exemplifies the best and worst of his intuitive genius. By a combination of carefully detailed analysis and prodigious flights of imagination, he reconstructed both the identity and the history of the Kerma site with. his usual confident assurance. It was, he concluded, a colony of Nubianized Egyptians in the Middle Kingdom, and the seat of the earliest Egyptian Viceroy of Kush. From this it followed that Egyptian hegemony in Upper Nubia had already been established in the Middle Kingdom, an inference which cannot otherwise be drawn from the textual or archaeological record.

Reisner's interpretation was based largely upon a few datable and identifiable objects found in the Kerma cemetery. Foremost among them were the life-size granite statues of the Egyptian Prince Hepzefa and his wife Sennuwy, both of which were found in the great Tumulus III. These two individuals were already well known from finds at Assiut, in Middle Egypt, and could be dated to the reign of Senusret I at the beginning of the XII Dynasty. The finding of the two statues led Reisner to conclude that Tumulus III was the burial place of Hepzefa himself, and that (in view of the size and splendour of his tomb) he was none other than the Viceroy of Kush. It followed, therefore, that the neighbouring great tumuli were those of his successors in the viceregal office.

Other Egyptologists were quick to challenge Reisner's view. They pointed out that the tomb of Hepzefa (admittedly unfinished) was already known from Assiut, that burial on foreign soil was abhorrent to Egyptian officials, that alien burial rites were doubly abhorrent, and that in any case Tumulus III contained material datable to later reigns than that of Senusret I. It was suggested that the inscribed statues, as well as a good deal of other Egyptian-made material found at Kerma, were the discarded status symbols of a bygone age in Egypt, which enterprising merchants had unloaded on the gullible and status-conscious Nubian kings.
The half century since Reisner's excavations has done little to clear up the mysteries of Kerma. Until systematic archaeology is inaugurated in Upper Nubia, much will remain as obscure as it has been since 1916. Because of the critical importance of Kerma to any interpretation of later Nubian history, however, it seems desirable here to reconsider some of the problems raised by the Kerma site and culture.

SCOPE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE EGYPTIAN PRESENCE

That there were Egyptians at Kerma seems beyond dispute. Yet it is almost equally certain that Reisner overestimated their numbers and their role. This was due in part to his interpretation of the imported statues, which we have just considered, but also to his mistaken belief that Kerma blacktopped pottery was made on the wheel, and therefore was the work of Egyptian craftsmen. It would indeed have required a large colony of potters to furnish the quantity of beakers found in the Kerma cemetery. However, my own investigations have established to my satisfaction that the vessels were made by hand, and therefore almost certainly by native potters.

Most scholars today would agree with Junker and Säve-Söderburgh that the burials at Kerma could not possibly be those of Egyptians. What, then, is left as evidence of the Egyptian presence? We can cite with varying degrees of confidence the architecture of the Deffufas, the brickwork within the largest of the tumuli, the paintings in the mortuary chapels, the manufactures and commerce carried on at the trading post, and some of the distinctive grave goods found in the cemetery. The latter evidence must however be regarded with a certain degree of caution. It seems worthwhile to quote Trigger in this regard:

Although heavily influenced by Egyptian techniques of manufacture and design, much of the material that was produced at Kerma reflects a local cultural tradition. For example, the design and carpentry of the beds which were found are typically Egyptian, but many of them have footboards that are inlaid in a style that is not. Likewise, the mica figures that were made to be sewn on leather caps are not Egyptian. The copper daggers, of which 130 were found, are a distinct local variant of the standard Egyptian variety, and the metal work copies the shapes of the local pottery. Although much of this material has been interpreted as the output of Egyptian craftsmen accommodating themselves to local tastes, it is also possible that local craftsmen acquired Egyptian techniques of manufacture which they then applied to their own cultural idiom.

None of the foregoing necessarily points to a large Egyptian population. It is only at the managerial level that we clearly recognize the Egyptian touch: in the design of the great brick structures, and in the supervision of craft production and commerce. A small Egyptian élite, supervising native commerce and industry on behalf of a Nubian king, would best account for the archaeological facts at Kerma as we now know them.

IDENTITY OF THE SITE

In the Kerma cemetery, not far from tile Upper Deffufa, Reisner found the fragments of a hieroglyphic stele which he described and translated as follows:

Above was a winged sun-disc with uraeus on each side. There followed eight lines of hieroglyphic inscription dated on the first day of the first month of the third season (month Pachon) of the 33rd year of Amenemhat III: ‘Year 33, first month of the third season, day 1 under the majesty of the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Nemaatra, the son of Ra, Amenemhat, living forever. List of bricks which came down to the snb-t which is in Inebuw-Amenemhat [Walls of Amenemhat]. • by the act of the hereditary prince, the sole friend, whom his Lord sent because of his value in increasing his boundaries and because of the excellence of his planning, the
Chancellor Inter, son of Semib, when he was with a company from Elephantine - 31,305 (or 35,300). Reisner immediately identified 'Walls of Amenemhat' (a place-name otherwise unknown in Egyptian annals) with the settlement at Kerma. Pointing out that 35,000 bricks would not go very far towards building any of the known structures there, he further reasoned that Inter could only have instituted repairs to a previously existing building - presumably the nearby Upper Deffufa. From this it followed that the great structure had already been built prior to the reign of Amenemhat III. It was also inferable that a town named after the Egyptian king (a name which contrasts markedly with those of the Second Cataract Forts) was an Egyptian town.

Viewed realistically, the interpretation of the Intef stele presents all kinds of difficulties. Nobody knows what a snb-t was, since the word occurs in no other text. Whatever it was, why should Inter have commemorated, in a form usually reserved for heroic exploits, the receipt of a shipment of bricks sufficient only for a modest construction? Why should bricks be shipped at all, when they can be made on the spot anywhere in the Nile Valley? The only justification for transporting such a cheap and unremunerative commodity would be in cases where construction was required far from available sources of water or clay - conditions which do not prevail at Kerma.

While many mysteries connected with the Intef stele may never be resolved, the same caveat surely applies to this find as to the various inscribed statues and statuettes from Kerma. A stele of one's own was, after all, one of the prime status symbols of antiquity, and an illiterate Nubian king might well have been content to impress his equally illiterate subjects with a second-hand model. If the Intef stele was brought from somewhere else, however, then neither the identity of 'Walls of Amenemhat' nor the Middle Kingdom date is necessarily applicable to Kerma.

INTERPRETATION OF THE CEMETERY

If we acknowledge, as most scholars now do, that the burial customs at Kerma are those of Nubians and not of Egyptians, we can nevertheless hardly avoid the conclusion that they represent a group of extraordinarily wealthy and powerful individuals or families. We are probably safe in identifying them as the first royal tombs in Nubian history. Although the order of their development is uncertain, the greatest of the tumuli can hardly represent anything but a succession; the coexistence of two or more such powerful individuals in the same time and place is unthinkable.

While we are clearly in the presence of a highly, even excessively, centralized authority, we cannot yet recognize the existence of a class-stratified society. The differences between the grandest and the meanest tombs are primarily quantitative rather than qualitative; moreover the tombs are all more or less jumbled together in the same cemetery. We can draw no sharp line between the great and the lesser tumuli, many of which may also be the tombs of kings in humbler days. The subsidiary burials represent, presumably, important members of the king's household who were permitted to outlive him but who wished to renew their association with him in the afterworld.

The contrast between the subsidiary interments and the sacrificial burials suggests that while the former may have been important royal retainers, the latter were more probably slaves. If so, slave-holding must have been developed on a large scale during the heyday of the Kerma kingdom. It may well have been stimulated by the example of the pharaohs, as the excessive slave-holding of West African kings in the eighteenth century was a byproduct of their dealings with European slave traders. The apparent presence of large numbers of slaves is one of several indications that the people of Kerma were a far more warlike race than were their cousins in
Lower Nubia.

PROBLEMS OF CHRONOLOGY

An initial problem concerns the temporal relationship of the two parts of the Kerma site. We have as a common bond between them, however, the brickwork of the Upper and Lower Deffufas, the numerous mud sealings (mostly of Hyksos date) found in both places, and the various manufactures carried on at the trading post which were paralleled by goods found in the cemetery graves. It seems logical in any case to assume, as Reisner did, that the great brick buildings and tumuli are representative of a single climax of wealth and power.

The absolute dating of the Kerma heyday is a much more difficult problem. Reisner's original belief in a Middle Kingdom date was based almost entirely on the statues of Hepzefa and Sennuwy, the stele of Intef, and a few other inscribed objects of Egyptian manufacture. If we recognize, however, that material of later date was found in the same tumuli, and that all of the inscriptional material found at Kerma may represent second-hand goods brought in at a later date, then no solid basis is left for a Middle Kingdom dating. There remains only the inferential evidence of the Second Cataract Forts, pointing to the existence of some sort of power centre farther to the south, and the specific resemblances of the Deffufa brickwork to that of the fortresses.

Far more trustworthy than inscribed stones are the numerous mud-seal impressions found both in the Lower Deffufa and in the Kerma cemetery. The great majority of these are assignable to the Hyksos period. This was recognized by Reisner himself, but he got over the difficulty in part by assuming that the type of seal normally identified with the Second Intermediate Period must in fact have been developed earlier. His conclusion has not, however, been verified by subsequent work in Egypt. Taking the seals together with other lines of evidence, both at Kerma and elsewhere, the most likely dating for the Kerma heyday would seem to be concurrent with the climax of Hyksos power in Lower Egypt, in the sixteenth century BC.

The great tombs may of course represent only a short chapter in a much longer history. Depending on the population of the Kerma settlement, the thousands of graves in the eastern cemetery could represent an occupation of many centuries, or they could all belong to a much shorter period. A certain degree of cultural change is manifest between the graves in the southern and northern parts of the cemetery; it is signaled in part by the paucity of sacrificial burials in the north. Reisner's assumption was that the cemetery had grown from south to north, and that the change represented a progressive Nubianization and impoverishment. However, the possibility of development in the other direction cannot be ruled out. In the light of our general knowledge of Egyptian-Nubian relations, a long period of development leading up to the Kerma climax seems more probable than does a long period of degeneration following it (cf. Ch. 9). We have to acknowledge, however, that the time span represented by the Kerma cemetery and by the Kerma culture may not be long. The culture as we now know it shows far less developmental change from beginning to end than does the C Horizon of Lower Nubia (Ch. 6).

KERMA SITES IN THE NORTH

For a long time after its excavation the Kerma site remained the only significant exemplar of the Kerma culture. More recently, however, a few other sites have been found within what is presumed to be 'Kerma territory'. Still others have been found much further to the north, under special circumstances which add an extra dimension to the Kerma problem.
If the Kerma climax is accepted as contemporary with the late C Horizon, then there must somewhere be a cultural frontier or transition zone between them. The logical place to look for such a frontier would be at Semna, since it was the frontier chosen by the Middle Kingdom rulers of Lower Nubia. This supposition, though not fully confirmed, receives considerable support from the recently concluded archaeological survey in the Batn el Hajar. Cemeteries of the C Horizon have been found only as far south as Saras, ten miles to the north of Semna. In the area immediately south of Semna a number of Kerma cemeteries have been found. Kerma cemeteries have also been found to the north of Semna, but only under special conditions which will be described presently.

Kerma territory, then, presumably extended from somewhere above Kerma in the south to Semna in the north. In all probability it was the original Land of Kush, as the term first appears in texts of the Middle Kingdom. Within this territory two important cemeteries have been investigated in addition to the 'discovery site'. The necropolis at Sai Island (an important local seat of power during most of later Nubian history) is enormous; perhaps as large as the Kerma cemetery itself. Here too are some very large tumuli, though none approaches the dimensions of the largest of the royal tombs in the south. The necropolis at Sai was partially excavated between 1970 and 1972; the graves and their contents were found to be identical in every respect to the minor tumuli at Kerma except for the apparent absence of sacrificial burials.

A Kerma cemetery of several hundred graves at Ukma, in the Batn el Hajar, has been excavated in its entirety. The work has just been completed, and no published report is yet available. While most of the finds evidently conform to the expected Kerma pattern, the excavator believes that several of the graves represent a divergent cultural tradition: an alien group perhaps living in a symbiotic relationship with the dominant Kerma population.

To the north of Semna, Kerma cemeteries or isolated graves have been reported at Saras, Abka, Mirgissa, Abu Sir, Buhen, Aniba, and Kubban. Of these the cemetery at Mirgissa, which contained twenty-two graves, has been fully excavated. The graves were situated close to the walls of the great fortress, but in a somewhat secluded wadi well away from the main Egyptian cemeteries. All of the graves were relatively small, but in other respects exhibited the typical Kerma mortuary complex. There were at least four instances of human sacrifice.

At the foot of the rock of Abu Sir, halfway between Mirgissa and Buhen, a tiny cluster of seven Kerma-like graves was found. Here, however, there were departures from the normal burial practice. The bodies were laid either on the right or on the left side, without consistent orientation, and there were no traces of beds. The tumuli, if they ever existed, had been destroyed by erosion.

The known Kerma burials north of Semna have one peculiarity in common. The great majority of them are associated with the great Egyptian fortresses, or, in the case of Abu Sir, with a lookout post maintained in conjunction with the fortresses (Ch. 7). The conclusion seems inescapable that at some point in their history the forts were manned in part by Kerma troops, who came or were brought far from their homeland for that purpose.

What were the time and circumstances of Kerma occupation in the forts? All of the known finds point unmistakably to a time late in the Second Intermediate period - presumably concurrent with the heyday of Kerma itself. This would theoretically fall between the major Egyptian occupations &the fortresses. It appears unlikely, however, that Kermans were the sole occupants of these great structures.
could hardly man the ramparts at Mirgissa, and the Kerma contingents at the other forts appear to have been smaller still. There may also be Egyptian graves at Mirgissa and elsewhere datable to the same period as the Kerma cemeteries.

The available evidence suggests that, during the Hyksos period, the fortresses of Lower Nubia were being manned by small cadres of Egyptian officials supported by a few native troops. Yet we know that the mandate of the Egyptian dynast at Thebes did not extend beyond Aswan, and the garrisons in Nubia were therefore not his. The only reasonable conclusion is that both officers and men were in the service of the King of Kerma. This seems to be attested too by the stele of Sepedher (cf. Ch. 7): 'I was a valiant commandant of Buhen, and ... I built the temple of Horus, Lord of Buhen, to the satisfaction of the ruler of Cush.' It would seem, in short, that at the height of their power the rulers of Kerma replaced the pharaoh himself as overlords of Lower Nubia and its trade. It was no doubt this state of affairs which provoked the would-be pharaoh at Thebes to utter his celebrated complaint, 'I sit united with an Asiatic and a Nubian, each man in possession of his slice of this Egypt.'

THE 'PAN-GRAVE CULTURE'

One more group of archaeological remains, contemporary with the Kerma period, requires mention in this chapter. These are the 'pan-graves' (so called because the grave pit retains the shallow oval form characteristic of earlier times in Nubia) which occur sporadically both in Lower Nubia and in Egypt. Although they exhibit many generalized Nubian characteristics, and sometimes occur in the midst of 'C-Group' cemeteries, the pan-graves are distinguishable on a number of grounds from the typical graves of the later C Horizon, and seem to represent a foreign intrusion alike in Egypt and in Lower Nubia. They were once thought to show closer affinities with Kerma, and on that basis it was suggested that they were in fact the burials of mercenary soldiers from the Upper Nubian kingdom who had served in the northern countries. More detailed analysis has suggested however that the pan-graves are distinct alike from 'C-Group' and from Kerma burials, and they are now believed to represent still a third Nubian population group, which Säve-Söderbergh identifies with the formidable Medjay of Egyptian texts. These, it appears, were not riverain peoples but nomads of the eastern desert, who perhaps sold their services as mercenaries both to the King of Kerma and to the pharaoh. It is now believed that all of the known pan-graves date from the Hyksos period, when the power of Kerma was also at its height.

INTERPRETATIVE SUMMARY

While the culture of the C Horizon was developing slowly and peacefully in Lower Nubia, a much more vigorous and warlike culture emerged in the better-favoured lands to the south. The material aspects of the Kerma culture and of the C Horizon are generally similar, and probably sprang from a common origin, but the wealth and power of Kerma far outstripped those of the Lower Nubians. Kerma in its heyday became an absolute monarchy of awesome proportions, while the social institutions of the C Horizon never progressed beyond a segmentary lineage system which probably lacked any central authority. The contrast between them may be likened to that between the highly autocratic Baganda and the much more democratic Nuer in modern times: they are culturally related peoples, but exhibiting very different levels of political development.

That the Upper Nubians had already moved ahead of their neighbours by the end of the Old Kingdom seems evident from the Egyptian accounts of the Land of Yam. By the Middle Kingdom the value of Egyptian trade with Upper Nubia was sufficient to inspire the pharaoh to a major effort for its protection and control, as
attested by the Second Cataract Forts. Yet it is not until a still later date that we can recognize archaeologically the source of all this interest and activity in Upper Nubia. The great royal tombs and architectural monuments of Kerma apparently belong to the Second Intermediate Period, when the power of the Nubians grew in proportion to the weakness and division within Egypt.

The wealth if not the power of Kerma evidently depended on an economic symbiosis with Egypt, and in particular with Lower Egypt. It was trade with the Delta which kept the Nubian king and nobles supplied with imported luxuries, and which induced them to keep open the trade route to the north by the establishment of small garrisons in the former Egyptian forts of Lower Nubia. In the interest of maintaining and expanding this trade, the Nubian kings probably undertook extensive military and commercial ventures in the lands still further to the south.

A small, élite corps of Egyptian officials oversaw the manufactures and the export trade of Kerma on behalf of the native ruler. They were, however, commercial rather than military or political figures. The Kerma kingdom was independent, self-governing, and capable not only of defending its own territory but, in the absence of Egyptian authority, of maintaining a loose hegemony over Lower Nubia as well. The picture of Kerma in the second millennium BC presents many parallels with the eighteenth-century kingdom of Dahomey, whose wealth and power depended on firearms supplied by the European powers in exchange for slaves, which were delivered to their resident 'factors' in the great slaveport of Whydah. 63

Kerma represents a transitional step between the Tribal and Dynastic stages of Nubian cultural development. Its material and to some extent even its social institutions are those of the Tribal period, and are little different in substance from the Lower Nubian A and C Horizons. Yet its autocratic, presumably divine king and its state-organized trade represent a first, long step down the road towards empire. Had the culture been left to develop unmolested, stratified society, peasant economy, bureaucratic government, and the other 'blessings' of imperial civilization must inevitably have followed in time.

As it turned out, the indigenous development of an imperial system in the Sudan was forestalled by the Egyptians (Ch. 9). Thrusting aside the native rulers, they established their own hegemony from the First to the Fourth Cataract. The full complex of civilization thus arrived in Nubia not as the outcome of local cultural developments, but as a transplant from Egypt. It was many centuries later before a genuinely Nubian empire was achieved, but when it came, it owed much to the legacy of Kerma.

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