When Greek Was an African Language: The Role of Greek Culture in Ancient and Medieval Nubia*

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The spread of Greek and Greek culture throughout the territories of the former Persian empire was one of the defining characteristics of the Hellenistic period. For almost a millennium, until the Arab conquests of the seventh century C.E., the acquisition of a Greek education and the ability to speak Greek were the keys to privilege throughout much of western Asia and Egypt. Not surprisingly, the study of this phenomenon has generated an enormous scholarly literature.¹ Much less studied, however, has been the significance of Greek for the cultures of peoples living on the periphery of the Hellenistic kingdoms and their Roman and Islamic successor states. The purpose of this paper is to examine the role of Greek and Greek culture in one of those peripheral areas: ancient and medieval Nubia.²

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¹ Most of it is in articles. Useful introductions to the issues involved are Naphtali Lewis, Greeks in Ptolemaic Egypt (Oxford, 1986); and Amélie Kuhrt and Susan Sherwin-White, eds., Hellenism in the East (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

² Nubia and Nubians in this paper refer to the Nile valley south of Egypt and its inhabitants, and Kush, Nobatia, Makuria, Alwah, etc. to the various states in the region. The standard history of Nubia is William Y. Adams, Nubia: Corridor to Africa (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977). The archaeology is surveyed in David N. Edwards, The

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It is a huge story. Spatially it covers southern Egypt and the northern and central Sudan from the first cataract at modern Aswan to south of Khartoum. Chronologically it spans almost a millennium and a half from the Hellenistic period to the end of the middle ages. It is also a story that could not even begin to be told until recently. In part, this was because of the lack of sources that is the bane of all ancient historians. Until recently, native Nubian sources were almost entirely lacking, and only fragments remain of the once extensive classical and Arabic accounts of the region and its peoples. Lack of sources was not, however, the only problem. The historiography of Nubia is the oldest body of Western historical scholarship dealing with the African interior. Like any historiography, however, it reflects the biases of both the times in which historians of Nubia lived and the periods in which their sources were written.

The central fact facing all historians of Nubia is that the surviving ancient and medieval accounts of Nubia are not only limited but profoundly Egyptocentric. Nubia and its peoples and cultures are rarely mentioned except when they are relevant to Egypt, and when they are mentioned, they are discussed from the perspective of Egypt. Not surprisingly, when modern histories of Nubia first began to be written in the nineteenth century c.e., they were largely based on classical and Arabic sources, supplemented by Egyptian texts and therefore they reflected the Egyptocentric views of their sources. Nubia was treated as little more than an extension of Egypt without a significant cultural tradition of its own. The problem was compounded, moreover, by the

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fact that their authors wrote during the heyday of European imperialism in Africa, and, not surprisingly, they shared the then-current popular view of Africans as inferior peoples, capable, at best, only of receiving and imitating influences from superior foreign cultures.

These two factors mean that when the presence of the Greek language and Greek influence in Nubia was recognized, no effort was made to understand how they functioned within ancient and medieval Nubian culture. Greek objects found in Nubia were treated instead as indices of Hellenization, which was conceived as a one-sided process of acculturation involving the deliberate decision by non-Greek individuals—usually elites—to transform themselves and their society by abandoning their own culture in favor of Greek culture. The equation was simple. The greater the number of Greek objects and other examples of Greek influence, the greater the degree of Hellenization. One example will have to stand for many. After reviewing the evidence for Greek imports into Nubia, the great Hellenistic and Roman historian M. I. Rostovtzeff concluded that Hellenistic Meroe “with its Hellenistic palaces, its Hellenistic bath, its Ethiopian-Hellenistic statues and decorative frescoes, became a little Nubian Alexandria.”

This situation has changed dramatically during the past half century. A new historiography of Nubia has emerged that treats Nubian culture as a distinct entity created by the inhabitants of the upper Nile valley and not as a remote outpost of Egyptian civilization doomed to ultimate decline and extinction because of its location in the interior of Africa. The catalysts for this change were two of the major developments of the Cold War period: the construction of the huge Aswan High Dam and the end of Europe’s African empires.

This is not the place to tell either the story of how the Soviet Union came to construct the Aswan High Dam or the story of the end of Europe’s imperial dreams in Africa. What does concern us, however, is the fact that construction of the dam was preceded by the largest and

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most complex archaeological salvage campaign in world history—the UNESCO-sponsored international effort to excavate and record every significant archaeological site in the two-hundred-mile stretch of the Upper Nile valley that would be flooded by Lake Nasser, the lake created by the dam.8 The result was the discovery and ongoing publication of a mass of new native Nubian sources—both textual and material—for the history of just about every aspect of ancient and medieval Nubian life.

Decolonization, on the other hand, transformed the writing of African history, encouraging the emergence of a new historiography of Africa that placed Africans at the center of their history. The Sudan was no exception. As a result, it is possible for the first time to discuss the place of Greek and Greek culture in Nubia in a new way, one that focuses on its function as one element in the long history of a culture that was created by Nubians.

The Hellenistic Period9

When does the history of Greek and Greek culture in Nubia begin? At first glance we seem to have a firm date. According to the second century B.C.E. historian Agatharchides of Cnidus, the author of the standard classical account of the region, Greeks first entered Nubia when Ptolemy II campaigned there in the 270s B.C.E. Precise dates for the beginnings of complex historical processes are rarely what they seem, and, unfortunately, that is true in this case.

While people from ancient Nubia are attested in the Aegean as early as the second millennium B.C.E.,10 direct Greek contact with the region began in 593 B.C.E., when the army of the twenty-sixth-dynasty Egyptian king Psamtek II campaigned in Nubia. Greek mercenaries were part of Psamtek’s army, and they commemorated their role in his expedition in graffiti scratched on the colossi of Ramses II at Abu Sim-
Four centuries later, Greeks again entered Nubia. In the late 330s B.C.E., Alexander dispatched a small reconnaissance expedition into the region, allegedly to find the sources of the Nile, and a decade or two later Ptolemy I raided northern Nubia. Greek objects also occasionally reached Nubia before the 270s. A good example is a spectacular vase by the fifth century B.C.E. Athenian potter Sotades, now in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, that was the prized possession of a Nubian aristocrat buried in the west cemetery at Meroe.

Ptolemy II's campaign, therefore, was not the first but at least the fourth time Greek soldiers operated in Nubia. Why Ptolemy II invaded Nubia is not clear, but Agatharchides suggests that he hoped to put an end to attempts by the kingdom of Kush in the central Sudan to expand its influence northward toward the Egyptian border. The details of the campaign are lost, but the poet Theocritus (Idyll 16, lines 86–87) claimed that he "cut off a part of Black Aithiopia," presumably the so-called Dodecaschoenus—the roughly seventy-five-mile stretch of the Nile immediately south of the first cataract—together with the important gold mining region east of the Nile in the Wadi Allaqi. Inscriptions and coins fill out the picture, indicating that Ptolemy II also garrisoned some of the old Middle Kingdom forts in the second cataract area, and suggesting that his authority temporarily, at least, reached the modern border between Egypt and the modern Republic of the Sudan at Wadi Halfa. What set Ptolemy II's Nubian campaign apart from previous Greek incursions south of Egypt, however, was that it opened a period of sustained contact between Kush and Ptolemaic Egypt, and the reason for that was something new: Ptolemy's need to find a secure source of war elephants.

The military use of elephants was millennia old in Asia. The Greeks and Macedonians first encountered them in battle, however, during Alexander's campaigns. Although the Ptolemies, like other Hellenistic kings, considered these living "tanks" an essential component of their armies, acquiring them was a problem because of their Seleucid rivals' monopoly of Indian elephants and mahouts. They had no choice except to find an African source for elephants and that led to the establishment of close relations between Ptolemaic Egypt and Kush that lasted for the remainder of the third century B.C.E. Armed elephant hunting

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expeditions, sometimes numbering hundreds of men as well as explorers and diplomats—one named Simonides the Younger even lived at Meroe for seven years and wrote an unfortunately now lost book about his experiences—freely circulated throughout Kushite territory.

On the Greek side, the results of Ptolemy II and his successors’ initiative are clear and uncontroversial. Besides gaining access to a ready supply of African products, including hardwoods, incense, gold, slaves, ivory, and even animals for Egyptian temples and Ptolemy’s zoo (including a rhinoceros), the reports Ptolemaic explorers and hunters prepared revolutionized Greek knowledge of the African interior. They recorded the Nile valley between the Egyptian border and Meroe in detail. They correctly identified the Nile’s three principal tributaries—the Atbara, Blue Nile, and White Nile—together with their native names and meanings. Rumors may even have reached them of the Nile’s ultimate source in Lake Victoria in modern Uganda.

The ethnographic map of Nubia also snapped into clear focus. As might be expected, the bulk of the information concerned the kingdom of Kush and its capital, Meroe, the Ptolemies chief rival for influence in Nubia. The reports detailed its relations with other ethnic groups in the region and described the principal features of Kushite culture, especially the public aspects of Kushite kingship, including details of the coronation ritual, the succession rules of the Kushite kings, descriptions of Kushite royal regalia, and the practice of human sacrifice at the death of a king.

While the high quality of the Ptolemaic accounts of Nubia and its peoples are clear, so also are their limitations. Ptolemaic diplomats and military officers were good observers; they even recorded a dangerous form of elephant hunting that was still in use in the nineteenth century C.E. They were not, however, anthropologists. They could, and sometimes did, misunderstand what they saw or were told, once mistaking a troop of chimpanzees for a tribe of tree-living natives. Still, with all their flaws, the Hellenistic accounts of Nubia were not equaled until the high Middle Ages. On the Greek side, therefore, the results of Ptolemy II’s and his successors’ activities in Nubia are clear: Greeks acquired access to elephants and other sub-Saharan African products and relatively accurate information about contemporary Kush and its

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culture that contemporary historians of the Sudan still find useful. But what about the impact on Kushites and their culture?

Military defeat, loss of territory, and foreign penetration of their territory on a scale unparalleled since the conquest of Nubia a millennium earlier by New Kingdom Egypt characterize the initial Kushite encounter with Ptolemaic Egypt. This would hardly seem at first glance a promising foundation for cultural exchange. Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, scholars have long maintained that, despite all these negatives, contact with Ptolemaic Egypt inspired the kings of Kush to pursue a policy of deliberate Hellenization that ultimately transformed their capital Meroe into a "little Nubian Alexandria." The principal evidence for this thesis is a passage from the first-century B.C.E. historian Diodorus describing a bloody confrontation in the third century B.C.E. between a Greek-educated king, Ergamenes—Arqamani—and the priesthood of Amon at Meroe. Specifically, according to Diodorus, study of Greek philosophy enabled Ergamenes to brush aside the priests' demand that he commit suicide and to enter "with his soldiers into the unapproachable place where stood, as it turned out, the golden shrine of the Ethiopians, put the priests to the sword, and after abolishing this custom, thereafter (sc. he) ordered affairs after his own will."

The Greek bias of Diodorus's account is obvious, but archaeological evidence also leaves no doubt of the far-reaching impact of Ergamenes's revolution. Henceforth, Kushite political and religious life was centralized at Meroe. The old royal cemetery at Napata near the fourth cataract of the Nile was replaced by a new burial ground east of Meroe. Kushite royal iconography reveals that the kings of Kush also adopted a new, less Egyptianizing style of regalia. The evidence, moreover, indicates that in the third century B.C.E. Kushite kings transferred their patronage from Egyptian gods like Amon to local deities connected with the office of the king but lacking identifiable Egyptian backgrounds such as the lion-headed war god Apedemak. These deities were also worshipped in temples that creatively combined Egyptian and Nubian traditions such as the so-called Lion Temples and the huge pilgrimage site of Musawwarat-es Sufra. Finally, a new quasi-alphabetic script for Meroitic was developed to replace Egyptian hieroglyphs, making possible the replacement of Egyptian by Meroitic as the language of government and religion.

Although we lack a clear statement of the rationale for these changes, they clearly amounted to a partial declaration of indepen-

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16 Diodorus 3.6.
dence from the Egyptian traditions that had been central to Kushite elite culture since the glorious days of the late eighth and early seventh centuries B.C.E., when the Nubian pharaohs of the twenty-fifth dynasty had united Kush and Egypt in a vast empire that stretched from the Mediterranean to the central Sudan. But were they also a vote for Hellenization? Such evidence as we have suggests that the answer is more complex than a simple yes or no. The Egyptian aspects of traditional Kushite culture were reinterpreted in accordance with local values, but they were not repudiated.

Although they themselves were not Egyptian, the rulers of Kush, like the Pharaohs, had claimed to be sons of the sun god Re and kings of Upper and Lower Egypt. They traditionally had conducted their government in Egyptian, celebrated their exploits in hieroglyphic inscriptions, and were buried with Egyptian rites in pyramids decorated with excerpts from the Book of the Dead and other traditional funerary texts. Even the reform by Ergamenes and his successors of the Kushite monarchy was expressed in forms that were derived ultimately from Egypt. Not surprisingly, therefore, it was the Egyptian side of Ptolemaic civilization that attracted the Kushites in the decades following Ptolemy II’s Nubian campaign. Thus, the royal titularies of the third-century Kushite kings and their regalia echo those of the contemporary Ptolemies. Even when they borrowed an office from the Ptolemaic government, they used the Egyptian designation for it, not the Greek.17

Similarly, when Kushite kings used Greek architects and masons to build temples, as they did at the pilgrimage center of Musawwarat es-Sufra, south of Meroe, the temples they built were adaptations of Egyptian, not Greek, temples. A good example is the so-called Lion Temple, excavated and partially restored by the East Germans in the 1960s. Here in an impressive series of reliefs accompanied by texts—based on Egyptian originals from Philae and inscribed in hieroglyphs typical of the early Ptolemaic period—the Kushite king Arnekhamani is depicted wearing a Ptolemaic-style crown and receiving pledges of victory from the Kushite pantheon. Only now, however, the pantheon is headed not by Amon but by the native war god Apedemak, who also wears a similar crown. By contrast, while the evidence for Greek influence in Hellenistic Kush is easy to find, it is limited in scale and scope.

The most dramatic examples are the possible adoption of the use of

war elephants and the construction in the so-called royal enclosure at Meroe of a small water sanctuary decorated with statuary modeled on Greek originals. The discovery of a set of Greek flutes—one of the few ever discovered—in a tomb at Meroe suggests that Greek musicians may have performed for elite audiences there. Otherwise, however, the evidence consists of a limited range of luxury goods such as metal vessels of various types—goose-head wine strainers, drinking cups, buckets, and basins—and fragments of wine amphorae, which are found in palace complexes and royal or noble tombs at Meroe and Napata.

Clearly, the development of a taste for Greek wine by the Kushite aristocracy and possibly also the use of war elephants were the most notable results of the exposure to Greek culture in Hellenistic Kush. As for knowledge and use of the Greek language, however we explain Ergamenes’s Greek education—that he was tutored by a “wandering scholar” has been suggested by one scholar—the evidence is scant. An inscription from Philae and the historian Diodorus’s (3.11) claim to have spoken with Aithiopian ambassadors at Alexandria, however, suggest that knowledge of Greek was limited and that its primary use was communication with Ptolemaic diplomats and officials. In the Roman period, however, the scope of Greek influence and the use of Greek both increased and began to affect core areas of Kushite culture, particularly religion.

Rome and Kush

Just as was true in the case of the Ptolemies, the first encounter between Rome and Kush was hostile. Following the collapse of Ptolemaic power in northern Nubia after the Roman conquest of Egypt in 30 b.c.e., both Kush and Rome rushed to fill the vacuum with predictable results. Fresh from the suppression of a revolt in southern Egypt, C. Cornelius Gallus, the first Roman prefect of Egypt, crossed into Nubia in force, appointed a Roman client ruler for Lower Nubia, and forced local Kushite officials to recognize Roman suzerainty and to agree to pay

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19 FHN 140.
tribute to Rome. Roman suzerainty over Kush proved ephemeral, however. A decade of raids and counter raids by Kushite and Roman forces convinced the emperor Augustus to withdraw Roman forces from all Nubian territory but the Dodecaschoenus. A long period of what probably should be called "cold peace" followed that lasted until the mid third century C.E.

However we characterize relations between Kush and Rome, the fact is that almost two and a half centuries of relative peace led to unprecedented prosperity in Kush. Trade with Roman Egypt expanded in tandem with growing Roman demand for the traditional products of Africa—gold, ivory, hard woods, slaves, and exotic animals—now desired both for Egyptian temples and the Roman arena. The archaeological evidence for increased prosperity in Nubia is still evident today in the form of greatly expanded temple construction and renovation—most Kushite temples date in their present form from this period—and increasingly wealthy royal and noble graves. Despite extensive looting of graves, temples, and other sites since antiquity, numerous objects imported from Roman Egypt during the Principate have been discovered on Kushite sites. As was true in the Hellenistic period, the bulk of this substantial corpus of imported classical objects consists of a wide variety of small but high-quality domestic goods: metal, glass, and ceramic objects including lamps, drinking vessels, dishes, and other eating utensils; items related to personal adornment such as rings, jewelry, beads, and mirrors; and household furnishings including the remains of furniture and decorative objects and, of course, large numbers of wine amphorae.21

Not surprisingly, Kushite exposure to Greeks and Greek culture also increased greatly beginning in the late first century B.C.E. The evidence of that exposure is abundant, but how Nubians responded to it differed depending on the nature of their relationship to Rome. In northern Nubia—essentially the Dodecaschoenus—which was under direct Roman rule, the Roman presence was direct and intense. The region was treated as an extension of Roman Egypt, and the Roman footprint on the land was heavy. They laid out roads, built temples and forts, and installed garrisons at strategic points. They also replaced Egyptian with Greek as the language of administration and law and introduced new taxes. Roman officials "rode circuit" in the region, thereby reducing the

authority of local judicial officials. Imported trade goods, pottery, and particularly wine circulated freely.

For most of the local population this was the extent of their contact with Greco-Roman culture. As elsewhere in the Roman Empire, however, the Romans encouraged the assimilation of members of the local elite, and some took advantage of the opportunity, becoming part of the local Roman establishment, joining Roman auxiliary units, and even identifying with Rome. Most such individuals are invisible to us, but we have evidence for one, a Nubian named Paccius Maximus, who received a Greek education, became an auxiliary cavalry officer, composed complex avant-garde Greek poetry (examples of which he had inscribed on the walls of local temples at Kalabsha and Hiera Sycamnos), and even referred to his own native Nubian language as a "barbarian" language.22

The situation was different farther south in independent Kush. Despite the generally peaceful relations between Kush and Rome and growing trade, Kushite attitudes toward Rome seem to have been ambivalent at best when not openly hostile. Particularly revealing is how the Kushites commemorated their escape from Roman domination in the 20s B.C.E. The Kushite account of that event may survive on an inscription that is now in the British Museum. Our inability to understand Meroitic forbids certainty. However, the inscription seems to refer to Rome, and the damaged remains of the lunette that topped it shows figures in Kushite dress trampling on bound prisoners.23 Fortunately, a photographic record still survives of the now lost decoration of a memorial temple (M 292) the Kushites built in the Royal Enclosure at Meroe.24 That decoration consisted of frescoes depicting bound Roman prisoners and other enemies under the feet of a seated queen, while under the threshold of the temple they placed a bronze head of Augustus taken from an imperial cult statue at Syene, where it would be stepped on every time someone entered the shrine, a standard way Kushites symbolized their supremacy over defeated enemies.

At the same time, there clearly was a renewed emphasis on Kush-

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ite tradition. So, unlike Hellenistic Kushite kings, who often modeled their titularies on those of the Ptolemies, Roman-period Kushite kings ignored the titularies of the contemporary Roman emperors and modeled theirs instead on those of the twenty-fifth dynasty and their successors, thereby reaffirming their ties to the founders of their kingdom.

Not surprisingly, therefore, while there is evidence for the incorporation of significant elements of Greek material culture in Kushite elite life and even for the teaching of Greek at Meroe, except for limited penetration of Greek cults, particularly that of Sarapis, there is no evidence for significant Hellenization. Instead, developments in Kush paralleled those in Roman Egypt, where “Greek”—and, one should add, Greek art—had become, in the perceptive characterization of David Frankfurter “simply a neutral lingua franca, the medium of broadest circulation.” As such, Greek and Greek art were both, therefore, also available for the expression of Kushite concepts and values without signifying acculturation to Greek culture. In the area of art the result was the creation of an eclectic art that combined Greek and Kushite elements to express Kushite concerns.

Examples are the victory stele of Prince Sherkarer at Jebil Qeili with its Greek-style solar deity, the fresco of Herakles as master of animals from the royal enclosure at Meroe, the use of Greek architectural forms in Meroitic buildings, and the adaptation of the iconography of the Greco-Egyptian god Sarapis to portray the Kushite royal god Apedemak. The use of Greek themes in Kushite religion was not limited, however, to public culture but extended into funerary religion, as illustrated by a pair of remarkable blue glass drinking vessels discovered in a tomb at Sedeinga that were broken into dozens of pieces during the burial ritual.

The vessels, which bear Greek inscriptions reading “Drink, you

27 Shinnie, Meroe, p. 51.
shall live,” also raise the question of the extent of the knowledge of Greek at Kush in the Roman period. We do not find and probably should not expect to find evidence for assimilated individuals such as Paccius Maximus at Meroe or elsewhere in independent Kushite territory, since assimilation would not provide the same opportunity for self-advancement in independent Kush that it did farther north in Roman Nubia. The discovery in the royal enclosure at Meroe of a column drum inscribed with the Greek alphabet, however, does suggest that Greek was taught at Meroe.

As in the Hellenistic period, the primary motive was probably pragmatic; the kings of Kush needed officials like the appropriately named “Great Ambassadors to Rome” who were fluent in both Greek and Egyptian to deal both with Roman officials and the priests of the temple of Isis at Philae.

One tantalizing but frustrating piece of evidence, however, raises the possibility that the drinking vessels mentioned were not isolated but that the Kushites used Greek, or at least the Greek script, relatively widely for religious purposes. Sir John Garstang discovered during his excavations at Meroe an offering table in the noble cemetery at Meroe that was inscribed in Greek letters. Unfortunately, all that we have of this important find is a muddy photograph so, barring its rediscovery, it cannot be determined whether the offering formula had been translated into Greek or, alternatively, the Greek alphabet had been adapted to write Meroitic just as was being done for Egyptian at about the same time.

Can anything more be said about the extent of the knowledge of Greek in Kush? Most scholars doubt it, but there is one piece of evidence that suggests that Greek was, in fact, fairly widely known at Meroe. Fragments exist of two victory thrones set up at Meroe by kings of Axum bearing Greek inscriptions celebrating the establishment of Axumite authority over Kush in the fourth century C.E. Since Axu-

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mite royal inscriptions were regularly inscribed in Ge'ez, Sabaean—a South Arabian language—and Greek, the fact that Axumite kings chose Greek and not one of their other official languages for their monuments at Meroe suggests that they believed that it was the language most likely to be understood there. Unfortunately, this has to remain only a suggestion for the moment.

Be that as it may, the establishment of Axumite suzerainty over Kush marked the beginning of a profound transformation throughout Nubia. That transformation took almost three centuries and changed fundamentally the political and cultural life of Nubia. The first step in this transformation was the disappearance of the kingdom of Kush in the mid fourth century C.E., and with it the political order that had dominated the upper Nile valley for more than a millennium.

More than a century of conflict followed between two of Kush's former subjects, the Nobatai—the ancestors of the contemporary Nubian peoples—and the Blemmyes. By the end of the fifth century C.E. that struggle had ended with the victory of the Nobatai and the replacement of the Kushite empire with three Nobatai-dominated kingdoms: Nobatia in northern Nubia, Makuria in central Nubia, and Alwah in southern Nubia. By the end of the sixth century C.E. the three kingdoms had converted to Christianity—specifically, to the Monophysite form of Christianity followed by the Coptic Church to the present. Finally, after almost another century the Nubian kingdoms were faced with a new political reality: the establishment of Arab rule in Egypt and the eastern Mediterranean and isolation from what was left of the Roman Empire.

**Christian Nubia**

Taken together, these three developments mark the end of the ancient history of Nubia. As usual, our limited sources preclude a detailed narrative of these events, allowing only brief snapshots of scattered

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37 For comprehensive accounts of this period, see L. Török, *Late Antique Nubia: History and Archaeology of the Southern Neighbour of Egypt in the 4th–6th c. A.D.* (Budapest, 1987); and Sir Laurence Kirwan in *Studies on the History of Late Antique and Christian Nubia*, ed. L. Török, T. Hagg, and D. A. Welsby (Aldershot, 2002).
episodes such as the defeat of the Blemmyes by the Nobadian king Silko in the mid fifth century A.D., the evangelization of Nubia by missionaries sent by the Roman emperor Justinian and his wife Theodora in 541 A.D., and, most remarkable, the dramatic defeat of two Arab invasions of Nubia and the consequent conclusion of a unique treaty in 652 A.D.—the so-called baqt—that guaranteed the independence of the Nubian kingdoms—now reduced to two, Makuria and Alwa—for more than five hundred years. This was the only time in the Middle Ages that Muslims exempted a non-Muslim state from conquest.

Archaeology makes clear the scope and scale of the transformation. Throughout Nubia, from Philae in the north to Musawwarat-es-Sufra in the south, worship of the old gods of Egypt and Kush ceased and temples were reconsecrated as churches while new churches and monasteries were built. From a land of Egyptian-style temples Nubia became a land of churches—well over a hundred are known. Nor was the change limited to the public aspects of religion. Pagan symbols disappeared from Nubian pottery. The most dramatic change, however, was at the personal level in funerary religion, and it is visible archaeologically in cemeteries throughout Nubia.

For millennia the peoples of Nubia had provided the dead with elaborate tombs, rich funerary gifts, and ritual offerings. Suddenly, this all ended. In Christian Nubia the dead were buried in Spartan graves that, according to the archaeologist William Y. Adams, were “narrow vertical slot[s] in which the body” was “laid on its back . . . without any covering except perhaps for a crude ‘lean-to’ of bricks over the face” and “wrapped in a shroud” accompanied by only “a few small articles of personal jewelry.” It was as though a chasm had opened between the newly Christianized Nubian kingdoms and Nubia’s long established and deeply rooted pharaonic traditions. Few aspects of Kushite elite culture crossed that chasm. One of those privileged few was the Greek language. Indeed, the Middle Ages were to be the golden age of Greek culture—Christian Greek culture, to be sure—in Nubia.

There is no space here to rehearse the long history of the Nubian Christian kingdoms. Suffice to say that Arab geographers describe both Makuria and Alwah as strong and prosperous states with numerous cities and towns. Makuria— the sources primarily concern Makuria—not only maintained its independence until the fourteenth century C.E. but

38 Welsby, Medieval Kingdoms, pp. 68–73.
40 Adams, Nubia, p. 480.
was strong enough to intervene in Egyptian affairs, and on one occasion in the mid eighth century the Makurian king Kyriakos even forced the emir of Egypt to release the Coptic patriarch of Alexandria from prison.

The revelation of the place of Greek cultural elements in the lives of these kingdoms has been gradual and is still ongoing, but already it is clear that Greek was the official language of government and religion for most of their history. The distinguished church historian W. H. C. Friend summed up well the initial impression created by the wide use of Greek and the extensive influence of Christian Greek art in Medieval Nubia in the title of one of his articles: "Nubia as an Outpost of Byzantine Cultural Influence."41 So, for example, Christian Nubian political terminology is almost entirely borrowed from the late Roman Empire. Terms such as basileus, eparchos, exarchos, domestikos, meizoteris, and even Hellenized Latin terms such as rix/rex, primikerios, not to mention Augustus and Caesar, abound. One king of Makuria was even called the "New Constantine."42

At first glance, we seem to be looking at a Nubian version of the late Roman imperial government, but first impressions are often misleading, and that is the case here. The Nubian kingdoms were not bureaucratically organized centralized states like the Roman Empire, but segmentary states like Kush and other African states.43 They consisted, that is, of alliances of regional chiefdoms linked to a paramount ruler by personal ties, and that reality is reflected in the use of these terms with basileus, rix, and Augustus referring to paramount rulers, eparchos and exarchos to regional governors, and those such as domestikos to the paramount’s household. In other words, Roman terms were not mechanically copied but selectively borrowed and adapted to a new Nubian reality.

The glory of medieval Nubian civilization was its religious art.44 Only brief allusions in Arab accounts and a few fresco fragments were known prior to the discovery by a Polish expedition of the main cathedral of Faras, the principal city and one time capital of Nobatia, buried

to its roof in sand. Excavation revealed that the cathedral and its decoration were largely intact and, more remarkable, that the cathedral was an artistic palimpsest with multiple layers of frescoes preserved. Careful separation of the different layers has allowed the reconstruction of a detailed history of Nubian fresco painting from the construction of the cathedral in the eighth century C.E. through its peak in the twelfth century to its final abandonment in the fifteenth century. Themes include episodes from the Old and New Testaments, saints, and Nubian political and ecclesiastical figures. Technically, stylistically, and thematically, Nubian Christian art has clear connections to Byzantine art but with its own distinctive characteristics such as the inclusion of elements of portraiture in its depiction of contemporary figures.

Even more remarkable is the survival of the Greek language after the Arab conquest of Egypt. Arab geographers claimed that the Nubians possessed books in Greek and prayed in Greek, and their claims have been fully confirmed by the UNESCO archaeological salvage campaign. Hundreds of Greek inscriptions and graffiti were discovered as well as the tattered remains of the cathedral library at Qasr Ibrim, which was destroyed in an Egyptian raid in 1173 C.E. led by Shams ed-Dawla Turanshah, the brother of the famous Saladin. The most spectacular and revealing find, however, was the twelfth-century tomb of Archbishop Georgios from Old Dongola, the capital of Makuria. The texts on all walls of this vaulted underground tomb include religious formulae, magical signs, the beginnings and ends of all four gospels, the Greek text of an extra-biblical text known as the "Speech of Mary to Bartos," and Coptic homilies. Taken together with the manuscript remains and inscriptions, Archbishop Georgios’s tomb leaves no doubt that cathedral libraries at major centers such as Faras, Qasr Ibrim, and Old Dongola possessed a wide variety of religious texts including bibles, church canons, saints’ lives and homilies, hymnals, other liturgical texts, and even magical texts.

Greek was not confined to books, however, but was a living language, at least as far as the clergy and governing class was concerned.

So, numerous graffiti painted or scratched on the walls of pilgrimage churches—over 650 such graffiti, many written in the first person, have been counted on the walls of one such church—point to widespread functional Greek literacy in these two groups. For evidence of more than this minimal literacy, however, we have to turn to funerary stelae, the most common form of Greek inscription found in Nubia.

Hundreds of these stelae have been discovered from all over Nubia. They seem to be unique to Nubia and began to appear in the eighth century C.E. They contain versions of a Byzantine prayer for the dead that was probably introduced into Nubia at that time or a century earlier and were made for all sorts of people from kings and bishops to common men and women. That the Nubians were not simply mechanically copying empty formulae but understood these texts and their theology is clear from the freedom with which they modified the basic prayer to suit the individual being commemorated. Particularly interesting in this regard are two stelae from Nuri near the fourth cataract. They date from the late ninth or tenth century C.E. and contain abbreviated versions of the standard prayer. The first reads: “John, the servant of Christ, fell asleep by the order of God the Lord, the omnipotent One; in Pachon, 28th day. And now You, Good God, rest his soul in the bosom of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. . . .” The second reads: “By the inclination and will of God the creator of everything who has arranged disorder into order. Elisabeth died in the month of Choiak. (God) rest (her).”

What sets these two inscriptions apart from all other Nubian funerary inscriptions is the fact that both contain phrases translated from Coptic. So, in the first the vocative “You, Good God,” is modeled on Coptic grave stelae; and in the second, the usual description of God as “the omnipotent One,” pantokrator, has been replaced by pantotektor, “the all builder,” a unique word that is virtually unattested in either classical or medieval Greek but is, however, a perfect translation of the standard description of God in Coptic grave stelae, damiourgos m pterif, “creator of everything.” In other words, the provincial priest who wrote

49 The most important editions are Jadwiga Kubinska, FARAS IV: Inscriptions grecques chrétiennes (Warsaw, 1974); and Adam Lajtar, Catalogue of the Greek Inscriptions in the Sudan National Museum at Khartoum (I. Khartoum Greek) (Leuven, 2003).
these texts was probably trilingual, understanding Greek, Coptic, and, of course, Nubian. Ironically, the most important result of these clerics' linguistic virtuosity ultimately threatened the survival of Greek in Nubia.

The tenth-century c.e. Arab geographer al-Aswani observed that the Nubians possessed Greek books, which they translated into their own language.\(^{52}\) Contemporary Nubian is no longer a written language, but sometime in the eighth or ninth century the Greek alphabet, supplemented by signs borrowed from the Coptic alphabet and even one from the old Meroitic script, was adapted to write Old Nubian.\(^{53}\) A religious literature composed primarily of translated patristic texts gradually developed. Fewer than one hundred pages from Old Nubian books survive, but they confirm al-Aswani's claim that the Nubians translated Greek religious texts directly into Old Nubian.

At first, Old Nubian was used only for religious purposes, but by the twelfth century c.e. it was being used for legal and commercial texts, and Old Nubian vocabulary was making its way into Nubian Greek texts.\(^{54}\) History was repeating itself. Just as the invention of the Meroitic script marked the beginning of the end of the use of Egyptian in Hellenistic and Roman Kush, so the invention of the Old Nubian script was inexorably leading to the marginalization of Greek in Medieval Nubia. That process had not yet been completed, however, when Nubian Christian civilization came to an end in the late fourteenth or fifteenth century A.D.

The end was gradual and the process complex. The replacement of the Fatimid rulers of Egypt with the more aggressive Ayyubids and Mamluks, increasing Muslim settlement in Nubia and intermarriage with the local population, and endemic dynastic strife in Makuria all played a part. In any event, by the early fourteenth century c.e. the kings of Makuria had converted to Islam, and the kingdom itself disappeared soon afterward. Alwah in the south and a fragment of Makuria called the kingdom of Dottawo with its capital at Qasr Ibrim, however, survived probably for another century. Even more remarkably, so did Nubian Greek.

One of the most important discoveries of the UNESCO salvage campaign was the tomb of probably the last archbishop of Qasr Ibrim,

\(^{52}\) Al-Aswani's account is lost, but fragments are preserved by later writers including most notably the fourteenth-century geographer Maqriti (Vantini, Oriental Sources, p. 614).


a Nubian named Timotheus. He had been consecrated by the patriarch of Alexandria in 1372 C.E. and sent to Nubia. When he died, he had buried with him his consecration documents. These were in Coptic and Arabic. The Coptic text, however, was preceded by the patriarch's greeting to Timotheus's Nubian congregation, which was composed in halting Greek and followed by a postscript in equally unsteady Greek written by an Egyptian bishop explaining that he had witnessed Timotheus's consecration.\textsuperscript{55} Greek clearly remained the official language of Nubian Christianity right to the end of its long and remarkable history.

Conclusion

The long and varied history of the role of Greek and Greek culture in ancient and medieval Nubia is a remarkable but still only partially known story. The first part of the story—the Nubian experience with Greek in the Hellenistic and Roman periods—has many parallels in other cultures on the periphery of the Greco-Roman world, where Greek also was used primarily for pragmatic purposes in dealing with the Roman Empire and its Hellenistic predecessors and Mediterranean luxury imports were prized as markers of elite prestige and privilege.\textsuperscript{56} Even the incorporation of Greek iconography and architectural forms into native religious art and architecture has parallels elsewhere, both nearby in the kingdom of Axum\textsuperscript{57} in northeastern Ethiopia and Eritrea and as far away as central Asia.\textsuperscript{58} In these and other such cultures, however, the use of Greek remained essentially pragmatic, so that it and the Greek cultural forms associated with it disappeared when contact with the Roman Empire was lost.

\textsuperscript{56} The only general survey, Sir Mortimer Wheeler, Rome beyond the Imperial Frontiers (Harmondsworth, 1954), is badly out of date. For non-Greek reactions to Greek art see John Boardman, The Diffusion of Classical Art in Antiquity (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994).
Nubia's eastern neighbor, Axum, provides a good example of the usual pattern. Imports from the eastern Mediterranean are well attested in the archaeology of Axum, Greek is found on royal inscriptions and coin legends, and references to the use of Greek are found in sources dealing with diplomacy and commerce with the Roman Empire from the first century C.E. to the end of antiquity. Greek quickly fell out of use, however, after the Arab conquests severed ties between Axum and Rome, being replaced by Ge’ez for literature and Arabic for communication with neighboring Islamic countries. The situation was different in Nubia.

Centuries of Roman rule had made Greek an integral part of public life in northern Nubia, the cradle of medieval Nubian civilization. Because of the ongoing influence of Rome in the region and the absence of a significant competitor, Greek continued to fulfill its pragmatic function, providing the Nobatai and Blemmye successor states of ancient Kush throughout late antiquity with a written language that could be used for internal administration and diplomatic relations with Roman Egypt in particular and the Roman Empire in general, and also, as a papyrus letter discovered at Qasr Ibrim and written in startlingly ungrammatical but still intelligible Greek has revealed, with each other. More important, thanks to the initiative of the Roman empress Theodora, Greek was the language in which Monophysite Christianity was brought to Nubia, allowing its close identification with Monophysite Christianity in a way that was found neither in Egypt nor elsewhere in western Asia. As a result, Greek did not merely survive in medieval Nubia, but it thrived, becoming so central to Nubian Christian culture that it is not surprising that in 1204 C.E. a Nubian “king” and his ten companions—he had started with sixty—should have begun a pilgrimage to Rome and the shrine of St. James of Compostella in Spain with Constantinople, the center of Greek-speaking Christendom. Already, however, the increasing use of Old Nubian in secular and religious texts foreshadowed the eventual decline and disappearance of Greek from Nubia, but the conversion of the Nubian kingdoms to Islam and the attendant spread of Arabic aborted that process and brought the long history of Greek in Nubia to a premature end.

59 FHN 319.