minority of Ezana, son of Ella Amida. This power enabled Frumentius to strengthen the position of Christianity. After a visit to Alexandria, he returned to Aksum with the title of bishop, and was successful in spreading his religion widely and in winning the king for the new faith.

The inscriptions from the reign of Ezana make it clear that he adopted Christianity during the course of his reign, since earlier ones show him as a worshipper of the traditional gods, of whom Ares, presumably an indigenous deity identified with the Greek god, is perhaps the main one. Later inscriptions, including the famous one describing the campaign on the Nile, while dropping the names of pagan gods, are not unambiguously Christian. However coins of this king's reign carry the cross, and there can be little doubt that Christianity had become the court religion by about AD 350, and it is from this time that there began the close connection between Christianity and what was to become the Ethiopian nation.

The inscriptions of Ezana, both in Greek and Ge'ez, the indigenous language and the forerunner of Amharic and Tigrinya, the main Semitic tongues of modern Ethiopia, are the main sources for knowledge of contact between Aksum and Meroe. The few Aksumite objects from Meroe have been mentioned; Meroitic objects in Ethiopia are equally few. Two bronze bowls, certainly of Meroitic manufacture, have been found at Addi-Gelemo in the eastern part of Tigre, and two faience figures, one of the Egyptian god Bes and one of a human figure with a sun disk, were found at Haoulti in a level dated to the fifth or sixth century BC. This is very scanty evidence on which to base any suggestion of contact between the two cultures, but it seems unlikely that these well-developed states could have remained in close proximity for several centuries without such contact.

It has usually been assumed that there was a decline in the power and wealth of Meroe after the first century AD. Pyramids certainly became smaller and funeral furniture poorer, and though this may reflect changed attitudes rather than poverty, it is noteworthy that no monumental buildings later than the reign of Netekamani can be identified. On the other hand the fine painted pottery, which suggests prosperity and some sophistication, belongs to this period. At Meroe town, buildings are not noticeably poorer except in the very topmost level,
where roughly made walls patched together with reused material have been found. No date can yet be given to this latest building, other than that it appears to be considerably later than the coin of Ezana whose discovery has already been referred to. If there were an absolute impoverishment of the Meroitic kingdom, an important part may have been played by declining Meroitic participation in the Red Sea trade. The use of the port of Adulis during the early centuries AD may have drawn trade away from further north and have helped to enrich Aksum at the expense of Meroe.

Although it is clear enough that the royal line, at least as revealed by their burials, came to an end at some time in the fourth century AD, perhaps as a result of Aksumite pressure, information on the date of the end of Meroitic culture as a whole and the reasons for it is much more difficult to determine, and the archaeological evidence difficult to interpret. In the far north, close to Egypt, cultural changes after the fourth century AD can be identified, and a sequence running through to at least the fourteenth century AD can be discerned. At Meroe itself, and in the surrounding country, this cannot be done: with the end of a distinctive Meroitic culture, whenever that may have been, there is a gap in the archaeological record until virtually modern times.

A large number of mound graves of about the fourth and fifth centuries AD are known on both sides of the Nile, stretching from south of the confluence of the Blue and White Niles to at least as far north as the junction with the river Atbara and across the Bayuda desert to Tanqasi, where a cemetery of such mounds has been excavated. These mounds represent a change in burial custom, and from those that have been excavated, at Meroe, Ushara and Tanqasi, material of a new and distinctive type has been recovered. Most of it is pottery, in the main large vessels of the shape usually described as 'beer pots'. These vessels, which have a large bulbous body and a long narrow neck, were not made on the wheel, as was most Meroitic pottery, and they are frequently characterized by markings on the lower part of the body conveying the impress of the mat on which the pot was rolled. They are sufficiently distinctive to be easily identified and, though common in the cemeteries, do not appear in the ruins of the town, although it is possible that some of the featureless hand-made sherds found there come from vessels of this type.

The dating of these graves is far from certain and nothing can be said of their earliest occurrence, though it is unlikely to be before c. AD 300. The very large number may suggest that they were in use for a con-
considerable period of time. The only objects from the graves which are
datable are foreign imports, but in fact there are only two such pieces,
which, as it happens, cannot be dated with any precision. These are,
from grave 300 at Meroe, a glass vessel of Alexandrian type which dates
between AD 200 and AD 400, and, from grave 361 at the same site, an
amphora which should date to the fifth or sixth century AD. All that
can be said, then, is that it would not be unreasonable to assume that the
new burial custom which these mounds illustrate was introduced at
some time not too distant from Ezana’s campaign and the supposed
end of Meroe.

In view of Ezana’s reference to the Noba as being the people in
occupation of the Island of Meroe, it is tempting to see in them the
introducers of mound burial as well as of a new pottery type. But
whether this is to be interpreted as the influx of a new people, or of the
resurgence of social groups whose culture had been swamped by that
of the Meroitic aristocracy, is impossible to determine. Some aspects of
the burials, such as the laying of the bodies on beds, hark back to much
earlier practices along the Sudanese Nile. Evidence for the end of
Meroitic culture in this area is far from clear; there is no gradual change
of the material remains under outside influences as in the north, and
such information as there is points to a rather sudden collapse. Whether
this was due to attacks by enemy peoples such as the Noba, or to internal
decay, or to a combination of the two, cannot at present be known.

A further problem, which may be related to the question of the end
of Meroe, is that of a change in the language of the country. Meroitic
was the written language of the whole stretch of river over which the
Meroitic kings ruled from at least as early as 200 BC until the fourth
century AD. After that there is a span of over 300 years from which there
is no written material in an indigenous language. When writing once
more appears, it is in Old Nubian and written with a modified Greek
alphabet.

There are two ways of explaining this situation, firstly that Meroitic
was the spoken as well as the written language throughout Meroitic
territory, and that it was supplanted by Nubian in about the fifth
century; this has until recently been the standard view of the linguistic
history. An alternative possibility is that Meroitic, whilst being the
written and official language, was only used colloquially in the Island of
Meroe, the part of the country where power resided, and that Nubian
was already present in the Nile Valley and was being spoken along the
northern stretch of the river between the First and Fourth Cataracts.
The occurrence of such written materials as ostraca and funerary monuments in Meroitic in this area does not necessarily disprove the hypothesis, since a similar situation exists today in those parts where Nubian is still spoken but Arabic always used for written purposes.

If Nubian came to the Nile Valley only in the fifth century, the question of its original home is of some importance, and the present distribution of Nubian languages may provide a clue. At the present day Nubian is spoken – or was until the disruption caused by resettlement as a result of the building of the new Aswan dam and the resultant flooding of much of Nubia – along the Nile from a little north of Aswan to Debbâ, and there is good evidence from place names for its further extension upriver, perhaps to the neighbourhood of Khartoum, in medieval times. Related languages are spoken in the Nuba hills to the south-west, where a group of dialects usually known as ‘Hill Nubian’ are spoken by a people very different physically and culturally from the speakers of ‘River Nubian’. A little north of this group, at Jebel Haraza, evidence for a closely related language has recently come to light, and, in northern Darfur, Meidob and Birged are also related.

This distribution suggests that in the past there may have been a wide area of the northern Sudan over which Nubian was spoken, and that it was one of the main language groups of the ancient Sudan. The modern distribution of related languages suggests that the original home of the ancestral language lay to the west, and that it spread from there to the Nile Valley. It is therefore tempting to identify the people buried in the mound graves at Meroe and elsewhere in the area with the Noba of Ezâna and with the bringers of Nubian language to the Nile. The name Noba, and the subsequent use of this or a very similar name by medieval Arab writers for the inhabitants of the northern Sudan, from which the modern use of the word Nubian is derived, is unlikely to be coincidence.

While these obscure events concerned with the collapse of the Meroitic state were going on in the Island of Meroë, a somewhat different situation can be seen in the north, and it is not easy to see if any correlations existed between historical developments in the two areas.

As already suggested, the northern regions of the Meroitic state enjoyed a period of reasonable prosperity in the first few centuries of the Christian era, and, far from Aksum, did not suffer either from trade rivalry nor from military attack from that region, although raids by the Blemmyes, presumed to be the ancestors of the Beja of the Red Sea hills, are recorded from as early as the middle of the third century AD. Although the effect of the Blemmye raids is not discernible in the
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archaeological material, they were a cause of considerable anxiety to the Roman rulers of Egypt, and the aid they gave to the Egyptian rebel Firmus at the time of the Palmyrene invasion of AD 272, together with other raids, must have contributed to Diocletian’s decision in AD 297 to withdraw Roman garrisons, to abandon Lower Nubia, and to establish the southern frontier of the Roman Empire at the First Cataract (cf. chapter 2, pp. 206-9).

This withdrawal of Roman troops from the Dodecaschoenus did not have any immediate effect on the Meroitic settlements. These lay somewhat further south and they certainly flourished through much of the fourth century until the appearance of new elements at the very end of that century or early in the next. This new culture element in the area is that commonly known until recently as the X-Group, a term coined by Reisner when carrying out the first archaeological survey of Nubia, which began in 1907 as a consequence of the building of the first Aswan dam. Faced with the discovery of a great deal of new archaeological material whose identity could not be accommodated by the traditional divisions of Ancient Egyptian history, Reisner gave designations by letters of the alphabet, thus giving rise to the well-known archaeological entities, the A-Group and the C-Group. Finding material of much later date, he used the term X-Group to identify an immediately post-Meroitic culture. The increase of knowledge in recent years has made the need for this anonymous type of terminology superfluous, and here the term ‘Ballana’ culture, as proposed by Trigger, will be used. It has the advantage that it follows normal archaeological tradition by naming the culture after the most spectacular of the sites where it has been found.

This new element in the history of Lower Nubia, which lasted at most from c. AD 400 to 600, is attested by the finding of archaeological material which, though showing resemblances, also has some marked differences from that of late Meroitic times. This Ballana culture, which is sufficiently distinctive to be readily identified, is known from cemeteries and villages stretching from the First Cataract to Sesibi, a short way north of the Third Cataract. It has not yet been found further south. There is no sudden break with Meroitic tradition, but the pottery, the best-known material because of its vast quantity, shows new shapes, in the main derived from the north, and a considerable simplification in painted design. No monumental buildings are known, except perhaps at Faras, where the rulers of the time may have had their residence, and the

1 B. G. Trigger, History and settlement in Lower Nubia (New Haven, 1965), 132.
evidence on the whole suggests that village life was somewhat poorer than in Meroitic times. But the spectacular remains of the period found in the large burial-mounds of Ballana and Qostol, with their rich funeral furnishings, show that this was a period of wealth and power, at least for the rulers. These burials, surely of powerful chiefs, contain a surprising number of luxury objects imported from the eastern Mediterranean, including silver vessels and jewellery, a wide range of bronze objects, and wooden boxes inlaid with ivory, as well as a range of locally made weapons and other war-like equipment. These were powerful and rich princes, and many scholars have assumed that there must have been an incursion of a new people into the river valley at this time.

Since two exotic groups are known from classical writers to have been in the area at the appropriate time, the Nobatae and the Blemmyes, there has been much argument as to which of these two peoples was responsible for the changes, and which of them is represented not only in the rich burials of Ballana and in the rather less elaborate ones at Qasr Ibrim, Gemai and Firka (perhaps the burial places of local chiefly families), but also in the large number of commoners' graves throughout Lower Nubia. The Blemmyes seem to have been firmly identified as ancestors of the Beja; the origin of the Nobatae is less clear. Procopius, writing in the sixth century AD, says that they came from the western oases, and were invited by Diocletian to fill the gap left by his withdrawal of the Roman garrison and to act as a buffer between the Blemmyes and the frontier of Egypt.

The great deal of extra information from skeletal analysis now available makes it certain that there was no large-scale movement by a people of different physical type. Whether the same is true of their rulers it is not possible to say, since the skeletal remains were not well preserved nor studied in detail. Today the majority view is that there was no massive immigration, and not only the skeletons but also cultural material argue strongly in favour of such a view. It is possible that small, well-armed horse and camel-riding military groups from outside established leadership over the indigenous population. If this were so, then these are presumably the Nobatae, and Procopius's story could well imply that this was the nature of the Nobataean immigration.

1 O. V. Nielson, Human remains, Scandinavian Joint Expedition to Sudanese Nubia, 9 (Stockholm, 1970), and D. L. Greene and G. Armelagos, The Wadi Halfa Mesolithic population, Research Report No. 11, Department of Anthropology, University of Massachusetts (Amherst, 1972), are the two main reports so far published. A number of preliminary reports have appeared.
The name and its close resemblance to the name Noba may suggest that they were speakers of ‘river Nubian’, and the later medieval kingdom of Nobatia continued to use the name. There is the striking apparent coincidence of similarity with the name of the old royal and religious centre Napata, and it could also be reasonably argued that the Nubian speakers, and hence the Nobatae, were the indigenous Nubian riverain population who had been subjected to Meroitic rule and acquired the characteristic Meroitic culture. Even if the Nubian language had already been spoken along the Nile for a long period, it does not mean that the warriors of the Ballana tombs were not a new people from elsewhere. If, as is suggested above, they were a small military group, perhaps brought in as an unofficial garrison, they may have come without women, and would have taken wives from the local population; in that case, as many other examples from Africa show, their children would have adopted the local language.

With the disappearance of Meroitic as a written language towards the end of the fourth century AD, we are left with no written documents in an indigenous language, though Roman writers continue to tell of Nobatae and Blemmyes. Such writing as there was appears to have been in Greek, and letters by Blemmye chiefs in that language which have been found in Egypt attest to deep penetration into Upper Egypt. They were presumably written for illiterate masters by Egyptian secretaries with some knowledge of Greek. The scanty written evidence suggests conflicts between Nobatae and Blemmyes continuing into the sixth century, when the Greek inscription on the temple at Kalabsha of Silko, who calls himself ‘kinglet’ (basiliskos) of the Nobatae, describes a major defeat of the Blemmyes. It has been suggested that Silko, whose inscription says ‘God gave me the victory’, was a Christian, but the representation of him that accompanies the inscription shows him riding a horse and wearing a crown with the emblems of various Egyptian gods. The use of the word ‘god’ is no greater evidence of Silko’s attachment to Christianity, completely belied by the details of his dress, than are the lamps and pots bearing Christian emblems from the chiefs’ graves at Ballana and Qostol. But this is the last stage of the long story of the kingdom of Kush from its beginnings before 700 BC to the last pagan kings still retaining some elements of Kushite culture into the sixth century AD. The culture of Nubia was about to change again under the impact of Eastern Christianity, which, coming from Egypt, was to influence it for the next 800 years.