Fig. 1.1
Map showing all sites referred to in the text.
Chapter One
Understanding Ancient Nubia

Approaches to Nubia

The questions asked in the introduction give this book its basic structure. For ancient Nubia, from 3000 B.C. to A.D. 350, there is much information. The archaeological record is rich, if incomplete. Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans wrote about the Nubians and depicted them in art. The Nubians left us their own written records, some in Egyptian, most in Meroitic—the written, as yet largely untranslatable language of Nubia from 180 B.C. to A.D. 400. From the evidence we can evoke something of Nubia’s human reality, but will do so within the framework of two major and debatable issues.

Most scholars today argue that Bronze Age Nubians were organized into relatively small, simply structured chiefdoms, except for a comparatively short-lived state centered at Kerma. However, I propose instead that for most of the Bronze Age Nubian political systems were strongly centralized, covered large territories, and were akin to states and kingdoms rather than chiefdoms. For later times, some scholars suggest that the Napatan and especially Meroitic kingdoms were large but very loosely organized states. Other scholars (with whom I agree) argue that these kingdoms were relatively highly centralized, and cohesive and stable.

My predilections aside, I will always indicate where scholarly opinion about important topics differs. In fact, it is this continuing debate about Nubian history and culture that brings our inert sources to life.

Our impressions about ancient Nubia have to some extent been overshadowed and distorted by the impressive, better-known history and
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culture of Egypt. If Nubia is seen as dwarfed by "that great colossus on the north," Nubia does indeed look peripheral. From this perspective, tribal Bronze Age Nubia can be imagined as heavily pressured and even manipulated by powerful Egypt. Later—in this same perspective—the independent Napatan and Meroitic kingdoms appear to derive their culture from Egypt, becoming merely barbarian variations of a superior model.

This perspective on Nubia is flawed. It exaggerates the political and social stability of Bronze Age Egypt and underestimates that of contemporary Nubia. Instead, we should see two major powers competing for resources and lands of the Lower Nile. Later, Meroitic Nubia and Ptolemaic, later Roman, Egypt are stalemates so far as territorial expansion is concerned. But the Meroitic kingdom may have been highly centralized rather than loosely "feudal" in structure, and its culture a subtle blend of Nubian and Egyptian elements rather than an awkward mixture of the two.

This book, then, presents a more positive or dynamic version of Nubian history and culture than some other studies. Nevertheless, Nubian culture was not "ideal," and superior to others, although some Greek and Roman writers said it was (others disliked the Nubians). The Nubians, it was said, were "the first of all men and the first to honor the gods whose favor they enjoyed." Some even suggested that the Egyptians were originally emigrants from Nubia and Egyptian culture Nubian in origin. Because some Greeks also thought that their own science, art, and religion derived largely from Egypt, one could argue that Greek, and ultimately Western, civilization had Nubian as well as Egyptian roots.

These ancient ideas have influenced modern studies such as Martin Bernal's *Black Athena,* but they are not historically well founded. Such theories were invented in antiquity to explain the origins of the Greek and Egyptian civilizations, which otherwise seemed mysterious. Moreover, by praising the supposed nobility of the Nubians, Greek and Roman writers were able, by comparison, to criticize aspects of their own cultures that they found distasteful. A similar phenomenon occurred in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe. To point out deficiencies in their own society, critics invented type figures of supposedly superior qualities—"Wise Egyptians," "Good Savages," and "Chinese Sages"—with little reference to the realities of the three cultures involved.

In fact, no people enjoyed a "Golden Age;" human history is full of light and shadow, good and bad. Ancient Athens is admired as an early democracy, but most of its population (women, foreigners, and slaves) were excluded from voting. Egyptian art, religion, and social organization are striking, but conditions were often oppressive for most of the Egyptians. Like Greece and Egypt, Nubia reveals both achievement and failure; but, like them, its civilization was a major one and its history fascinating in its diversity.

People, Places, and Things

We get our knowledge of ancient Nubia from three sources—its peoples, places, and things.
The peoples and places are those named in texts about ancient Nubia, in ancient Egyptian, Meroitic, Greek, Latin, and other languages. Often, the people or place involved is obscure to us. Are the people named the entire Nubian nation or those of a subregion, or even a small village? Is the place all Nubia, part of it, or a single site? And which people are to be located in which place?

These questions can puzzle scholars, but a few names at least are reasonably clear in meaning. The Bronze Age Egyptians called the Nubians "Nehasyu," a word including nomads as well as riverine Nubians, and even the Punites, far away on the Red Sea coast. However, the nomads east of Lower and Upper Nubia were also called the "Medjayu." Ta-Nehasyu then meant simply "Land (ta) of the Nubians," and was used as such into the Roman period.

After 1550 B.C. Egyptians also often called Nubia "Kush," a name originally applied only to some or all of Upper Nubia. During the first millennium B.C., however, Kush was the preferred name for all Nubia in Egyptian, Assyrian, Persian, and Hebrew.

The Greeks and Romans gave Nubia yet another name, Aethiopia or Ethiopia. Ethiopia was applied to other parts of Africa as well. Eventually, Ethiopia became identified with the land of Abyssinia, which had only slight historical connections with nearby Nubia.

The third source of information, the things of the Nubians, are those that make up the fabric of their archaeology—cult-places, houses, graves, artwork, and artifacts. In each phase of Nubia's history these things display a distinctive typology, characteristic of that phase and no other; they are said to form the archaeological assemblage typical of that phase. In fact, even within the same period of time, the assemblages of different regions can be markedly different from one another. For example, in the Bronze Age, and in Meroitic times, the archaeology of Lower Nubia was usually different from that of Upper Nubia.

The archaeological picture of Nubia as a whole is very incomplete. We know this because we can reasonably predict where in Nubia and its hinterlands people would have lived in the past; yet often we know little or nothing about the archaeology of the regions involved.

Thus, we can reasonably guess that in the Bronze Age and later there was a more or less continuous ribbon of agricultural villages along the Nubian Nile (and the downstream end of its tributary, the Atbara). The ribbon was broken only twice, by stretches of the valley between Lower and Upper Nubia, and Upper and Southern Nubia. Along these stretches the environment was very harsh, and settlement sparse or absent.

East and west of Southern Nubia nomadic pastoralists covered large areas on a seasonal basis. A significant number may have been riverine peoples taking herds out into the semi-desert; others were nomads coming up from the south, to which they returned as the grass withered every year. The delta of the river Gash, east of the Atbara, is "anomalous, with the silts providing good grazing as well as good agriculture following the annual flood." The nomadic belt once stretched farther north, when the climate was marginally better, and
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included part of Upper Nubia; but after 1300 B.C. only Southern Nubia lay within it.

Another important nomadic population, known as the “Medjayu,” was based on the Red Sea coast; every year they followed the rains back into the Red Sea hills and onto the plains east of Upper and Lower Nubia.

Throughout the regions listed above we would expect to find archaeological remains, except when historical circumstances (rather than environmental change) led to depopulation for a time. For example, Lower Nubia was largely empty of settlement from about 2900 to 2350 B.C., and 1000 to 300 B.C. However, if we look at the columns in Figure 1.2 that represent the various parts of Nubia and its hinterlands likely to be occupied by settled peoples or nomads in ancient times, we see that they often are shaded, so as to show that their archaeology is unknown. It is true that the archaeology of nomads is more elusive than that of settled peoples, but the basic reason for the archaeological gaps is that the regions in question have not been subject to comprehensive archaeological surveys.

Lower Nubia has received such surveys and hence is exceptionally well documented archaeologically. Elsewhere, individual sites have been excavated and limited survey undertaken in some regions (others are almost completely unexplored). But only large-scale archaeological surveys can reveal the full range and extent of ancient sites within a region. This is particularly true for Bronze Age and Napatan sites, which are rarely discovered in any other way. Sites of these two periods along the valleys suffer from erosion, burial under silt and intrusive sand dunes, and overbuilding by later sites, namely, the many Meroitic, post-Meroitic, and medieval towns and villages that have already been located by archaeologists throughout Upper and Southern Nubia. Numerous ancient cemeteries also flank Upper and Southern Nubia, representing literally hundreds of thousands of graves. Many are Meroitic or later, some probably Bronze Age; few have been systematically excavated.

On the semi-desert and desert plains, settlements were probably small, and cemeteries not very conspicuous, because the ancient inhabitants were typically nomads, often on the move. However, careful surveys could recover many such sites, as recent work in the southern Atbai has demonstrated.

The Nubian archaeological picture is, then, tantalizing and frustrating, yet also full of potential and excitement. In terms of Nubian history, future discoveries will lead to great increases in basic knowledge and understanding, which is no longer the case in better-explored Egypt.

Discovering the Nubians

Excavating sites and deciphering texts provide evidence that must then be interpreted if we wish to discover the living reality of Nubian society, but in so doing scholars can reach very different conclusions. One area of debate, already mentioned, is the political status of Nubians—were they organized into chiefdoms or states? The issue is difficult. Small, simply structured chiefdoms are clearly not states, but large complex chiefdoms and early states have much in common.
A chiefdom and a state both have a single, paramount ruler. However, a chiefdom’s population does not exceed about one hundred thousand people, but a state’s is in the hundreds of thousands, or millions. Moreover, the governmental systems are very different. A paramount chief rules through subchiefs, whose functions replicate, on a smaller scale, those of the chief. And in a chiefdom kin-relations are all-important; people are appointed to government and allotted income and status because they belong to important families or lineages, with claims on offices and resources. But a state ruler heads a centralized government, serviced by regional ones that are narrower in function; and officials are appointed, salaried, and rewarded not so much for reasons of kin, but because they are efficient and loyal.

We shall return to Nubian political systems later. Generally, it is difficult to evaluate the political, economic, and cultural status of any community on the basis of archaeology alone, all the more so when “Western” ethnocentric bias effects our decisions. We tend to overvalue developed societies with material cultures similar in important ways to our own, and undervalue others with material cultures more alien to us.

Thus, ancient Egypt, with its monumentally scaled, stone-built, and rectilinear pyramids and temples (akin to our own monumental architecture) seems to us “superior”; yet other complex societies found different, less familiar modes of expression. The “Great Enclosure” at Zimbabwe in Southeast Africa, for example, was built by local peoples between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries A.D. Massive, stone-built, and monumental, it compares well at 6300 square meters with the Egyptian temple of Amun at Karnak (about 8400 square meters) in the earlier 18th Dynasty. But at Zimbabwe oval and circular forms are preferred, and the interior has a convoluted complexity very different from the axial regularity of the Egyptian temple plan.

In Nubia, the material culture of Napatan and Meroitic times integrated much from Egyptian art and architecture; we instinctively see it as valuable and civilized. Earlier, Bronze Age Nubians preferred much less grandiose modes of expression in material culture, but this does not mean their social organization was simpler and more primitive than that of the Egyptians, as examples from other African cultures show.

For example, the great Zimbabwe monuments—products of a well-organized society—were actually part of the capital of a state or a very large complex chiefdom; but the large town (about 100 hectares, or almost 1 square mile) surrounding them consisted of clay huts with thatched roofs. Later, nineteenth-century Buganda was also a highly organized state, with a well-laid out capital city several miles in extent. Yet its palaces and houses were all built of grass and wood.

Archaeology can be supplemented by written records reflecting a society’s degree of complexity, but Bronze Age Nubians were not literate. This does not imply cultural immaturity, for many complex chiefdoms and even states have functioned well with little or no literacy. The Inca state in Peru, for example, used a system of knotted string (quipu) for its records.
Egyptian texts refer often to Bronze Age Nubia, but they say little about Nubian society or politics. Most surviving texts are from temples, and present pharaoh as a conquering hero for the benefit of the gods; Nubians, like all foreigners, are rendered simplistically as emblems of the cosmic chaos the gods empower pharaoh to overcome.

To some extent we can "read between the lines" of such texts to learn more about Nubian society, but even here scholarly biases creep in. For example, Egyptians called both Near Eastern and Nubian rulers heka or wer. Scholars translate these words as "ruler" or "king" for the Near Eastern rulers, but as "chief" for the Nubian, although nothing in the Egyptian texts warrants the differentiation.

As for Egyptian art, it contrasts half-naked Nubians and their simply built villages with robed Near Easterners living in fortified, mud-brick towns. This contrast, however, reflects long-established conventions, not reality. For example, Middle Bronze Nubians at Kerma with a highly developed culture lived in a large, fortified mud-brick town at that site, and perhaps did so elsewhere as well.

After the Bronze Age, written sources are more revealing. The Napatan rulers made use of Egyptian and its writing system, although the surviving texts focus on religion and royal victories, not Nubian society as a whole. Later, the Meroites invented an alphabet for their own language, but the many surviving texts—rich in social as well as historical information—remain largely untranslatable, although some valuable insights have been recovered.

An Introductory Outline

Despite the large archaeological gaps noted above, a partial outline of Nubian archaeology and history can be sketched, as an introduction to the more detailed chapters that follow.

Before the Bronze Age the Nubian archaeological map looked very different from its later phases. The climate was more favorable, and vast areas that later became desert supported many hunting and gathering people. From 9000 to 4500 B.C. the archaeology typical of the phase is labeled Khartoum Mesolithic. Later, from 4500 to 3500 B.C. the climate deteriorated, and for much of Nubia human activity was restricted to the river valleys. Archaeological characteristics differ from one region to another, but the basic economy was neolithic, involving "in some cases ... cultivation of domestic plants, and herding of domesticated animals."6

Toward Bronze Age times the archaeological picture becomes more sharply differentiated. After 3500 B.C. Lower Nubia was occupied by sedentary agriculturalists with a distinctive material culture, labeled A-Group. They were brought to an end by Egyptian aggression in about 2900 B.C., and Lower Nubia remained empty of Nubians for almost 600 years.

Contemporary with the A-Group is the as yet poorly known Pre-Kerma culture of Upper Nubia. Farther south, the Berber-Shendi Reach (Southern Nubia), well settled in Neolithic times, is an archaeological blank for 2000 years. Some suggest that it was empty of settlement, but possibly its Bronze Age archaeology remains to be discovered.
Fig. 1.2
The principal regions of Nubia and contiguous areas, illustrating the variable degree of archaeological coverage we have for each. Hatched columns or segments represent areas that are archaeologically unknown, mainly because the necessary intensive surveys and fieldwork have not yet been carried out.
Throughout the Bronze Age nomadic herders lived east and west of Southern and even Upper Nubia. Their archaeology is almost unknown, except at Shaqadud, and in the southern Atbai and the delta of the Gash and Baraka rivers. By 3000 B.C. a fairly uniform material culture, the Gash Group, existed in the last three regions, and lasted until 1500 B.C.

The Upper Nubian Pre-Kerma assemblage developed into the Kerma Group, typical of the region from 2400 to 1500 B.C., or even later. Lower Nubia was resettled by Nubians in about 2400 B.C.; its archaeological assemblage until 1700/1500 B.C. is labeled C-Group.

Egyptians were active in Nubia. They controlled empty Lower Nubia, and raided Upper Nubia, through the 4th to 6th Dynasties. Then, after a period of withdrawal, Egypt conquered Lower Nubia in about 2000 B.C., although Upper Nubia remained independent, developing into a powerful Nubian kingdom. This “kingdom of Kush” gained control of Lower Nubia in about 1680/1640 B.C.

Contemporaneously (2400–1500 B.C.) the Gash Group underwent important developments: many of its settlements were permanent, and one (Mahal Teglinos) had a town and cemetery occupying 17 hectares (about 42 acres). Some suggest that the Gash-Baraka region was included in Punt, a coastal land visited by Egyptian trading expeditions, but this is doubtful.

Egypt began a new drive for empire after 1550 B.C., and ultimately controlled Lower and Upper Nubia until about 1000 B.C. The population continued to be mainly Nubian; and the Egyptians both traded and fought with the independent people of Southern Nubia as well.

Thereafter Egypt weakened internally and abandoned Nubia, while Nubia rapidly grew strong and expansive. After 900 B.C. rulers arose in Upper Nubia who conquered Egypt and ruled it and Nubia as the 25th Dynasty for almost a century, creating perhaps the largest state ever to develop along the Nile. Egypt was lost after 650 B.C., but Nubia continued as a wealthy, independent kingdom, centered first at Napata, then (fourth century B.C.–A.D. 350) at Meroe, farther south.

The Meroitic kingdom eventually disintegrated. Lower Nubia became divided into the two kingdoms of the Blemmyes and the Nobatai, while in Upper (and Southern?) Nubia Meroitic culture was transformed into the Tanqasi culture. By the end of the sixth century A.D. Nubia had become divided into three kingdoms—Nobatia, Makouria, and Alwa—which converted to Christianity, opening yet a further and fascinating chapter in the diverse history of the Nubians.