The empire of Kush: Napata and Meroe

The ancient kingdom of Aksum, which had grown up on the high table-lands of present-day Ethiopia, had rapidly attained the summit of its power; Ezana, the first monarch to embrace Christianity, reached the confluence of the Atbara and boasts of having mounted an expedition yielding much booty against the Nubas. From this we may conclude that the Meroitic kingdom had already collapsed at the time of Ezana’s campaign. From then onwards inscriptions in Meroitic ceased and it may be that this was when Meroitic language gave place to the tongue ancestral to present-day Nubian. Even the pottery, while remaining faithful to its millenarian tradition, acquires new characteristics.

Some authorities have theorized that the Kushite royal family fled westward and settled at Darfur where there would seem to be traces of the survival of Meroitic traditions. In any event, explorations in these regions and in the southern Sudan should afford us a better understanding of how Egyptian influences were transmitted towards inner Africa through the intermediary of Meroe. The glory of Kush is quite surely reflected in certain legends of Central and West Africa. The São have legends of the bringing of knowledge by men from the east. Knowledge of techniques spread; certain peoples cast bronze by the ‘cire perdue’ method, as in the Kushite kingdom; but above all, and of vital importance, it would seem to be thanks to Meroe that the working of iron spread over the African continent.

Whatever the importance of this penetration of Meroitic influences through the rest of Africa, the role of Kush should never be underestimated: for over a thousand years, first at Napata and then at Meroe, there flourished a strongly original civilization which, beneath an Egyptian-style veneer fairly constantly maintained, remained profoundly African.

Nubia after the fall of Meroe: ‘Group X’

It can be taken that the Nubas from the west or south-west were the ‘carriers’ of the Nubian language, whose offshoots even today are living tongues both in certain mountainous regions of Darfur and in the various sectors of Upper and Lower Nubia.

As we have just seen, a proportion of Nuba groups had installed themselves in the southern part of the Meroitic kingdom. Archaeologically they are there identifiable by pottery of a rather African type. Their tombs are tumuli, of which some have been excavated at Tanqasi near the Gebel Barkal and at Ushara, while others remain to be explored, in particular

41. In particular, A. J. Arkell, 1961, pp. 174ff., put forward this hypothesis on the basis of the existence of ruins and onomastic traces. It does not appear, however, to have gone beyond the realm of pure hypothesis.
42. See above, note 22, and bibliographical references below.
along the west bank of the Nile. It appears to have been about +570 that these Nubas were converted to Christianity by the Monophysite Bishop Longinos. In the north the date of the survivals of the Meroitic kingdom appears to have been different, up to a point. Since G. A. Reisner's 1907 survey, the cultural phase succeeding the fall of Meroe has been designated by one letter as Group X, a frank admission of ignorance. This culture extended over all Lower Nubia as far as Sai and Wawa to the south towards the Third Cataract. In this area it pursued its evolution from the first part of the fourth century to the middle of the sixth, i.e. up to the introduction of Christianity and the rapid rise of the Christian kingdoms of Nubia.

The barbarian luxury of the Group X kinglets was revealed in the period 1931–3, when the English archaeologists Emery and Kirwan, at Ballana and Qustul44 a few miles south of Abu Simbel, excavated enormous tumuli which J. L. Burckhardt, the unwearying pioneer surveyor of Nubia, had already noted at the start of the previous century. Surrounded by their wives, their servants and their richly caparisoned horses, the dead reposed on litters as in the old days of Kerma. Their heavy diadems and silver bracelets set with coloured stones have a wealth of reminders of Egypt or Meroc, such as the ram's head of Amon bearing a huge crown atef, the fringes of uraei or the busts of Isis. Alexandrian influences are clearly apparent in the treasures of silverware which strewed the floor: among the ewers, cups and patens, there was an incised plate showing Hermes seated on a globe with a griffin by his side; there are also huge bronze lamps and a wooden chest inlaid with panels of carved ivory. But the pottery is still of the traditional Meroitic type so that the qualities of a truly Nubian technique persist over the millennia.

Nobades or Blemmyes

Which were the populations of Group X - Nobades or Blemmyes? The Blemmyes45 were warlike nomads customarily identified with the Bedja tribes of the eastern desert. As regards the Nobades or Nobates, after much disputation they are accepted as Nubas; the writer is inclined to think them the lords of Ballana and Qustul. In any event Blemmyes and Nobades are barely more than names for us, and it seems preferable to use the term 'Group X' or 'Ballana culture'.

Ancient literary evidences and epigraphic documents enable us to tie the main historical outlines. The historian Procopus claims that, towards the end of the third century, when the Roman emperor Diocletian pulled back the frontier to the First Cataract, he encouraged the Nobates to leave the

44. See bibliographical references below, and in particular W. B. Emery and L. P. Kirwan, 1938.
Oasis region and to establish themselves on the Nile, reckoning on their serving as a screen for Egypt against the incursions of the Blemmyes. In actual fact, under Theodosius towards 450, Philae was attacked by the Blemmyes and the Nobades; they were driven back eventually by forces commanded by Maximinus, and then by the prefect Florus.

After the advent of Christianity they were permitted to continue to visit the sanctuary of Isis at Philae and for certain major feasts were allowed to borrow the statue of the goddess. Qasr Ibrim may have been one of the staging posts for this pilgrimage, for what seems to have been a statuette of Isis in painted earthenware was found there. It was only under Justinian, between +535 and +537, that his general, Narses, closed the temple of Philae and expelled the last priests.

The same period saw the undertaking of the evangelization of Nubia. If we are to believe John of Ephesus, the Melkite Orthodox envoys of the emperor were outdistanced by the Monophysite missionary Julian, backed by the empress Theodora, and he succeeded, in +543, in converting the king of the Nobades. In a corrupt Greek inscription, unfortunately undated, in the temple of Kalabsha, the Nobatian king Silko boasts of having, by God’s help, conquered the Blemmyes, who thus vanish from history.
PLATE 10.1a Ethiopian black granite statue of King Aspelta

PLATE 10.1b Detail of head of statue

PLATE 10.2 Queen Amanishakheta: relief from the pyramid at Meroe
PLATE 10.4 Painted blue glassware of Sedeinga, Khartoum

PLATE 10.3 Crown of Ballana