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MEROE AND ITS SOCIETY

I am much honoured to be asked to give a lecture in memory of my friend and colleague Fritz Hintze. The late Professor Hintze was the foremost scholar of Meroitic civilization of his day and it seemed to me appropriate that I should talk about some of the results of my excavations at the town of Meroe itself. Since this site was that of the royal residence and therefore the capital of the ancient kingdom of Kush for about one thousand years it is there that perhaps the best information of the nature of the society of the kingdom could be obtained.

Mine were not the first excavations to be carried out at the site, and from 1910 to 1914 Professor Garstang of Liverpool University worked on a large scale. As was the custom of that time Garstang was mainly concerned with investigating major buildings and finding objects suitable for display in museums. For this reason these excavations were mainly concerned with the areas which could be identified as a royal palace and a large temple.

My excavations, from 1965 to 1984, had a rather different aim. I was hoping to be able to throw some light on the nature of non-royal society and to examine the houses of the common people, those whose work made possible the existence of rich palaces and temples and which maintained the fabric of the Meroitic state. I also hoped to be able to find evidence for the various crafts and industries which had been carried on at Meroe. Of these the most important was the iron smelting for which the town was well known ever since Sayce, who worked with Garstang, drew attention to the large mounds of iron slag which are to be seen at several places at the site.

Examination of the site suggested that the two major mounds which lay outside the confines of the royal palace and the large temple to the god Amun, already examined in the earlier excavations would cover the houses of the main non-royal population. For this reason work began on a long trench running east to west and at right angles to the main axis of the mound. Very soon it became clear that small houses of sun dried mud brick had been built in this area and that

they had been the residences of those who carried out the ordinary duties of the citizens. None of the houses were very large though because of the way that the trench had been laid out no complete house was revealed. The construction of these houses was entirely of mud brick, as are most houses in the area today. It is an economical and easily available building material and has been widely used in the Sudan at all periods.

In the southern part of the northern of the two main mounds through which the excavation trench had been cut the houses all seemed to be of the same style with small rooms of some four metres by six. Some had certainly been kitchens from the quantity of animal bone, the remains of meals, and of charcoal from the cooking that was found in them, together with large coarsely made ceramic vessels many of which appear to have been used for storage.

Further north in the same mound the remains of larger and more substantial buildings were found. Also of mud brick but with thicker and more substantial walls. This suggests that in this part of the town a section of the population with greater wealth were living though there was no evidence to show what the occupations of such people had been.

Still deeper and below a variety of mud brick buildings an area of clean sand was found with post holes arranged in horse shoe shape. The purpose of these post holes was made clear by the local labour force who showed that the holes were arranged in exactly the same way as those they make now for the upright poles for the mat covered huts in which the local transhumant people of the central Sudan live surrounded by their camels and goats. The finding of this evidence for light, non-permanent huts may indicate that before the town of Meroe was first established, in perhaps the 8th or 9th centuries B.C. there had been a non-permanent population living in a manner similar to its descendants of today. Alternatively it may be an indication that there were such people living on the edge of a more permanent but smaller town than the present remains of Meroe suggest. If this is so no trace of such an early town has yet been found

and if it is there it lies deep, more than ten metres, below the present top of the mound.

Of the activities of these inhabitants of the town the evidence can be partly seen in the products that they left behind. There must have been areas of the town where different specialised crafts were undertaken. We may assume that the main agricultural population, responsible for the growing of the basic cereal food crop, sorghum, of which many examples were found lived in the town and cultivated the river banks after the annual flood had gone down but that those who herded the cattle, sheep and goats which provided the plentiful meat supply made clear from the large number of animal bones found in the excavations lived on the edge of the town or perhaps even further away and were, perhaps, the people living in the small mat covered huts already described.

Of the activities carried on in the town that on the largest scale was the iron smelting. Several large mounds of slag are to be seen on the surface and excavation had shown that there were scatters of slag at different levels in many parts of the site. Excavation close to the main slag mounds showed a number of the furnaces in which the iron ore was smelted and although it is not possible to say how many furnaces were in use at any one time it is certain that the production of iron and presumably its smithing into tools and weapons was a major activity in the town.

The closeness of the smelting areas to the temples and the royal palace is surprising but the evidence is clear that the smelting was carried out here whatever inconvenience was caused to the upper classes, some of whose activities would surely have taken place down wind of the strong north wind which blows for much of the winter months.

Study of the iron working area and its furnaces has provided much information about the nature of Meroitic iron working and the finding of the pots used as bellows with arrangement for fitting tuyères into the pots so as to direct the blasts of air into the furnaces answered one of the questions as to how the bellows worked. The large bellows pots must have had a leather cover which by a pumping action drove air into the furnace through the tuyère.

Other crafts were also practised - many spindle whorls show that the spinning of thread was one. Surprisingly the largest number of spindle whorls were found close to the smelting furnaces and a fanciful thought is that the women spun and watched whilst the men smelted. Evidence for weaving consists only of a few loom weights. The wood of which looms were made has not survived but it can be assumed that the cotton cloth spun here was also woven. It is probable that Meroitic clothing was mainly of cotton.

Other manufactures certainly included pottery on a large scale and pot kilns were found at

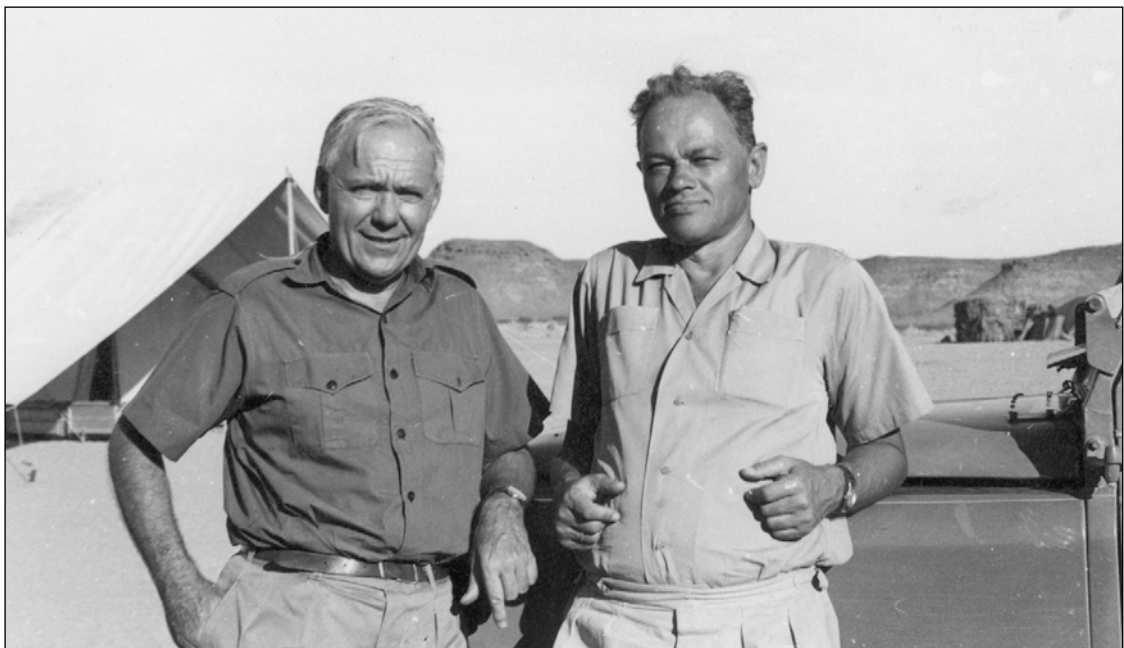


Abb. 1: Peter L. Shinnie und Fritz Hintze in Musawwarat es Sufra (1975?).

the north east corner of the site by Garstang. All traces of them seem to have vanished now. The evidence for the presence of pottery is overwhelming – over one million pot sherds were found in each season of excavation and though some of it may have been made in other places and brought to Meroe as an item of trade much of what was found must have been made on the spot as study of pottery fabrics has shown that much of it was made from local clays.

Apart from these main manufactures evidence from objects found suggests that there were a number of others. Jewellery, much of it gold, was certainly plentiful amongst royalty as evidence from royal burials has shown. For others faience beads and amulets must have replaced precious materials and its making must have been on a considerable scale. The raw material, sand, was plentiful enough and one can imagine a thriving industry at some place in the non-royal and non-divine part of the town. Glass may also have been made though the evidence is not very clear. Stone head making was also a local industry.

Although the main emphasis of the excavation was on learning about Meroitic society and its way of life other aspects of Meroe were found and in the course of excavating the main trench four previously unknown temples were found. Three of these, two on the north and one on the south were found to line a processional way leading east from the entrance of the previously discovered Amun temple. Two others were found nearby. All these lay somewhat to the south of the main domestic area of the site and are a part of an area, once probably domestic but cleared perhaps early in the first century A.D. to form part of an important area reserved for religious activities.

Investigation of the temples shows them to have been violently destroyed after a period in which they had ceased to be used for religious purposes and had been lived in by squatters. The nature of the end of the Meroitic state has not been well understood though some have thought that it may have been seriously damaged by an invasion from Axum in the middle of the Fourth century A.D. as suggested by an inscription of king Aezanas of Axum. During Garstang's excavations a partial inscription in Greek and of Axumite origin was found. In the recent excavations another fragmentary inscription was found and seems to say that an Axumite force came to Meroe. In addition one Axumite coin dated to about A.D. 350 was found.

As a result of the 1965-1984 excavations much more is known about life in the Kushite state at its capital city. Different areas of the site occu-

ried by different social classes can now be roughly defined and there is a better knowledge of the range of manufacturing activities. In particular the chronology of iron smelting is now far better understood and it can be seen that this important activity started early in the sixth century B.C.

Much still remains to be understood about the nature of Meroitic society and its class structure as well as of the way in which the state was administered. In the absence of appropriate and readable documents this will be a difficult matter but the important advances made over the last few decades in which the late Professor Hintze played a major role show that further work both in the field and the study will eventually lead to a better understanding. •