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## MEDIEVAL NUBIA – THE FORGOTTEN CIVILIZATION

I think that my choice of a topic, and of a title, for this lecture is justified by the great Nubia exhibition that has recently been making the rounds of the German museums. The exhibition covers every phase of Nubian cultural history from the Neolithic to the Ballaña ("X-Group"), but conspicuously omits the high achievements of medieval Nubia. There are, as I understand, two reasons for this. The first is a lack of sufficient exhibition space; the second is that medieval Nubian material was included in an exhibition of Coptic art a few months earlier.

In my view the first of these, but not the second, is a sufficient excuse. Exhibitions must of course make the best use of whatever space is available to them. On the other hand, to assume that medieval Nubian civilization is adequately subsumed under the heading "Coptic" is no more legitimate than is the assumption that the

civilization of Kush is a mere provincial version of pharaonic Egypt.

In my own work over the last 40 years I have given special attention to the civilization of medieval Nubia, not because I am a fellow Christian but because I consider that it is a chapter of high civilization that has been unduly neglected. I appreciate it also because the archaeological as well as the historical record is so much richer than for any previous Nubian period, allowing us to have a view not only of artistic and architectural achievements but of the daily lives of ordinary men and women – always a focus of primary interest to an anthropologist like myself.

### A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The history of medieval Nubia, as a distinct civilization, begins with the country's conversion to Christianity, in the middle of the sixth century A.D. In place of the once-unified Empire of Kush, the evangelists who came to bring the Gospel found three independent Nubian kingdoms. Nobadia, in the far north, was already familiar to Greek and Roman writers; it was the post-Kushite successor state whose powerful kings, buried at Ballaña and Qustul, still wore the Kushite royal insignia and maintained the worship of Isis and other deities from the past. To the south of Nobadia, the Kingdom of Makouria had its center in the Dongola Reach, between the Fourth and Third Nile Cataracts, while the Kingdom of Alwa was located far to the south, with its capital near the site of modern Khartoum. Unlike Nobadia, neither Makouria nor Alwa was an outgrowth of the earlier Kushite state, and their origins are still unknown.

According to ecclesiastical historians, the conversion of the Nubians to Christianity proceeded very rapidly, and was complete by the year 580 A.D. This appears to be confirmed by archaeology, where we find an almost overnight transition from pre-Christian to Christian burial



*Fig. 1: North aisle of the Faras Cathedral, showing Nativity mural on the far wall.*

practices throughout the Nubian cemeteries, and the very rapid construction of churches in all parts of the country.

During the beginning phases of conversion, there was active competition between the Melkite (Byzantine) and the Monophysite (Coptic) sects of Christianity for the allegiance of the Nubians. There is some evidence that the Melkites were initially successful in Makouria, and the Monophysites in Nobadia and Alwa. Once the ascendancy of the Coptic Church was established in Egypt, however, its dominance in Nubia was also assured. From the seventh century until the end of the Middle Ages, the Nubian church was treated as an integral part of the Egyptian Orthodox (Coptic) Church, and its bishops as well as many of its priests were appointed from Egypt. It is a curious fact, however, that the Nubians throughout the Middle Ages continued to use Greek, rather than Coptic, as the liturgical languages in their services.

At some time probably in the eighth century, the two northern kingdoms of Nobadia and Makouria became united under a common ruler, whose seat was at Dongola in Makouria. There is no direct historical record as to why or even when this unification took place, but it was evidently carried out without bloodshed. The two kingdoms were never fully integrated in the same way as were the German states under Bismarck, for example; they always continued to bear separate names, and had somewhat different administrative systems, although acknowledging a common ruler.

After the Arab armies conquered Egypt in 640-42, they attempted to follow up with the

conquest of Nubia. However, two separate invasions, in 642 and in 652, were successfully resisted, and thereafter the invaders and the Nubians negotiated a treaty of peace and trade that left Nubia free from any Islamic threat for the next five hundred years. Relations were especially close with the Fatimid regime in Egypt (969 – 1171 A.D.), which relied on its friendship with the Nubians as a buffer against enemy Muslim regimes to the east and west. During this time, which I have called the Classic Christian period, the medieval Nubian civilization reached its peak of prosperity and cultural development.

The long peace came to an end in 1172, when the Ayyubid ruler Salah ed-Din (known in the West as Saladin) seized the throne in Egypt, and immediately sent a raiding expedition into Nubia. The raiders did not stay long, and wrought damage only in a few places, but their invasion was enough to convince the Nubians that the era of peace was at an end. Many smaller villages were abandoned, populations drew together in larger, defensible localities, and the long-neglected fortifications at Qasr Ibrim and elsewhere were restored. Nevertheless, the Ayyubid regime established by Salah ed-Din in Egypt was too weak, and too beset by enemies in Syria and Palestine, to cause any further trouble in Nubia, and for nearly a century peaceful relations and trade were resumed.

More serious and protracted troubles began when the Mamlukes became masters of Egypt in 1250. These unruly and militaristic despots were bent on establishing their suzerainty in Nubia as well, partly by direct annexation (in Lower Nubia) and partly by establishing client rulers on the throne at Dongola. There were several

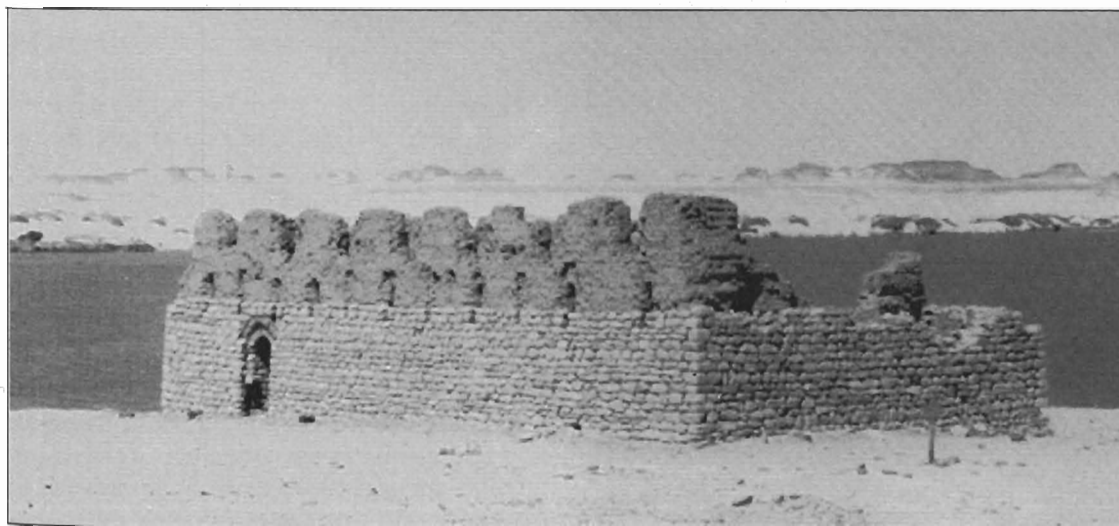


Fig. 2: Early Christian church at Faras East.

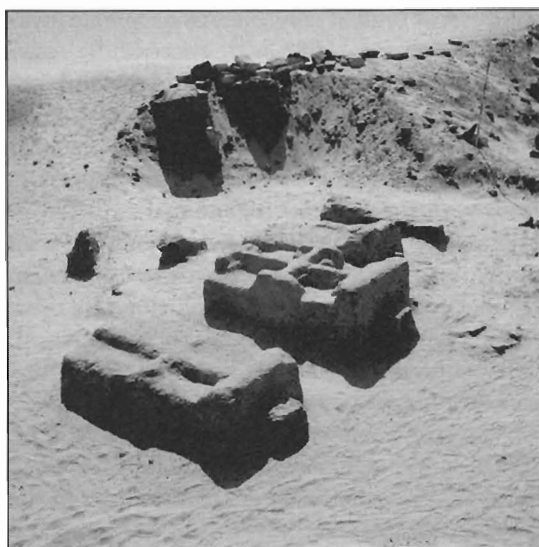


Fig. 3: Cross-topped mastaba tomb superstructures at Meinarti.

Mamluke military incursions into Nubia in the 13th and 14th centuries, and these episodes added to what was already becoming an unstable political situation. Eventually, as the central power of the rulers weakened, a kind of military feudalism developed, as local warlords built their own castles and their own personal armies up and down the Nile.

The final demise of Makouria and Alwa came about when the central Sudan was overrun by migrating Arab nomad tribes, at the end of the Middle Ages. Some were expelled from Egypt by the Mamlukes, while others moved directly across the Red Sea from the Arabian Peninsula. Arrived on the Nile, they set themselves up as masters over the Nubian peasant population, and established a whole series of petty, warrior

kingdoms that nominally professed Islam, and that derived nothing from the earlier polities of Makouria and Alwa. In the far north, however, the total desert environment of Nobadia offered no attraction to the nomads, and was never overrun. Here, a splinter kingdom called Dotawo lived on until nearly the year 1500, still perpetuating as best it could the administrative and the ecclesiastical institutions of medieval Nubia, still executing mural paintings of Christian holy figures, and still employing Greek in the liturgy.

How and when Christianity finally died out in Nubia remains a mystery. As early as 1323 a Muslim ruler ascended the throne at Dongola, but this was clearly not followed by a wholesale conversion of his subjects. A new bishop was consecrated for Qasr Ibrim and Faras in 1372, and a hundred years later still a Bishop of Ibrim was mentioned in documents found at the same site. The last known Christian inscription, of a certain King Joel of Dotawo, bears the date 1484, after which the record is silent. When the Ottoman rulers of Egypt annexed Lower Nubia, in the middle of the 16th century, they apparently found no surviving trace either of the Kingdom of Dotawo or of the organized practice of Christianity. The Nubian church had always to rely on priests ordained in Egypt, and when no more were forthcoming it probably died out for lack of the needed external support. Eventually, the faith of Islam came to fill the gap, but there was by no means a direct conversion from the one faith to the other. At least in the more northerly parts of Nubia, it is difficult to find any clear evidence for the practice of Islam before the 18th century.

#### THE VISIBLE ACHIEVEMENTS

Let me turn now to a consideration of what we may call the visible achievements of medieval Nubian civilization: those things that have left their traces in the archaeological and architectural record:

#### ECCLESIASTICAL ARCHITECTURE

Generally speaking, the medieval Nubians did not go in for monumentality in their architecture and art, as had their Kushite and Egyptian predecessors. Their most impressive buildings, the Cathedrals at Qasr Ibrim, Faras and Dongola, had nothing like the magnificence of the largest Kushite temples. Still, they are impressive in comparison to the ordinary domestic architecture of their times. The largest cathedrals had five

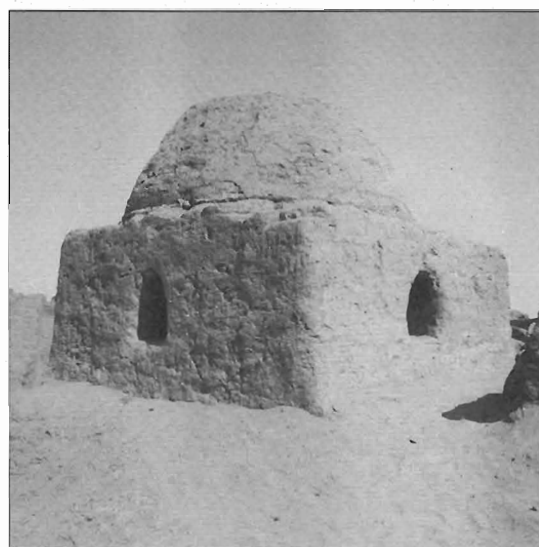


Fig. 4: Qubba tomb superstructure at Meinarti.

aisles, separated originally by monolithic colonnades, and terminated in an apse at the eastern end after the fashion of classical basilicas (Figure 1). According to church records there were thirteen episcopal sees in Nubia, and therefore presumably thirteen cathedrals, but only a few of the buildings have been located archaeologically.

Much more numerous than cathedrals were the parish churches, which were built in virtually every town and village. In Lower Nubia alone, more than 120 church buildings have been identified. For reasons that are not clear, some villages had a single church, while others, no larger, had three, four, or even five churches. The earliest of the churches, built in the eighth and ninth centuries, were basilican in plan like the cathedrals, but with three instead of five aisles. Most were built of stone, and many had roofs supported on monolithic columns – an innovation of the Christian period (Figure 2). Their plan was generally similar, though never identical, to early

churches in Egypt. In later centuries the Nubian churches developed an increasingly independent architectural tradition. The buildings were usually smaller than their predecessors, and were commonly built of mud brick. Vaulted ceilings and domes were supported on masonry piers rather than on columns. The churches of Late Christian times, after about A.D. 1250, were notably small, and seem to have been copied after the little cupola churches of the Byzantine Near East.

#### MORTUARY ARCHITECTURE

Monumental tombs are lacking among the remains of medieval Nubia – one of the most conspicuous differences from all earlier times. Nevertheless, the Nubians continued the age-old practice of marking graves by means of surface constructions. In place of the earthen mounds of immediate pre-Christian (“X-Group”) times, they began now to build masonry superstructures of stone or brick, in quite a



Fig. 5: Classic Christian houses at Meinarti.

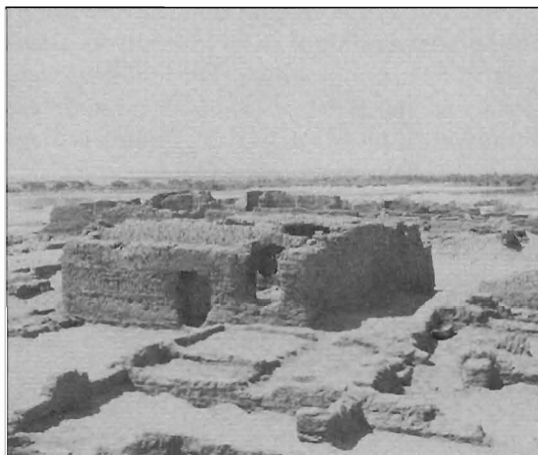


Fig. 6: Late Christian house at Meinarti.

wide variety of forms. In Lower Nubia, most were solid rectangular mastabas, about two meters long and a meter wide; they might have a plain, flat top, a rounded top, a stepped top, or a top modeled in the form a cross (Figure 3). In addition, there were also superstructures in the form of a small domed qubba (Figure 4), and others in the form of a cross. Most superstructures had a small niche or "box" at the western end, in which a votive lamp could be burned, and a fair number had an inscribed tombstone in Greek or Coptic attached at the western end. Underground, the great majority of graves were

simple slots in which the dead were laid in an extended position, with heads to the west. Bodies were tightly wound in shrouding, sometimes of fine textiles, but no other grave goods were included, in marked contrast to the practices of all earlier times.

#### DOMESTIC ARCHITECTURE

The ordinary dwellings of the Early Christian period were no different from those of the immediate pre-Christian period. They were generally small, irregular in plan, and somewhat crudely built from a combination of stone and brick masonry. Most had from three to five rooms. Villages, though usually small, were densely crowded, with the individual houses clustered together in large room blocks.

In Classic Christian times a new and more spacious architectural standard was introduced. Most houses had a fairly regular square or rectangular plan, and consisted of a large front room, from two to four store rooms behind it, and behind that again an angled passage leading to an indoor toilet chamber at the back of the house. As before, the houses were tightly clustered together along narrow, irregular streets and small plazas (Figure 5). In Late Christian times the same general architectural plan persi-



Fig. 7: Mural at Faras, depicting Archangel Michael protecting the Hebrew youths in the furnace.



sted, but the houses were more and more stoutly built, with thick walls and brick vaulted ceilings in place of the flat roofs of earlier times (Figure 6). Many houses were built with one or more "strong rooms", in the center of the building, which could only be entered by climbing in from above. In the last centuries of the medieval period (called "Terminal Christian") a few of the houses had become miniature castles, two or three stories high, and sometimes with no ground-level entrance to any of the rooms. Obviously, these features developed in response to the insecurity and the threat of marauders, that developed particularly after A.D. 1250.

#### MURAL ART

The highly developed mural art of the Nubian churches first became known through the excavations of F. LI. Griffith at Faras and Abdel Qadir in the 1920s. Much more spectacular however were the huge and splendid murals that came to light when the Faras Cathedral was unearthed in the 1960s. Subsequently, other churches with well preserved programs of decoration have been found at Abdallah Nirqi and at Sonqi Tino. No other church, at least in Lower Nubia, was decorated with the same degree of elaboration as was the Faras Cathedral, but we also know, from surviving traces, that every parish church, no matter how small, had its own decorative program, which usually occupied most of the walls at the eastern end of the building.

Mural art underwent a marked stylistic progress during the seven centuries when it was practiced. The earliest paintings hewed closely to Coptic Egyptian tradition; they were mostly in rather muted colors, with sparing use of decorative detail, and featured very large personages with huge, staring eyes. Later painting, in the Classic Christian period, diverged increasingly from the Egyptian tradition, and showed figures adorned in highly ornate, brightly colored garments with a wealth of decorative detail, and with faces less emphasized (Figures 7 and 8). Decoration in the Late and Terminal Christian periods was considerably simplified, with a marked predominance of red and yellow over all other colors.

There was no one rigidly prescribed program of decoration in the Nubian churches, but the same designs tended to occur in the same places in many churches. In the apse there was generally a central figure of the standing Madonna

and Child, flanked on each side by a row of Apostles; in the north aisle there was usually a Nativity scene; at the head of the south aisle there was usually a standing figure of the Archangel Michael, and a head of Christ surrounded by the symbols of the four evangelists was located elsewhere in the south aisle. Other common scenes were the Crucifixion, and figures of cavalier saints on horseback. There was enough variability in the designs from one church to another to show that the Nubian muralists enjoyed some degree of artistic freedom, although they may well have worked from copy-books.

#### CERAMIC ART

The highly ornate tradition of Meroitic pottery decoration disappeared altogether in the post-Kushite period, as "X-Group" pottery was made almost entirely in imitation of the late Roman redwares. This tradition carried over into the first two or three centuries of the Christian period. Then, almost overnight, the Nubian potters blossomed forth with a whole new range of highly decorated wares, reminiscent in some ways of the Meroitic wares. However, many of the designs were actually copied from contemporary mural and especially manuscript decoration, featuring a combination of late Hellenistic and Byzantine motifs. Especially popular were animal and bird figures; elaborate, running friezes consisting of connected leaves or vines; and intricate interlace designs (Figures 9 and 10). Most decoration was in red and dark brown, on a background that might be white, yellow, buff, or light



Fig. 8: Mural of Saint Anne at Faras.



Fig. 9: Classic Christian decorated bowl, with gazelle design, from Faras Potteries.

orange. Although the inspiration for the designs may have come from contemporary Coptic mural or manuscript art, it did not come directly from Egyptian pottery, where the same tradition never developed. Apparently, it was the Nubians' own idea to apply the floral and animal designs to the decoration of pottery.

Gradually, over the Classic and Late Christian centuries, the newly established decorative tradition became more rigid and formalized, and lost much of its early, "flowing" character. Animals and birds largely disappeared in favor of highly complex and "busy" geometric designs,



Fig. 10: Classic Christian decorated bowl, with bird design, from Faras Potteries.

with a preference for rectilinear rather than curvilinear motifs (Figures 11 and 12). There was also a return to a preference for red or orange as opposed to white or yellow wares, with painted decoration in black only. In the last century of the Christian era the vessels became notably heavy and rather clumsy, with simplified, very bold painted designs.

In the Classic and especially in the Late Christian periods, the Nubians also began to receive considerable quantities of glazed pottery, made mostly in Lower Egypt. The earliest imports, which employed a lead glaze, were characterized by rather "splashy" or runny designs in yellow, green, and brown; some of these were imitative of the Tang wares of China. Later, when alkaline glazes were introduced, the preferred designs were in blue on white or black and blue on white, clearly imitative of the Chinese Ming wares.

#### TEXTILE ART

The full richness and diversity of medieval Nubian textile art has only come to be appreciated in the recent past, as a result of the extraordinary discoveries at Qasr Ibrim. Although the material is preserved mostly in the form of torn-up rags, their quantity as well as their variety is enormous. It includes not only locally made woolens, but linens, cottons, and even some silks from Egypt, the Near East, and probably India.

The indigenous textiles of Meroitic and "X-Group" times were very largely of cotton. Curiously enough this usage died out almost completely at the beginning of the Christian period, when the Nubians shifted over to the wearing of wool. The change may have been due in part to the difficulty of obtaining cotton from the more southerly parts of Nubia, where it was grown, but it may also reflect the fact that wool can be dyed in much brighter colors than can cotton of flax. Certainly, the medieval textiles were far more colorful than anything of earlier date; they featured a wide variety of striped, checked, and embroidered patterns in bright red, orange, yellow, blue, green, and brown. From Classic Christian times onward there was also a steady increase in the volume of imported textiles of linen and silk, some of which bore very elaborate decoration.

#### OTHER ARTS AND CRAFTS

Because the Christian Nubians abandoned the practice of burying valuables in their graves,

medieval sites have not yielded anything like the same abundance and variety of luxury goods as have the sites of Kushite and "X-Group" times. In general, the only finds have been objects accidentally lost, or broken and discarded, in village sites. These can only give a partial indication of the kinds of goods that were enjoyed in everyday life. They include quite a variety of decorative bronze objects, including small vessels, ornaments, and crosses; glass bowls, perfume flasks, and beads; carved wooden icons; ornaments of ivory; and a very few decorative objects of gold and silver (Figures 13 and 14). Much of the bronze work was probably locally produced, while objects of glass, except for beads, were obviously imported. There were also of course a great many utilitarian objects of iron, wood, ceramic, and basketry, of local manufacture.

#### WRITING AND LITERACY

Although the mass of ordinary Nubians could probably not read or write, literacy was nevertheless more widespread, and was employed for more different purposes, than in any earlier time. In the later Middle Ages not fewer than four languages were in use: Greek, Coptic, Old Nubian, and Arabic.

In the immediate pre-Christian "X-Group" period, Greek (in a rather simplified local dialect) had already been adopted as the medium of communication in Lower Nubia, replacing the older Meroitic script. Its use continued throughout the whole of the Middle Ages, since it was adopted from the beginning as the liturgical language of the Nubian church. It was used also for religious texts, for mural inscriptions, for tombstone texts, and for a certain amount of ordinary correspondence. However, there were also, from the beginning, some religious texts in Coptic, mostly written on parchment. These probably originated in Egypt, and were circulated mainly among the ethnic Egyptians who formed part of the Nubian clergy.

After the ninth century, Greek was largely supplanted by Old Nubian as the language of administration, commerce, and private correspondence. This was the indigenous language of the Nubians, written in a modified version of the Coptic alphabet. It was used extensively for legal documents, written always on soft skin, but also in a wide variety of secular contexts, where it was usually written on paper (Figure 15). In the later Middle Ages a good deal of correspondence in Arabic also made its appearance, as Egyptian merchants came to trade and to settle in Lower Nubia. Most of them apparently had no com-



Fig. 11: Late Christian decorated jugs, from Meinarti.





Fig. 12: Carved wooden icon, depicting holy figures, from Qasr Ibrim.

mand of the indigenous written languages, since they used their own language to address not only one another, but also the Nubian administrative officials with whom they dealt.

Curiously enough, all four of the written languages were sometimes employed in tombstone inscriptions (Figure 16). The tombstones of native Nubians were most often in Greek, but often began and ended with two or three lines of Old Nubian. Tombstones in Coptic are believed to be those of Egyptian priests or monks resident in Nubia, while tombstones in Arabic are believed to be those of Muslim merchants.

#### THE INVISIBLE ACHIEVEMENTS

Let me turn now to what I will call the invisible achievements of medieval Nubian civilization: those things that we know from historical records, though they have left nothing that can be seen and admired in museums.

#### THE POLITICAL SPHERE

One of the outstanding achievements of the medieval Nubians was surely their establishment of wholly secular monarchies, claiming no divinity for the rulers. Indeed the Nubians may have achieved the most complete separation between church and state of any people in the world, up to that time. Their church was an integral part of the Egyptian Orthodox Church, governed from Alexandria, at the same time when their monarchies were wholly independent of any foreign control.

One of the conspicuous consequences of this secularization of government was the complete elimination of the royal tomb, as a symbol of authority. Archaeologically, we have found royal tombs enough to account for every ruler of Kush from Kashta to Teqerideamani, as well as for every post-Kushite ruler of the Ballaṇa ("X-Group") kingdom, but no single tomb of a Christian Nubian ruler has ever come to light. All of the art, the iconography and the literature of medieval Nubia celebrates a heavenly king, not an earthly one.

There were, as a result of this separation, elaborate but completely separate bureaucracies in the ecclesiastical and in the civil spheres. They were appointive in both cases, but the priests and bishops were appointed from Alexandria, and the civil officials from Dongola. So far as we can determine, none of the offices were hereditary.

#### THE MILITARY SPHERE

It is one of the paradoxes of medieval Nubia that the people still retained their age-old warlike reputation, at the same time when they enjoyed five hundred years of peace with one another and with their neighbors. They successfully resisted the Arab invasions of 642 and 652 – something neither the armies of Byzantium nor those of Persia had been able to do – and in later centuries Nubian mercenaries were an important component of the Fatimid Egyptian armies. Yet, so far as we know, the kingdoms of Makouria and of Alwa never once made war on one another, and only in the rarest instances did they raid Upper Egypt. Among the more than thirty bureaucratic titles that are mentioned in legal documents, no specifically military titles can be recognized.

### THE RULE OF LAW

Here we encounter one of the truly revolutionary changes in medieval Nubian society. There was, for the first time, a widespread use of legal instruments which were not merely royal edicts, but were considered to have permanent force. They were sworn and witnessed in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, rather than by the king. At Qasr Ibrim, and probably elsewhere, they were carefully conserved for generations, and sometimes even for centuries. As might be expected, most documents had to do with the ownership and transfer of different kinds of property, including land, saqias, date trees, animals, grain stores, and slaves.

### THE SOCIAL SPHERE

The society of medieval Nubia was undoubtedly stratified, as were all the other civilizations of ancient and medieval times. There are some hints of a hereditary aristocracy in the reports left by Arab chroniclers, but on the other hand no aristocratic titles can be recognized in the legal documents. Both the houses and the tombs of ordinary folk seem to give evidence of a rough social equality, in that there were no conspicuously large dwellings or tomb superstructures. We know too, from legal documents found at Qasr Ibrim, that women could own and sell property, and engage in trade, in their own names.

It is only in the disturbed conditions of Late and Terminal Christian times that we begin to catch sight, archaeologically, of conspicuous social divisions. In many communities, some families were able to construct very large and impressive dwellings, which in time became miniature castles, at a time when most of their neighbors lived in much humbler abodes. Such families, we believe, eventually became semi-independent local feudatories, though they do not seem to have been granted any formal recognition as such by the king.

Slavery was, of course, present at all times, and is well attested by documentary finds and historical texts. It is equally evident however that slaves played no important part in the internal economy of the country. Those that are mentioned in legal texts seem in all cases to have been personal servants rather than chattel laborers. Slaves however were chiefly an item of export trade, passing through Nubia on their way to the Islamic lands to the north.



Fig. 13: Late Christian pilgrim bottle, from Meinarti.

### THE ECONOMIC SPHERE

The Egyptian envoy Ibn Selim el-Aswani, who traveled through Nubia near the end of the tenth century, has left an interesting and a rather surprising picture of economic conditions at that time. According to his account, Lower Nubia, as far south as the Second Cataract, was a free-trade zone in which Egyptian merchants were allowed to travel freely, and even to settle down, and Egyptian money was in circulation. On the other hand, all commerce with the upriver districts was a monopoly of the king, and no money was in use. Cargoes brought by Egyptian merchants were handed over to the king's

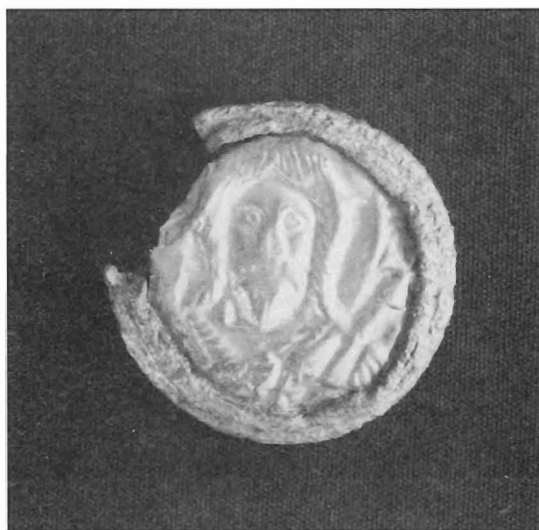


Fig. 14: Gold and silver medallion, depicting a holy figure, from Meinarti.

representatives at a place called the "Upper Customs Post", which was apparently somewhere between the Second and Third Nile Cataracts.

Notwithstanding the evidence of Ibn Selim, it is clear that the economy of Lower Nubia was by no means fully monetized. Very few coins have been recovered from archaeological sites, and there are only a few mentions of money ("dirhams") among the numerous legal documents from Qasr Ibrim. The chief medium of commerce was evidently durra grain, which was not only used in trade but was collected as taxes, and could be disbursed from public storehouses in time of need. Dates were clearly another important item of commerce, and perhaps also a medium of exchange.

Our excavations in village sites have suggested that conditions in Nubia were relatively impoverished in Early Christian times, but became much more prosperous in Classic and Late Christian times, when trade with Egypt flourished. This is indicated by the relatively large and spacious houses, with their numerous store

rooms; by the abundance of grain storage bins and silos; and by imported luxury goods of glazed pottery, glass, and textile. But there was, inevitably, an economic downturn in the disturbed Terminal Christian period; it is indicated by a marked diminution in the volume of imported goods.

#### RELIGION

Long before Christian times, the Nubians were celebrated by Greek and Roman authors as a devoutly religious people, and they remained so under their new church. Their art and literature are suffused with religious iconography, and religious invocatory texts and graffiti appear everywhere. As elsewhere in the Coptic world, the Archangels, and especially the Archangel Michael, assumed a primary role as subjects of veneration and supplication.

Although the Nubian church was administratively united with the Coptic Church of Egypt, there was nevertheless, from the beginning, a trend toward artistic and literary independence. The Nubians always used Greek rather than Coptic as their liturgical language. In addition, both the architecture and the mural art of the Nubian churches diverged increasingly from Egyptian traditions as the centuries went by, showing surprising influences from Syria and from Armenia.

Religion was certainly much more democratized than in any earlier time; that is, it was brought down to the level of the peasant masses. While there had been Kushite temples only in a few major centers, there were churches everywhere, even in the humblest villages. It is noteworthy too that these buildings – even the cathedrals – were not designed to impress or to overawe from the outside, where their facades were plain and unadorned. All of their embellishment was on the inside; it was apparently meant to instill a sense of participation, rather than of awe.

The fact that there were several churches in some villages, but only one in others, suggests the probability that enrolled congregations were an important feature of Nubian Christianity. Villages having several churches were probably places where several outlying settlements had drawn together, but each retained a separate congregational identity. But it is possible also that the cults of different saints were featured at different churches.

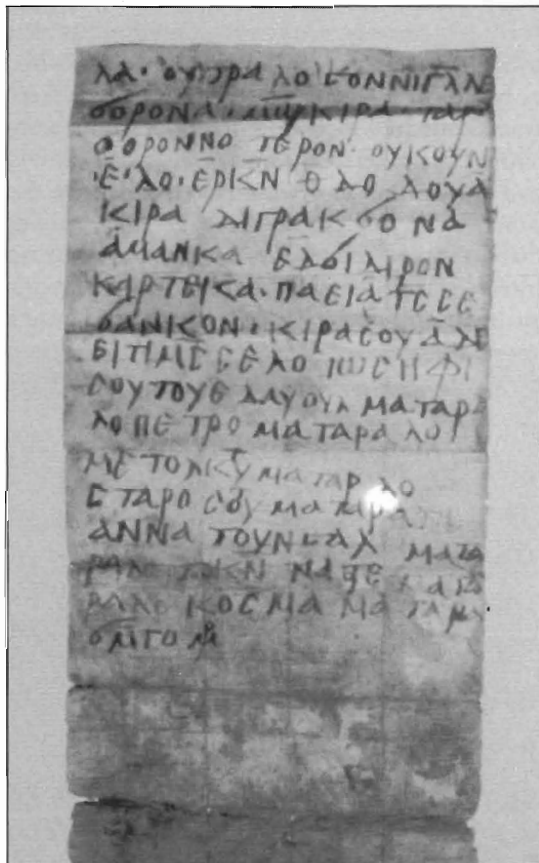


Fig. 15: Letter to the Eparch of Nobadia, in Old Nubian, from Qasr Ibrim.

## LITERACY

This has already been mentioned as one of the important medieval Nubian accomplishments. While actual literacy was probably confined to the priesthood and a few administrative officials, written instruments, in four different languages, were certainly used for a much wider number of purposes than in any earlier time. It seems clear, from the numerous archived documents found at Qasr Ibrim, as well as from mural graffiti, that a very high importance was attached to the written word, by the literate and the illiterate alike. If literacy was not widespread, it was nevertheless widely accessible; everyone could have access to scribal services, for a price.

## PEACE

Finally, the achievement of five hundred years of uninterrupted peace was surely the greatest of all medieval Nubian accomplishments. It is all the more remarkable when we consider the ancient warlike reputation of the Nubians, and the fact that the kings of Nobadia were direct successors to the bloodthirsty Ballaña monarchs. Yet they apparently agreed to the unification of their realm with that of Makouria, without bloodshed. The reasons for this change of heart are far from clear even yet, and they certainly cannot be attributed to the ideology of Christianity alone. But for whatever reason, the Nubian for half a millennium really did decide to "beat their swords into plowshares".

It is in the nature of humankind to celebrate violence, and to extol the great warrior leaders like Alexander, Caesar, and Napoleon. But war is, when all is said and done, an easy condition to attain; it has been very nearly the normal political condition throughout human history. It is a lasting peace, not war, that is difficult to attain, and that ranks as a genuinely outstanding achievement.

## SUMMARY

From a purely material perspective, the lives of the Nubians were hardly affected by the coming of Christianity. The overwhelming majority continued to be peasant farmers, living in the same villages as before, cultivating the same crops, making the same kinds of tools and containers, and burying their dead in the same cemeteries. Yet from a political, ideological, and aesthetic standpoint their world was revolution-

nized, turning away altogether from the long-enduring traditions of pharaonic Egypt and of Kush. They drastically redefined the relationship between the people, the rulers, and the gods. In the process they moved from the world of antiquity to that of the Middle Ages, and in certain respects even into the modern world. In their separation of church and state, above all, they were ahead of all of their neighbors.

## WHY THE NEGLECT?

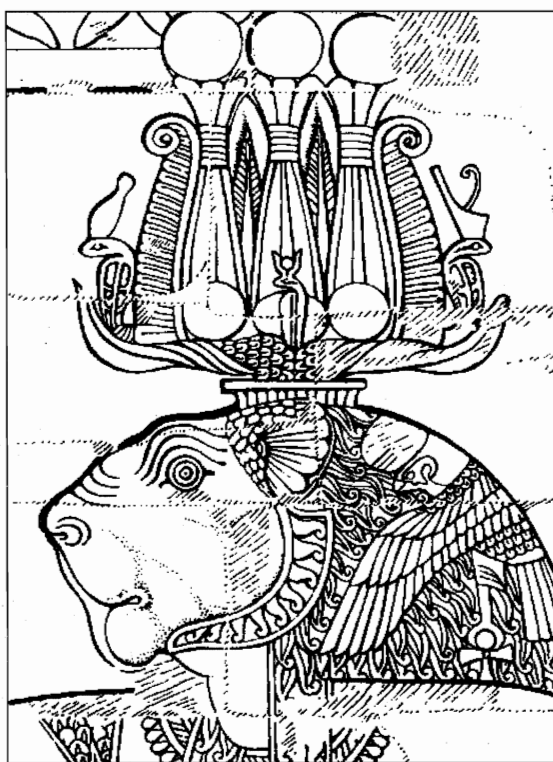
I would like to conclude by reflecting briefly on why it is that the civilization of medieval Nubia has not received the attention and the respect that it deserves. There are, I believe, three possible reasons:

First, the visible achievements of the medieval Nubians are not highly visible to most of the public. The Cathedral at Faras as well as all of the Lower Nubian churches are under water, and the surviving Christian sites like Qasr Ibrim and Old Dongola are in places difficult to reach and seldom visited. The great murals can be seen only in Warsaw or in Khartoum. Because no offerings were placed in graves, the wonderful products of Nubian ceramic and textile art have come to be known only from accidental findings in townsites. Most of these were from my own excavations, and they can be seen only in the National



Fig. 16: Coptic tombstone from Meinarti.

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Abbildung auf der Titelseite:

Blick auf die Terrasse des Zentraltempels der Großen Anlage von Musawwarat,  
1994 (Foto P. Wolf)

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