

SUDAN ANTIQUITIES SERVICE

A
SHORT HISTORY
OF THE SUDAN

(Up to A.D. 1500)

by

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THE EMBLEM ON THE COVER IS TAKEN FROM
THE CENTRAL MEDALLION OF A BLUE FAIENCE
BOWL, FOUND IN ONE OF THE TOMBS OF THE
NAPATAN PERIOD AT EL KURRU. IT REPRESENTS
A CALF LYING AMONGST THE PAPYRUS, AND IS
NOW IN THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS AT BOSTON,

U.S.A.

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A SHORT HISTORY OF THE SUDAN

Up to A.D. 1500

THE life story of almost any country can be divided into two main periods—prehistory and history. The “historic” periods are those for which written records exist; the “prehistoric” are those from which we have material remains, but for which there is no other direct evidence.

In the Sudan the “historic” periods begin about 2000 B.C. when we read from Egyptian records that the northern Sudan was subjugated. Before that time there were three periods of pre-history, as we have discovered partly from excavation (Arkell's work at Khartoum and Esh Shaheinab) and partly from the evidence of the tools which the early men used and the pictures which they drew on the rocks, all of which have been found in various parts of the country.

PREHISTORIC PERIODS

1. THE OLD STONE AGE, OR PALAEOLITHIC PERIOD

Man first appeared on the earth perhaps a million years ago, and for a period even as long as two hundred times the period of recorded history, he was nomadic, and lived by collecting wild fruits and vegetables and by hunting. His surviving tools are all of stone, the earliest of all being very crude and made simply by chipping two or three flakes off a pebble. Over a period of many thousands of years, he learned to make reasonable tools, such as the “hand-axes” which have been found at Khor Abu Anga near Omdurman.

2. MIDDLE AND NEW STONE AGES

After the old stone age, in most countries, prehistoric man passed through two further stages of development—the middle stone age, or mesolithic period, which was transitional to the new stone age, or neolithic period. During these periods, man learnt to make life much easier for himself. First he learnt to make more efficient and smaller tools, and consequently became more skilled in the performance of his work. When a culture is found with these different tools, it is said to be of the mesolithic period. Later he learnt to make pottery, and to cultivate land and

domesticate animals. This is probably the greatest step forward which man has ever taken, for the practise of agriculture induced community life and a consciousness of property, and lent stability to the hand-to-mouth existence he had previously led. From these tiny roots grew all those things which we now accept unquestioningly as the essence of modern life. When therefore a site is found where there is pottery and the evidence of agricultural pursuits, but not yet of the use of metal, it is said to be of the neolithic period.

In the Sudan, sites of both of these types have been found and excavated, but they do not have all those features which are found in other parts of the world. The culture sometimes called "Khartoum Mesolithic," which was discovered in Khartoum close to the civil hospital, had all the tools of stone and bone which are associated with mesolithic cultures but it also had pottery. The culture of neolithic type found at Esh Shaheinab, about 30 miles north of Khartoum, showed no evidence of agriculture and only a small indication of the domestication of animals, but it was, in the standard of its tools and pottery, much more advanced. It was perhaps an early settlement of a neolithic type, and a site may well be found where all characteristics of neolithic culture are present.

Needless to say, these periods have no fixed date, but vary from area to area—there are primitive peoples in the world who to-day are not long removed from a neolithic type of existence. In the Sudan the neolithic period was probably flourishing by about 3000 B.C. and the mesolithic sometime earlier.

As this period came to a close in the Sudan, the foundations of a great civilization were being laid in Egypt, where various skills and techniques (including the use of metal) were used which were quite unknown here. About 3500 B.C. the Egyptians discovered the art of writing, and we have records which tell of their achievements. Thus we know that about 2000 B.C. they invaded and conquered the northernmost stretches of the Sudan; and this initiates the historic periods of Sudan history.

THE HISTORIC PERIODS

I. THE EGYPTIAN MIDDLE KINGDOM PERIOD (c. 2000 B.C.—1700 B.C.)

From the earliest years of this period until about 500 B.C., the history of the Sudan was closely linked with that of Egypt. The first Egyptian occupation lasted nearly 300 years, during which time the Sudan became a province of Egypt. It may have been administered by an Egyptian governor who had his headquarters at Kerma, but this is not certain, for some people think that the buildings at Kerma were only a large trading post. A series of forts was built along the river to protect trade,

and they were sited at points where the river becomes narrow and most difficult to negotiate because of rocks. The remains of these fortresses still exist at such places as Mirgissa, Shelfak, Semna, and Uronarti. All these buildings and those at Kerma were made of mud brick, and it seems probable that the Egyptians introduced this method of building to the Sudan about this time. They also brought with them their various skills—the working of metal, of which we have examples in bronze swords, ivory carving and the making of faience. The earliest beds (*angareeb*s) known in the Sudan came from Kerma, and were decorated with ivory inlay, in the form of animals and birds. These objects are chiefly of the XIIth and XIIIth dynasties, but some bear the names of earlier kings.

About 1700 B.C. the Egyptians were overpowered by an Asiatic people, the Hyksos, and Egyptian control of the Sudan came to an end. Very little is known of what happened during the next 2000 years, until, after the Hyksos were expelled from Egypt, the Egyptian Empire was re-established by the great kings of the XVIIIth dynasty.

2. THE EGYPTIAN NEW KINGDOM PERIOD (1580 B.C.—1100 B.C.)

When the Egyptians had re-established themselves at home, they came back again into the Sudan. Initially there were revolts and resistance from the Sudanese to the re-occupation of their country, but gradually they settled down and prospered under reasonably peaceful conditions. Temples were built and maintained at many places such as Buhen (opposite Wadi Halfa), Semna, Sulb, Sesibi, Amara, Kawa, and Jebel Barkal and towns grew up around them in some cases. There was much trade with Egypt proper, the Sudan supplying such things as cattle, ebony, ivory, ostrich feathers, slaves, gum, hides, and above all gold; and trade routes stretched from the borders of Egypt to the Red Sea Hills, from whence came much of the gold, and into the central Sudan, and possibly even further south. It is clear, however, that the Sudan as far south as modern Merowe was an integral part of Egypt at this time, and the town of Napata, which stood where Merowe now is, was probably the most important town south of Aswan, and was the main administrative centre for the area. This period marks the greatest extent of Egyptian influence in the Sudan.

3. THE NAPATAN PERIOD (750 B.C.—c. 500 B.C.)

As the Egyptian Empire began to decay about 1100 B.C., another period of obscurity begins in the Sudan. Although no details of the history of this country during the next few hundred years are known, it is certain that Egyptian influence was still great, and there was probably a colony of Egyptian priests of the god Amūn-Ra at Jebel Barkal. This

hill became sacred to the god and a great temple was built there for him. The area around Jebel Barkal and on the other side of the river must have been the centre of political and cultural activity throughout the period, and eventually became the capital of the first organized Sudanese state.

In the year 750 B.C. a man called Kashta became king of Kush (the contemporary name for the Northern Sudan) and made his capital at this town, then known as Napata.* He included Upper Egypt as far as Thebes (Luxor) in his kingdom, and managed to confine the Egyptian king to the area of the Delta. Kashta's successor, Piankhy, who ruled from 744-710 B.C., completed the conquest of Egypt, and he and his immediate successors became kings of Egypt, where they form the XXVth dynasty. The most famous of these was Taharqa (688-663 B.C.). In the year 661 B.C., in the reign of Tanwetamani, the Sudanese were driven out of Egypt by the Assyrians, but they continued their rule in the Sudan for another 150 years from Napata, until about 500 B.C. when they moved their capital further south to Meroë.

There is evidence of Egyptian influence during the whole of this period; for example, the Napatan kings borrowed from Egypt the idea of burying their royal families in pyramids; the temples which they built and the religion which they practised in them are strict copies of Egyptian examples, and all the smaller antiquities which remain to us are identical in inspiration with Egyptian ones, though the workmanship is often not so good. It is clear, however, that after the Assyrian conquest of Egypt, the Napatan kingdom became a separate entity and did not owe allegiance to Egypt. In the centuries that followed the separation, the Egyptian influence on art and the traditions taken over from Egypt gradually died out. Even the use of the Egyptian language had died out by the beginning of the first century A.D. and the country developed its own language, Meroitic, and its own demotic and hieroglyphic script.

4. THE MEROITIC PERIOD (c. 500 B.C.—A.D. 350)

The transfer of the capital of the Napatan kingdom to Meroë involved no change in development or culture, but was caused by the gradual assumption of political power by another branch of the royal family which had been settled for some years at Meroë. There followed a period of considerable prosperity, and the town of Meroë flourished. It appears to have been a wealthy city, its revenue being based in part on the extensive

* Napata is the name of the ancient town near which modern Merowe now stands. 'Merowe' must not be confused with ancient 'Meroë', the town which gives its name to another period of Sudan history. Ancient Meroë was near to Kabushiya, and the railway line from Wadi Halfa to Khartoum runs through the middle of the town, now, as seen from the train, only brick covered mounds.

iron working which was carried out there. It was a centre of trade and was well known throughout the Greek and Roman world, being mentioned by several of the classical writers. Many objects of Greek and later Roman workmanship were imported and have been found in Meroitic tombs—even as far south as Sennar—and it seems clear that the wealthier, at least, of the Meroitic people were able to maintain a high standard of living. Their own art was unique and had many individual characteristics, but it also derived much from classical and Egyptian art forms; the temple known as the “kiosk” at Naga and the swimming bath at Meroë are good examples of the influence of classical forms on their architecture; while the great temple to the god Amūn at Meroë must have been a fine building in the Egyptian style.

The extent of the Meroitic kingdom has not yet been defined and although Meroitic goods have been found near Sennar, this might have been an outpost beyond the confines of the empire. The great majority of Meroitic sites are to be found in the “Island of Meroë,” the area between the Nile and the Atbara. The most important of these are Musawarat es Sufra, Naga, and Basa (in addition of course to Meroë itself), where recognizable and extensive remains are still to be seen, but there are traces of temples, reservoirs for water, and other buildings in many places in the area.

Some time before the end of the Meroitic period, the power of the empire must have waned and its wealth decreased. The latest graves at Meroë contained goods of a very poor quality compared with the earlier ones, and there was probably not much building. Most serious of all was the loss of the art of writing, for the events for many years after the end of this period are unknown, and the fall of Meroë itself is known only from an inscription set up in Axum, in Abyssinia, by the king who sent an expedition to Meroë in A.D. 350 and found it in ruins. After A.D. 350, in spite of its former importance, Meroë apparently ceased to exist even in men's thoughts, so much so that there was not even a traditional belief about where it lay. It was only when an interesting looking collection of brick covered mounds were excavated in 1909-14 by Garstang, that ancient Meroë was finally identified, although it is true that archaeologists had had a suspicion for some few years that these might represent the town.

The Meroitic period represents the only period in the ancient history of the Sudan when the Sudanese achieved a high state of culture without the prompting of an outside people—they were able at this time to pick and choose amongst the other cultures known to them and retain only those features which appealed to them, with the result that they have left for us some of the finest monuments and antiquities which the Sudan possesses.

5. THE CHRISTIAN PERIOD (A.D. 540-1504)

In the year A.D. 540, the Empress Theodora of Byzantium sent missionaries to the Sudan to convert the people to Christianity. They were successful in this, and within a short time two powerful kingdoms arose with Christianity as their official religion. Of these two kingdoms, one, with its capital at Old Dongola, covered much the same area as Northern Province covers to-day; while the other, with its capital at Soba, had the area of the Blue Nile and the Gezira for its territory. The Northern kingdom was originally two kingdoms—Nobatia and Makurrah, but they later became one, called Nobatia; and the southern one was called the kingdom of Alwah.

The Northern Kingdom, with its elements of Byzantine Greek influence, developed a remarkable culture of its own, including a distinctive type of pottery decorated with attractive designs in colour. They built many little churches of brick modelled on the Byzantine type, and one fine one of stone at Ghazali, near Merowe. Greek and Coptic were in use in the churches as well as Old Nubian, which had succeeded Meroitic as the language of the country.

The history of the Northern kingdom is one of almost incessant warfare with the Muslims of Egypt. These wars started in A.D. 641 when the Egyptians invaded Nubia, but they found that their enemies were a people to be reckoned with, and could achieve nothing better than making a treaty with them, by which an exchange of goods was arranged—the Nubians would supply slaves in return for grain and cloth. Conditions of peace did not last for long, however, and sporadic warfare was carried on culminating in a battle in A.D. 1323 when the Christians were finally defeated. They soon became converted to Islam, but the church at Dongola had already been turned into a mosque in 717 A.H. (A.D. 1317), according to an inscription in it.

During the greater part of this period, there was much penetration by Arabs through the Red Sea route. Tombstones have been found in the Red Sea Hills, one of which is dated A.D. 900, which were set up on the graves of some of these Arab travellers, and they are the earliest Arabic inscriptions known in this country. It seems likely that the conversion from Christianity to Islam was a more gradual process than would perhaps appear, and there may well have been a considerable number of converts amongst the inhabitants of the Northern kingdom, at least, some time before A.D. 1323.

The kingdom of Alwah has left little record of its history, and most of what is known has been found in the reports of travellers who passed through the kingdom. From their accounts it seems that Soba, the capital, was a town of some size, and "contained fine buildings, extensive

monasteries, churches full of gold, and gardens." (Maqrizi). Later, in 1208, it was again reported to be a flourishing town with good crops, and fine buildings (Abu Salih). It is evident that it was a place of some importance, and it controlled a large area. However, after the defeat of the Northern Kingdom, it became increasingly difficult for the people of Alwah to maintain contact with their ecclesiastical centre, Alexandria, and, although they tried to maintain their religion and religious teaching, the isolation in which they found themselves led to decay of their culture, and in A.D. 1504 they were defeated by a people from the south, the Fung. Soba was sacked, and the Christian religion was replaced swiftly by that of Islam.

DARFUR

It is perhaps unnecessary to point out that the story of the Sudan, as told in these pages, refers almost exclusively to the lands north of Khartoum which border the Nile. This is because little or nothing is known of the ancient history of other areas, with one important exception—Darfur.

Lying away to the west, Darfur has never been in very close contact with the riverain areas, except through the link of trade routes, and it is likely that there was greater influence from the lands to the north and further west.

By A.D. 1200, Darfur was in the hands of a people called the Daju and it is believed traditionally that they were the first rulers there. They were replaced, at least in the northern and central areas of Darfur, by the Tungur about A.D. 1350, a people who are thought originally to have come from the region of Dongola. The southern part of Darfur was perhaps still controlled by the Daju. During much of this period, there was nomad Arab infiltration from the north and east, and many settled in Darfur while others moved on westwards. Although they never became strong enough to conquer the country themselves, they spread Islamic beliefs and customs and, most important of all, were numerous enough to be a force which could not be ignored, with the result that warring tribes were all suing for their support. By A.D. 1500, the Tungur kingdom was at the height of its power; Islam was the official religion and Arabic was spoken at court. Shortly afterwards, however, the Tungur capital at Orrei was taken by the people of Bornu, who in their turn became the rulers of Darfur for a period.

The economy of Darfur was based mainly on the slave trade, and raids were made especially from the north to carry off slaves for the North African market. There are the remains of many stone-built palaces, mosques, and other buildings in Darfur, but most of them are probably

more recent in date than A.D. 1500. One, however, is certainly of the earlier period—the remains of Orrei, the Tungur capital. The buildings were substantial and made in a style which is undoubtedly African in inspiration—based on the typically African round hut, surrounded by a protective wall or fence. There is no evidence of any great cultural attainments, or that the affairs of Darfur had any marked effect on the rest of the Sudan.

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