

Bruce Williams

A-Group Society in the Context of Northeastern Africa

A-Group contrasts with later C-Group, and some other cultural phases in Nubia in the diversity of its material culture and classes of burial. Major ancient phases with limited class distinction reflected in burials include most of C-Group, Pan Grave, and the pre-Twenty-Fifth Dynasty Napatan in Lower Nubia. Zibelius-Chen (1988: 55-63), for example, discusses C-Group. Some divisions in the earlier C-Group can be noted (Williams 1993: 37). Although the differences are not as strong as in late A-Group, the Neolithic showed distinctions of wealth and status, as did A-Group and Kerma (Geus 2002: 3-9), and the major phases of Napatan, Meroitic, and X-Group. Both the class distinctions and the cultural diversity were partly replicated in the Kerma, Napatan, Meroitic, and post-Meroitic or X-Group periods. The cultural diversity indicates contacts with a broader area than just the Nile Valley such that assumptions that the culture was entirely riparian can be challenged and parallels drawn between the cultural ecology of A-Group and later times.

The following article is offered in memory of Lech Krzyzaniak, who contributed profoundly to the study of early cultures in Northeastern Africa and generously offered large opportunities to explore, examine, and share new ideas and discoveries in a field that he did so much to change.

Social Differentiation in A-Group

Based on its limited number of sites and the modest number of tombs in its cemeteries, A-Group was once characterized socially as a scattered population of loose tribes and kin groups. (Geus 2002: 4-9). This characterization did not take into account the complexity and refinement of crafts and some customs, nor did it consider the selective preservation of sites in A-Group Nubia, and the strong bias in favour of cemeteries. Nordström (2004) analyzed A-Group social structure as revealed in the cemeteries. For the wider issue of development in the

early A-Group, see H.S. Smith (1991). Since modern Nubian strip-villages with large house-enclosures vastly reduced the number of sites available for exploration (Williams 1986: 5-7) A-Group was both under-represented and under-explored. Habitation sites on the desert edge seem, like many early habitation sites above the Third Cataract, to have been reduced to scatterings of sherds and stone debris by deflation where they were not originally rubbish scatters, despite the recent discovery of Pre-Kerma remains. Upstream, even in Kerma times, settlement sites away from Kerma tended to be small, with not very substantial structures (Welsby 2001: 589 gives a summary; for rural Kerma sites see Gratien 2002; Welsby, Macklin & Woodward 2002: 30-32). One site, however, was a kilometre long. Moreover implicit or explicit in the earlier characterization was the attribution of refined objects to an Egyptian origin that assumed a sharp cultural division between the regions, an assumption that alone supported the attribution. Despite Murnane (1987) the Gebel Sheikh Suleiman monument is still sometimes attributed to Djer (cf. Bongrani 1998).

A-Group is no longer considered a simple backwater. Evidence of concentration in wealth and authority is now recognized from a number of perspectives. This recognition came about, not just because of the cemetery of great tombs at Qustul, but an analysis of sites by Nordström, in which he discerned a burgeoning social differentiation in A-Group's middle and later phases (Nordström 2004; Geus 2002: 4-9). This social differentiation began earlier (cf. below).

Social differentiation, in both wealth and culture actually first appeared in the earliest cemeteries at Khor Bahan not far south of Aswan, which contained some remarkably rich tombs, (Nordström 2004: 140 and fig. 5; Gatto 1998; H.S. Smith 1991: 98-101) although differences in wealth were less than those found in contemporary Naqada I Egypt (Nordström 2004: 136; for the Naqada I Gebelein textile Williams & Logan 1987: 255-256 and fig. 15). The graves at Khor Bahan were typical of the Sudanese Neolithic, (cf. Geus 1991: 57-59, figs. 5-6 with Reisner 1910: figs. 69, 71, and 72 Cem. 17: 7, 17: 50 and 17: 56) while the pottery and most objects were typical of Naqada I Egypt (H.S. Smith 1991: 98-101; Nordström 2004: 104; Gatto 1998). Subsequently, the pottery and small objects of northern Nubia became increasingly like those of contemporary Sudan (Nordström 2004: 140-142) where differences in wealth also appear (Geus 2002: 3-4; Reinold 1991: 26-28) although Egyptian pottery storage vessels remained common (Williams 1986: 67-78). Middle A-Group tombs at Sayala were very rich, but this was also the date of the earliest great tombs at Qustul. If the transition to late A-Group is set at the replacement of rippled fine pottery by painted pottery, Sayala belongs to Middle A-Group, contemporary with the earliest two tombs in Qustul Cemetery L (note following). Sayala was a place of special importance (Geus 2002: 7; Nordström 2004: 139-143; H.S. Smith 1991: 107-108), as well as

Qustul (Williams 1986: 377-381, 165-167 and table 42). In the Late A-Group, new elements from the west were added to the pottery, for example with shapes that resemble A-Group, but with surfaces often indented (“controlled rilling”; see Hope 2002: figs. 8-10; cf. Williams 1986: fig. 10 P). At Tunqala West, one tomb had a high cairn-tumulus (H.S. Smith 1962: 64-69). The tumulus type was probably unusual. The great tombs of Qustul continued to be made on the same scale of size and wealth as their royal contemporaries in Naqada III Egypt (cf. for example Dreyer 1998: fig. 2, 4, with Williams 1986: fig. 159, L 23).

Pictorial evidence from symbolic images supports the conclusion that Nubia’s rulers at that time claimed the same pharaonic status as their Egyptian contemporaries (Williams 1986: 138-147, 167-175) and some of it indicates they claimed victory in Upper Egypt (Williams 1986: 154-155).

Diversity in wealth is evident in the arrangement of cemeteries at Qustul. Excluding circular cache-pits, found in all areas, major burials in the cemeteries of Qustul occur in an ascending social order from north to south. Cemetery W1 contained burials ranging in wealth from small shafts with only one or two vessels up to burials in tombs several meters long, with numerous and varied pottery vessels and objects. Two of these were bed-form burials (Williams 1989: fig. 27, W11, fig. 51, V61). W1 and W42 here are Dyn. XXV in date (Williams 1990: figs. 2 and 8). Farther south, tombs in the large area called Cemetery V were larger, and they included shafts with side chambers, at least one bed burial, and probably large shafts. The bed burial and the trench with side chamber are of interest here, not just because of their recurrence, but because they differ from contemporary Egyptian tombs and from burials south of the Third Cataract. A few circular graves might appear in this large area. Although I originally interpreted them as reused cache pits, they contained A-Group pots of types not usually found in storage pits (Williams 1986: 117 and notes 12-13). Southernmost of the series was the cemetery of great tombs, L. A group of rectangular deposits nearby, Cemetery S, was probably ancillary to the great tombs making up a great funerary complex (Williams 1989: 99-104, 138). This sequence, from middle class to great tombs, may represent a social progression of the type found generally in the distribution of tombs in Egyptian necropolis, i.e. a north to south ascending social progression (suggested by G. Emberling and S. Harvey).

A-Group belonged to both the Neolithic of Sudanese tradition and the Naqada Culture, but recent discoveries in the Libyan Desert show that related cultures spread across the savannah, probably as far as the Gilf el-Kebir (see Schön 1996: Taf. 66-1 Wadi Akhdar II 81/2). While not identical with the core A-Group culture, they are within the range of variation represented in the valley sites, which display considerable eclecticism. The A-Group’s radius of action was therefore larger in area than Upper Egypt, even if the area was more sparsely

populated. It should not be surprising to find that the A-Group developed institutions that matched this substantial area of responsibility with suitable signs of authority (for discussion of different items see Darnell 2002: 159; Rampersad 2000; Williams 2006; Heldall & Storemyr 2003: 37; see below). The growth of this power can now be examined against a wider background of events in north-eastern Africa that show wide-ranging relations and high levels of organization.

Sudan and the deserts in the later Neolithic and Pre-Kerma Periods

The deserts of ancient Egypt and Nubia were at least as important for the movement of people, animals, and goods as they have been in recent times. In the wet phase of the Holocene Sahara, the actual desert retreated some 800 kilometres northward, making wide areas available for at least seasonal occupation and greatly easing travel. It seems that monsoon rains reached as far north as Dakhla (Kuper 2002: 3). Recent research indicates that the early Nile-based societies each had a large range of action that included both the seasonally-inundated valley and the surrounding savannah. Discoveries in northern Sudan include evidence of relations with Upper Egypt's earliest culture, the Tasian, which has also left traces in the deserts (Darnell 2002: 162-65; Friedman & Hobbs 2002). To the south and west, relatively moist climatic conditions created a river in the Wadi Howar that flowed from Chad to the Nile (Keding 2004).

Complexity in the Sudanese Neolithic

Burials at Kadero and el-Ghaba/Kadada displayed differences in wealth that the excavators attributed to class (Geus 2002: 3-4). While the numbers and types of grave goods varied considerably, it is the size of the el-Ghaba cemetery that indicates the existence of a substantial settled population on a scale that compares with Upper Egypt (Reinold & Krzyzaniak 1997: 12). At Kadruka, Reinold excavated a cemetery that was apparently organized around the burial of a single individual and included sacrifices (Reinold 1991: 28).

The Pre-Kerma Culture

Knowledge of the Pre-Kerma Culture is still limited, but much of the Dongola reach has not been explored completely and sites are badly deflated. It is not surprising that few objects yet reveal specifics of a symbolic universe for them. At Barga, the excavator Honegger found a settlement that was organized carefully enough to indicate the presence of an authority, something he referred to as a pre-kingdom (Honegger 2004a: 91-93). Both at Kerma/Barga and Sai, circular pits were used for storage (Geus 2004; Honegger 2004a: 88-89), the normal storage technique used in the Nile Valley as far as northern Egypt (Williams 1982.) Significantly, a sealing with a definite symbolic design, indicates the presence of some kind of administrative arrangements (Honegger 2004b: 69, cat. 54).

The knowledge of rock art in this area is also very shadowy. A few applicable fragments of evidence, all from the igneous boulders that make up the dikes of the Third Cataract may indicate something of an early symbolic universe that parallels developments on the Lower Nile.



Fig. 1. Neolithic rock-drawing of a hunt, at Akkad on the West Bank of the Nile, near Tumbos.

(all rock-drawings have been digitally traced in white on photographs by the author. The opportunity to study these drawings was graciously provided by a gift of Mrs. Louise Bradbury to the Oriental Institute to support archaeological field research in Sudan and by Prof. Stuart Tyson Smith, director of the University of California at Los Angeles Expedition to the Dongola Reach in 1997 and the University of California at Santa Barbara Expedition to Tumbos in 2000, 2002, and 2005.)

At Akkad, on the west bank at the southern end of the Third Cataract, are a number of rock art stations, and remains of early sites, including Neolithic. At least one hunt scene is near an early site (Fig. 1). Another early drawing is a hippopotamus hunt pecked on a boulder at ground level sheltered behind a higher boulder with cattle drawings of the Kerma period (Säve-Söderbergh 1953: 15-19, fig 8). The rump of a hippopotamus figure found at Badari-Hemamiyeh is painted with a boat and men carrying harpoons (Brunton & Caton-Thompson 1928: 54 pl. 54-15; Williams & Logan 1987: 260-261). The relative date of the

drawing of the hippopotamus hunt on the boulder is secured by the fact that it is much more patinated than the cattle drawings on the more exposed rock in front of it. Its closest parallel is on a Naqada I palette in the Medelhavsmuseet (Säve-Söderbergh 1953: fig 8; Asselberghs 1961: pl. 46).

A second representation, at Hannek, is in a cluster of boulders that may have served as a kind of shrine. Surrounding it is a large Kerma, and perhaps earlier site. Representations pecked on the boulders include rhinoceros (Fig. 2), giraffes, and elephants. One elephant, crudely drawn, has the ears elevated and the trunk thrust forward, treads on a crenellated structure (Fig. 3) (cf. also Van Albada & Van Albada 2000: fig. 64). This combination can be compared with the elephant treading on triangles or mountains found in late Naqada Period Egypt (Fig. 4). (Quibbell, 1900: pl. XVI-4; Williams 1988a: 37, fig. 2d; Dreyer 1998: 173-180, fig. 104; Baque-Manzano 2002: 36-38; Kemp 2000: 223-226, fig. 10). In this case, however, the crenellations, matched by a curved line below that makes a complete shape, have a specific parallel in nature directly in view across the river, Gebel Alarambi (Fig. 5) (Williams 2006: 154).

A third example is a group of rock drawings on a cluster of boulders between the Hannek and Akkad sites, also near a Kerma site. This includes several boats, high at one end, truncated at the other, one with a simple curved cabin, containing what appears to be a human figure (see Raffaele 2005: Aha 1; Vandier 1952: 829; Engelmeyer 1965: pl. II 1-4, 8; IV 5; XII 4; XXII 7; XLV 2; LIV 1). Exact parallels for these are difficult to find, but the nearest date to the Egyptian First Dynasty.

If it would be exaggeration to suggest a state with a detailed bureaucracy and complex official culture from these fragments, formalized symbolic religious thought and social differentiation are indicated, and some kind of administration, all at an early period, Neolithic and Pre-Kerma. Moreover, without being Egyptian, or having exact parallels in Egypt, these phenomena represent a parallel, informed, development.

Desert and Valley in Naqada Period Egypt

While Egypt's Naqada Culture and its northern neighbours were firmly rooted in the valley, the people of Upper Egypt were especially active in the Eastern Desert (cf. S.T. Smith 2004) most likely for mining, hunting, quarrying, and herding. In any case, from the Wadi Hammamat east of Coptos to the Wad Abbad east of El Kab and further to the south, masses of rock drawings attest to a sustained and intense interest in the Eastern Desert by the Upper Egyptians of the Naqada Culture (Cf. Winkler 1938; 1939; Rohl 2000).

A certain equilibrium between the seasonally-watered savannah lands and the continuously watered valley and oases remained intact as long as the Holocene



Fig. 2. Neolithic or Pre-Kerma rock-drawing of animals including a rhinoceros at Hannek site on the West Bank of the Nile in the Third Cataract, near Tumbos.

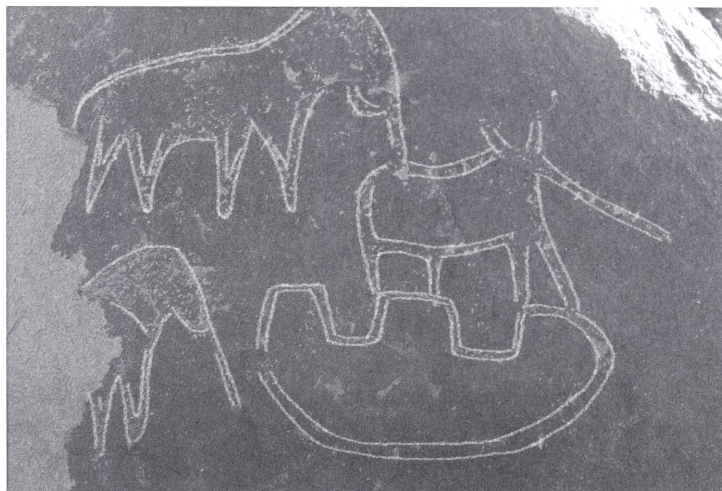


Fig. 3. Neolithic or Pre-Kerma rock-drawing of elephants, one striding across the summits of a *gebel* at Hannek site.



Fig. 4. Elephant striding across the summits of a *gebel*, on a carved ivory from Hierakonpolis, after Quibell 1900, pl. XV-4.

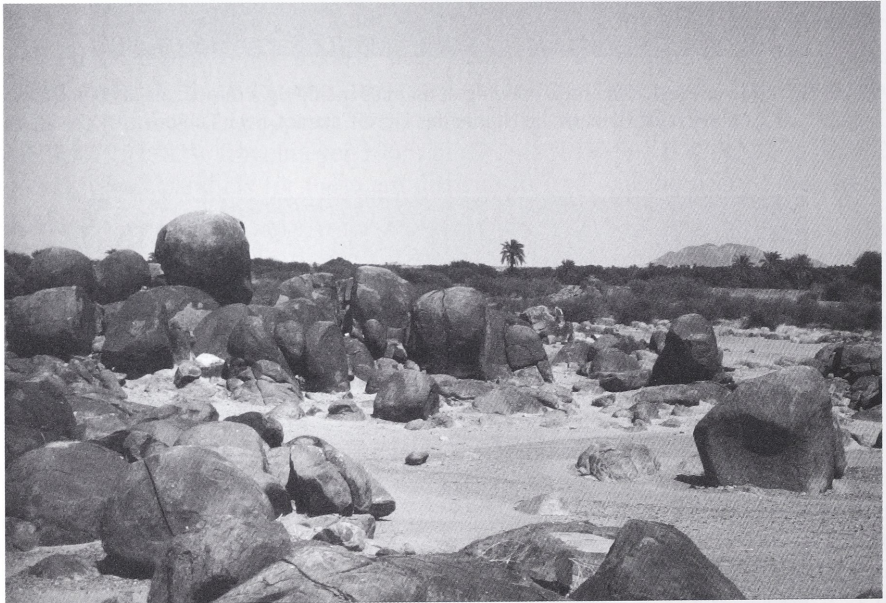


Fig 5. Hannek site, cluster of boulders with rock-drawings. Gebel Alarambi in the Eastern Desert is visible in the distance.

rains watered the land well enough to support a population. The relationships were not entirely symmetrical, even then, as the rock art indicates, but the existence of substantial water sources at various distances from the large, permanent ones gave a measure of independence to fairly large savannah populations. To some extent, variable preservation has contributed to an imbalance in the evidence. Settlements in the Nile Valley were reused, as the debris of construction and occupation raised them above the inundation. Being deeply covered by later remains, they are few and difficult of access. Early remains are best preserved on the desert edge where they were thick enough to resist deflation, not reused, and not dug away as *sebakh*. Desert sites were prone to deflation and more difficult to detect, which has kept them from attracting systematic attention until relatively recently. Kuper (2002: pl. 7) shows the major migration to the valley by about 4000.

Consolidation in the Valley

By 4000 B.C., this equation changed. Rainfall decreased so that the populations of the northern savannah found progressively less food for their cattle, and water became scarce. By some time in the early Old Kingdom, the Western Desert had become enough of a desert for travel to require special logistical arrangements, although parts of the *Darb el-Arba'in* could be traversed by donkey train as late as the Sixth Dynasty. Harkhuf's travels are well known (Helck: in LÄ II: 1130; Meurer 1996: 76-77), but note also Meri and his travels to the west (Kuper 2002: 10). The population dwindled as the desert expanded and it became possible for people who lived in areas with a permanent water supply to extend an importance into predominance, predominance into domination, and, sometimes, domination into control. This new equation of desiccation was not changed until the coming of the camel restored a new measure of mobility and independence, and sometimes superiority, to the desert. Some rainfall persisted in the Red Sea Hills, and this permitted overland contact with the savannah-lands and watercourses farther south. The Bedja have continued to live there in numbers sufficient to maintain a strong identity to the present day.

In the last half of the fourth millennium B.C., Egypt coalesced from a series of smaller kingdoms based on what were later major temple-cities of Upper Egypt into a single great entity, a colossus that had a profound effect on its neighbours. This Egypt was born in struggle. Weapons were among its earliest grave goods (see Petrie 1920: 22-23, pls. xxv-xxvi; Reinold 1987: fig. 7a, for example). The earliest art depicts hunts, some of the most impressive being organized hippopotamus hunts involving coordinated attacks by harpoon from land, small water craft and large boats (Säve-Söderbergh 1953; Williams & Logan 1987: 260-261). A few important paintings show that ritualized executions of bound prisoners also took place, presumably after combats (Williams & Logan

1987: 261-265; Williams 1988b: 46-51; Dreyer et al. 1998: 111-112, figs. 12, 1 and 13). They continued through the Naqada II (Williams & Logan 1987: 253-257) into the tumultuous period when the state encompassed all Egypt and they were stock themes of Egyptian art thereafter. Labels on some of these scenes of struggle indicate that they were directed not just against rivals in Egypt, but also the lands outside, such as Libya and Nubia (Asselberghs 1961: pl. 92; Raffaele 2005: Aha smiting Ta-Seti; also Vandier 1952: 834; for the Gebel Sheikh Suleiman Monument: Murnane 1987; Williams & Logan 1987: 263-264. See also Williams 1986: 167-172).

The late Naqada period corresponded to the drying spell, and this, probably combined with military force, depopulated the adjacent deserts. By the time of Narmer, today considered the dynastic founder, and his successor, Aha, Egypt was ready to neutralize areas adjacent to its frontiers, in Sinai, Palestine, and Nubia. (Nubia: H.S. Smith 1991: 108; Sinai: Hartung 1998: 346-348; Palestine: Hartung 1998: 348-378, 387-388). In doing so, Egypt ended two thriving trading communities and uprooted networks of communication that had endured for generations, founding an anti-settlement policy that continued until the late Old Kingdom. An echo of the end of the anti-settlement policy may be found in the rise of the C-Group, closely watched and managed by the nomarchs of Elephantine. These Nubians provided soldiers for the great Egyptian campaigns in Palestine. It was this triumphant and monumental Egypt, which gave rise to the historical conceit of a solitary eminence.

Representation and an Economy of Classes in A-Group.

The development of a class structure was discerned in the physical evidence of goods and graves, but it would be reasonable to expect that it would be reflected in art and architecture. Architecture hardly appears in A-Group, but there is a large amount of art, much of it significant. The rock art of Lower Nubia includes immense numbers of representations of river vessels, both ordinary and sacred. Of the same types as found in Naqada Period Egypt, these attest clearly to the importance of sustained contact with that country. They also point to a shared cultural background, because the religious and triumphal nature of the sacred vessels could not have been unknown in Nubia. Since A-Group had its own rulers, these vessels must have belonged in A-Group as much as Egypt. For Naqada period high-stern vessels at Djara, see Le Quellec, Flers and Flers (2005: 49-50, figs. 76, 77, 80) and for the victorious gesture with arms upraised in the Gilf el Kebir, sometimes in a line dance, see the same authors (2005: figs. 632, 783 in Uweinat). The similarity is general, however (Le Quellec, Flers and Flers 2005: 262-264). Uweinat and the Gilf el Kebir are almost equidistant from the Nubian Nile and the Wadi Howar.

However, it is ordinary boats that are of special interest here, because what they carry often differs greatly from the cabins on boats shown on the painted pottery of Upper Egyptian Naqada II, or even the Hierakonpolis Painted Tomb. Many Nubian boats are shown with a curved mound amidships that must represent a cargo (examples in Engelmayer 1965: pls. 3: 5c; 4: 1, 3, and 5; 16: 4; 17: 1, 2; 18: 7; 19: 4-5, 20: 1b; 23: 4). A similar representation of cargo appears later in the Sanam temple reliefs (Griffith 1922: pls. 26:1, 31:2). Detailed representations of cargo of this type appear in the bows of boats in Huy's tomb (Davies & Gardiner 1926: pl. 33). Lines crossing the mounds that intersect at right angles further indicate that this is a protective tarpaulin held by cords (cf. Engelmayer 1965: pl. 19: 4-5).

Certain trade goods appear in the archaeological record. Hundreds of cache-pits found with pottery at Khor Daud near Wadi Allaqi (Merpert & Bolshakov 1964) indicate that the gold mines were already exploited there. Carnelian mines near Toshka show the origin of that semi-precious substance to have been near the heart of A-Group Nubia, noted by a Norwegian-British expedition but not extensively explored (Heldall & Storemyr 2003: 37, referring to Stele Ridge; Harrell n.d.a; n.d.b). Incense, almost certainly of southern origin, appears not only in the great tombs at Qustul, but also in more modest graves, sometimes in fairly large fragments. It occurs frequently in Egypt (Petrie 1920: 44; Petrie & Quibell 1896: 21, 28, 29; Brunton & Caton-Thompson 1928: 63)¹

All of these products could be shipped in quite small, but still valuable packages and one wonders what actually was under the cargo-covers of these boats, but the monumental commemoration indicates it was probably precious and related to the goods Nubia was later customarily expected to yield as tribute. What other materials might have been traded is uncertain, but they perhaps included dates. The representations relate to trade along the river, but evidence exists for A-Group activity in the deserts.

The Relevance of the “Sudanic Kingdom.”

An important feature of the later Kushite cultures, Kerma, Napata, and Meroe, was that they consisted of a core official, formal culture surrounded by,

¹ see also Petrie Collection online, which notes a number of resin fragments). Petrie Collection online contains a number of resin fragments: 17122 from Tarkhan; 4360 from Naqada, large and small lumps; 4403 from Naqada; 5123 from Ballas; 5125 from Ballas; 51605 bead; 51997 unworked; 5450 from Ballas; 836 black; 59796 same; 72678 poss Naqada; 72582 possibly from Naqada; 72685 possibly from Naqada; 72686 probably from Naqada; 72688 from Meydum IV; 72691 probably from Naqada; 72942 from Naqada; 7364 from Lahun, a cake dating to Dynasty I; 75942 from Hierakonpolis, possibly resin for incense consisting of lumps and fragments; 75943 from Hierakonpolis, white resin; 9004 from Badari, important Badarian fragments; 9143 from Badari, beads, Badarian;

and imposed upon traditional cultures that could be considered diverse (Edwards 1998; Fuller 2003). Like its successors, A-Group society had a core official culture, with a variety of material cultures represented in its area of activity. It could thus be characterized loosely as a social antecedent of the kingdoms of Kush, the latest of which Edwards and Fuller have recently characterized as Sudanic. A group aspiring to dominance, with symbolic traditions more or less formalized to express that dominance that penetrated ordinary customs, and perhaps even the domestic economy acquired direct control or great influence over a wide area. Dependent or subject peoples might have had very different cultures, even though subject to the same rule. The ascendancy was military, although control of trade was a major objective of government action. The word control might at times be too strong to describe activity that merely suppressed some entity that threatened to interfere with trade. Certainly authority late in the Funj Empire or shortly after as seen by Burckhardt in its latest stages did not do much to police or regulate the trade routes that criss-crossed its northern domain. Trade in these areas had its own momentum, and all parties had a stake in its success, so wilful impedance was local and temporary. It was dangerous, so an important guarantee was in the fact that there were alternate routes for the same trade, namely slaves. A key point in the characterization of the kingdoms of Nilotic Sudan was their combined sway over lands with permanent water and those with seasonal supply augmented by permanent fixed sources, such as wells and hafirs. In a form appropriate to the technology of the Neolithic, this cultural ecology spread northward hundreds of kilometres by 9,000 B.C. and persisted for millennia, withdrawing southward at a pace that allowed Kerma to succeed the A-Group in a succession of kingdoms that lasted until the end of the ancient world.

Conclusion

Relatively new to this discussion are two major challenges to the belief that Egypt was isolated in Africa in early times. First, the Neolithic of Sudan is now known to have been much more complex socially than thought only a generation ago (Reinold & Krzyzaniak 1997: 12; Reinold 1991: 28) and it had significant influence on the earliest phase of Neolithic culture in Upper Egypt, the Tasian (Friedman 2002; see Darnell 2002: 158-159 for later connections, 162-165 for Tasian). This important relationship continued, shown most dramatically, in the northern Nubian A-Group when the pharaonic dynasty of rulers arose at Qustul to play a role in the emergence of united Egypt.

The second challenge is found in the evidence that the deserts were not just highways but places where there were actual populations, even if they were more mobile than the people in the valley. These desert dwellers even built significant stone monuments well before the Pyramids. These monuments, and the Qustul Dynasty show that unlike Nile-cantered Egypt, Nubia drew upon a base

that spread across the savannah, much like old Kush at Kerma (W.V. Davies, n.d.) or the Napatan and Meroitic empires much later. Neither Nubia nor the deserts were merely fields of activity for the Egyptians, their distinctive cultures interacted with Egypt and transmitted at least some ideas to and from more remote regions.

In ancient Saharan Africa, art, the most revealing of all evidence for transmissions, exists in a contrast between wide-ranging material cultures and a regionalized mosaic of highly developed artistic traditions. These traditions were not strictly isolated from one another, but they shared important details and even large themes across time as well as space to create a distinctively African cultural expression. Some of these themes and details appear in the cultures along the middle Nile, which have often been treated as though they were remote from the rest of the continent. Discoveries of recent decades have shown that Nilotic cultures developed with contact, influence, and participation from the deserts, and that these deserts were highways to regions farther away. After the advent of desiccation, the political entities of Nubia, however, retained wide spheres of action and cultural and economic pluralism.

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