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Two proto-kingdoms in Lower Nubia in the fourth millennium BC

Abstract

Examination of archaeological data (mainly from Cemetery L at Qustul) as well as epigraphic material (from Gebel Sheikh Suleiman and labels from Horus Aha's tomb at Umm el-Qaab) permits to suggest the existence of two proto-kingdoms in Lower Nubia at the end of the fourth millennium BC. They played an important role in the politics of early Nilotic states. Additional sources suggest that Lower Nubia was abandoned at the beginning of the third millennium BC.

Introduction

The main excavations campaigns in Lower Nubia were carried out in two phases. The first was in the first decade of the 20th century (Reisner, Smith, and Derry 1909; Reisner 1910; Firth 1912, 1915, 1927; Junker 1919, 1926) and the second one in the beginning of the 60's (Nordström 1972; Williams 1986, 1989). There were also smaller campaigns between these two phases (Emery and Kirwan 1935; Steindorf 1935).

Although the information used here is limited to published results and museum collections, it is possible to re-interpret the events of the fourth millennium BC from a different perspective, based on publication of excavations carried out in the 1960s, as well as the latest excavations now underway in Egypt and on the Central Nile.

The main aim of this paper is to demonstrate that there were two proto-kingdoms in Lower Nubia (from Elephantine to Dal) whose rulers were buried at Sayala and Qustul. Although Wilkinson (2000: fig. 3) points out the existence of both entities, he did not study them deeply.

I will also attempt to show that there was a conflict between both polities over the control of trade and access to objects from Egypt and raw material from the Central Nile. In that conflict, Egypt had at the beginning a passive policy but later, when its interests were threatened by a unified proto-state in Lower Nubia, it began to play an active role in the competition between the two Nubian polities.

Some comments on Lower Nubian items

Gatto and Tiraterra (1996) have differentiated two cultural areas in Lower Nubia. They examined the remaining materials of ten A-Group cemeteries located in strategic areas along the Nile. From the analysis of non-ceramic materials, Lower Nubia can be divided into two different areas: north and south. On one hand, Gatto and Tiraterra (1996:333) believe that North of Qustul the trade probably played a major role in the economy and in the social structure of the population. On the other hand, Qustul was an unusual case compared to surrounding cemeteries. South of Qustul, materials reveal an agro-pastoral economy with less trade with Egypt.

From the study commented above, it is possible to conclude the existence of two different areas in Lower Nubia. If we consider that the variety, quantity and quality of the grave goods are determinant elements of differentiation from other cemeteries, it is possible to conclude that there are two sites that permit us to locate the burial place of the élites of both areas: Sayala and Qustul.

The Nubian “royal” cemetery L at Qustul

The region in which Qustul was situated was very important strategically because it was located at the Second Cataract where navigation was impossible. In addition, Qustul was supposedly located at the valley where access to the Western Desert and therefore the oases was easier (Gatto and Tiraterra 1996:333).

In the Cemetery L of Qustul, part of the elites of the Nubian A-Group and their relatives were buried. This cemetery had a chronology corresponding to the Naqada IIIA to the first half of Naqada IIIB (the equivalent of Dynasty 0) period (for the relative chronology (Table 1) followed in this paper, see Hendrickx 1996; Williams 1986:178-179; Williams 1987:20). According to radiocarbon analyses published by Hassan and Robinson (1987:125) the ‘Terminal A-Group, correlated with the end of Naqada III and the beginning of Dynasty I in Egypt, dated to 2948±95 BC.’ Most of the ovoid storage jars can be dated to the S.D. 77, although the latest tombs contains pots that can be dated to the first years of the First Dynasty (Williams 1986:164). Thus, the development of this cemetery was contemporary to the final stages of the unification process in Egypt.

In the last days of January 1964, the team directed by the Egyptologist K. C. Seele (1974:1, 29; Williams 1986:1) discovered the cemetery L, in the framework of the Nubian Salvage Campaign. This campaign was organised by the UNESCO between Abu Simbel and the Sudan frontier from 1962 to 1964. The archaeologists discovered that in most cases the tombs of this cemetery had either been plundered shortly after their construction or that they were subsequently re-used during the New Kingdom or even in the Christian period. Thus the partial or complete absence of furnishing has affected the results of previous interpretations.

Table 1. Chronology.

Years BC	Hendrickx's Stufen	Upper Egyptian Kings	Sayala	Qustul	Epigraphic records
	Naqada IIIA1	?	137: T5	L29	
3380?-3350	Naqada IIIA2	Scorpion I	137: T1	L28	
3350-3295	Naqada IIIB	?	137: T2	L24	
		?	142: T1	L23	
3295-3175		Iry-Hor	142: T7	L11	
		Horus Scorpion II	142: T4	L19	
	Naqada IIIC1	Horus Ka		L22	"Minor" GSS
		Horus Narmer		L5, L2	(1st) "Major" GSS
				L30	Wooden label
3175		Horus Aha		L1, L8	(2nd) "Major" GSS
		Horus Djer			

GSS= Gebel Sheikh Suleiman

Cemetery L at Qustul yielded thirty-three burials. Its purpose was to accommodate not only humans but also animals (cattle). With reference to this point Nordström (1996:36) confirms that A-Group social organisation had a strong matrilineal tradition, in which men expressed rank, power and authority with other means than women. Due to the poor preservation of the contents of the tombs, the archaeologists recovered only a small number of skeletons. Yet, enough survived to indicate that the burials included both individual and multiple burials (not more than two persons). This cemetery was used during the crucial period in the development of the state. Thus, it is necessary to know if a special area was devoted to the elite members of a dynasty. Hoffman, Lupton, and Adams (1982:59) speaking about the cemetery at Locality 6 of Hierakonpolis, where some members of the elite of Nekhen were buried affirmed that 'a deliberate arrangement of their tombs suggests an almost "Dynastic" or "familial" emphasis on the succession to the power.' Similarly, K. C. Seele (1974:29) suggested the possibility that Cemetery L could have been used to bury a group with royal rank.

Among the five types of A-Group tombs differentiated by Williams (1986:14-15) it is possible to detect three of them at cemetery L: royal tombs,

cattle-sacrifice burial, and cache pits and circular burial pits. Williams (1980:16) explains why he denominated some of these tombs as royal:

- a bigger size than all other tombs known in the A-Group,
- the abundance and variety in their contents,
- the presence of Egyptian objects with a royal iconography.

The royal tomb consists of a trench up to ten meters long, with an oval chamber up to five meters long by three meters wide and two to two and a half meters from the floor to ceiling (Williams 1986:14). It is possible that the tombs originally contained round-topped stele (Williams 1991:75). The total number of royal tombs in Cemetery L at Qustul is twelve (Williams 1986:167) and their chronological order is as follows: L28, L29, L24, L23, L11, L19, L22, L5, L2 L30, L1, and L8. The owner of L2 could be Horus Pe according to Williams (1986:177) or Pe Hor (Kahl 1994:887 - against both readings see Jiménez-Serrano 1999). O'Connor (1993:21) prefers to reduce the numbers to between three and eight but he does not point out which tombs he chose. Based more on the importance of artistic aspects H. S. Smith (1994:374-375) reduces the number of royal graves to eight tombs: L29, L24, L23, L19, L22, L11, L5, and L2. In the present paper, Williams' thesis is followed because he had access to the original excavation reports and to the finds.

The grave goods of these tombs consist of incised black bowls, faience vases, painted Egyptian pottery, A-Group painted pottery, Egyptian stone vases, ripple-burnished pottery, pottery of Sudanese tradition, ivory cylinders and, depending on the tombs, some other objects. As Williams (1986:21) states, 'Pottery [not only A-Group, but also of the Egyptian and Sudanese tradition] occurred in Cemetery L in much larger quantities and in a much greater variety than other A-Group sites.'

Following Nordström (1996:35), who affirmed that "... the rank and status of the dead in the Nubian A-Group is reflected by the composition of the mortuary remains, by the rituals at the funeral and by the size of the group related to or dependent of the deceased," in the present paper, a statistical study of some of the numerous aspects of this necropolis has been undertaken. Thus, a rough estimate of the surface area of the royal tombs has been calculated (Fig. 1). The estimates are rough because the walls of the subterranean chambers were irregular and sometimes did not have an orderly geometric volume. The second variant used is the number of the Egyptian pottery vessels found with the burials. Although we are conscious of the risk involved - since their number may be distorted by tomb robberies, the percentages are surprisingly uniform. In addition, robbers were likely to remove valuable objects and not pottery. Other variants chosen are pottery of Sudanese tradition (local pottery), Syro-Palestinian pottery (Early Bronze I, E.B. I), and other objects of Egyptian origin, such as the

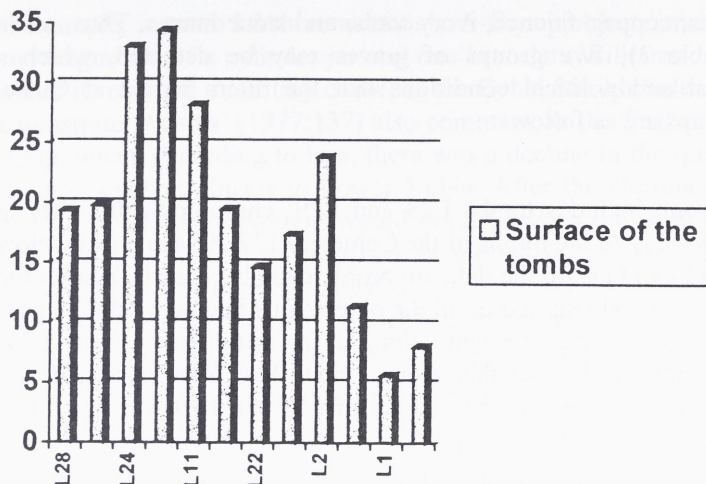


Fig. 1. Size of tombs

Table 2. Data from Qustul

	L28	L29	L24	L23	L11	L19	L22	L5	L2	L30	L1	L8
Surface m ²	19,3	19,8	33	34,34	28,13	19,42	14,64	17,3	23,81	11,34	5,65	8
Egyptian pottery			48	28	39	26	4	2	19		10	
Sudanese pottery		4			7	15	4	8	12	9	2	
E. B. I pottery		1	9			1						
Stone vessels			3	4	19	9	5	9	38	6	4	
Copper			3			2						
Faience			271 beads 8 balls				1	1	1		9	
Ivory			21 dowl-ends		2	17	3		3 many fragments of bracelets			2 fragments of cylindrical jar and bracelet
Mace-heads			1		1	1						

stone vases, copper, faience, ivory tools, and stone maces. Thus, as the graphics show (Table 2), five groups of graves may be detected, which reflect the economical and political conditions that the rulers buried at Qustul enjoyed. These groups are as follows:

1. This group includes tombs L28 and L29: chronologically, they seem to be contemporary to the tombs of the Cemetery 137 at Sayala (see below). In these two tombs of Qustul, the data are problematic because L28 lacks furnishing (it was re-used and emptied of all the objects in a later age), but its position in the cemetery shows that it might belong to the same age group as L29. Although L29 is the only one of this group, which has grave goods, it is possible to assume that the funerary furnishing of L28 and L29 was never as rich as the tombs of the following groups.
2. The surface area and number of grave goods in tombs L24, L23, L11 and L19, show a pronounced increase, especially as regards the amount of Egyptian pottery. Luxurious objects also increase with a maximum in tomb L11 where the level of the pottery of Sudanese tradition begins to stabilise (increase of local richness). In addition, tomb L24 is important in its chronology and contents. In this burial great quantities of Egyptian pottery, E.B. I pottery, copper tools, and one stone mace appeared. All of this could be explained as a result of the increase of the territorial power of the rulers of Qustul over the proto-kingdom of Sayala (compare below). This group of tombs ends with L19 which has fewer grave goods, but is more varied qualitatively, having E.B. I pottery which was found only in L24.
3. In tombs L22 and L5, there is a noticeable decrease in the number of all grave goods. Possibly this can be understood as a result of a crisis caused by political (Egyptian) or economic pressure. In the first case, this crisis can be attributed to an Egyptian military intervention in Qustul area, which may be recorded in the minor relief at Gebel Sheikh Suleiman (see below).
4. This group is represented by one tomb only, L2. This tomb has been isolated because it seems to be "an island in the middle of an ocean". The quantity of objects increases when compared to the preceding and the succeeding groups of tombs. This may be related to a new Egyptian intervention. The Egyptians could have placed a puppet ruler in Nubia or the Nubians could have done it on their own account to make the Egyptians content. However it is also possible that Egypt lost its influence due to internal problems.
5. Finally, the tombs L30, L1, and L8 belong to the monarchs at the time of the collapse of the Qustul state, as demonstrated by the low numbers of the objects imported from Egypt - in most cases it is possible to observe a total absence of

them: for example, in tomb L8 there were only A-Group objects, most of them pots, some fragments of a cylinder jar and one bracelet (Williams 1986:236). We infer that its end had a military cause, as the Gebel Sheikh Suleiman relief could demonstrate. Adams' (1977:137) also comment on the final moments of the A-Group, when, according to him, there was a decline in the quantity and quality of the Egyptian objects in Lower Nubia. After the elimination of the Lower Nubian rulers, the Egyptians would not depend on the ways which the rulers buried in Qustul (and Sayala) had developed in the trade of African products. Egypt had not intermediaries in this trade. In addition, the Lower Nubian menace to the Egyptian city of Elephantine decreased.

I also contend Williams' (1986:177) hypothesis which suggests that the rulers of Qustul initiated the unification of Egypt. It seems clear that the loss of economic power of the Qustul rulers is matched with the socio-political and economical development of both Upper and Lower Egypt (Kemp 1989:34, 41-43, 45, figs. 8 and 13; Williams 1991:79; O'Connor 1993:21; Wilkinson 2000).

The Nubian "royal" cemeteries 137 and 142 at Sayala

The A-Group cemeteries that surround the rich and strategic plain of Dakka are numerous. The characteristics of the region offered more economic possibilities than other areas of Lower Nubia. The rich plain of Dakka could support more cattle and provide more agriculture products; it has access to Wadi el-Alaqi and has important deposits of metals and minerals (Gatto and Tiraterra 1996:333; Sadr 1997).

Many cemeteries have been discovered in this region, but two are the most important: cemetery 137 (half a kilometre to the south of Sayala) and cemetery 142 (about one kilometre to the north of the ancient village of Naga Wadi). Both sites were excavated by Firth (1927:204-217) who noted that they were plundered in ancient and modern times, remains that survived can be dated to the A-Group period. Two gold mace handles with pink quartz mace-heads are an outstanding discovery made by Firth. Both weapons were found in Tomb 1 of cemetery 137 together with other objects such as palettes, Nubian and Egyptian pottery bowls, beads, etc. The presence of different items shows direct trading links between Egypt and Sayala. In addition, Nubian elites took over some Egyptian motifs, as can be seen on reliefs of the famous stone maces and the slate ritual libation-vessel, whose purpose would be ceremonial (Smith 1994:376).

Some years ago, H. S. Smith (1994) re-examined Cemeteries 137 and 142, concluding that the chronology of most important tombs of the Cemetery 137 (Nos. 5, 1, and 2) must be dated to the Naqada IIIa.1 and IIIa.2 being contemporary with tombs 29 and 24 of Cemetery L of Qustul. On the other hand, tombs 1,

7, and 4 (?) of Cemetery 142 might be dated to Naqada IIIb (Naqada IIIB) period, to the reigns of Horus Aha and Horus Djer.

There are different opinions about the role that these important people played in the Sayala region. Williams (1986:13) believed that the person buried in tomb 1 at cemetery 137 was a “notable”. Nordström (1972:26), Smith (1991:107), O’Connor (1993:22-23) and Shinnie (1996:50) preferred to call him a “chief”. On the other hand, W. Y. Adams (1977:130), although he did not deny the possibility that some tombs should be ascribed to chiefs, pointed out that “he (grave owner) might have been nothing more than an unusually successful middleman in the growing Nubian-Egyptian trade - one of those “cultural brokers” who regularly appear and who rapidly acquire authority when alien cultures come into contact. Or, he might have been a commander of mercenary troops in the service of the Egyptians (a profession followed by many later Nubians), and derived his wealth as a reward from his masters.” However, I agree with Smith (1994:375) who affirmed that there were ‘five or six local princes of quasi-royal pretensions, ruling over the period from Naqada III.a.1 to the time, perhaps, of Horus-Aha/Djer.’

Epigraphic evidence: Gebel Sheikh Suleiman reliefs and the wooden label of Horus Aha from Umm el-Qaab

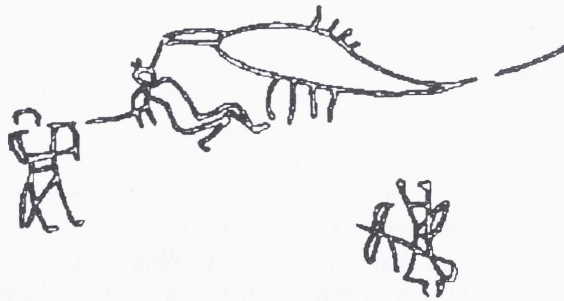


Fig. 2. The “minor” relief of Gebel Sheikh Suleiman (from Wilkinson 1999: fig. 5.3.1).

During the expedition of the Egypt Exploration Society at Buhen between 1962 and 1963, Winifred Needler discovered a rock drawing very close to the well-known Gebel Sheikh Suleiman relief. That relief represented a scorpion in the top centre, facing left (Fig. 2). It held between its claws a prisoner dangling from a rope, while a second figure, a little below and to the left, brandishes a weapon, which could be a mace-head. Above the scorpion, there is a third man who shoots with a bow and arrow towards the prisoner. Needler (1967:90-91) suggested that this relief commemorated the Scorpion (II)’s victory over Nubia.

The “Major” Gebel Sheikh Suleiman relief (Fig. 3) represents a falcon’s head on a serekh that encloses the name of Djer. Alongside, a prisoner facing to the right has his arms bound behind his back, and is holding in his hands the hieroglyph sign 𓆎 - Aa 32-, *t3-sty*. Further to the right, as Murnane (1987:284) suggested, is possible to see water, but very roughly shown, perhaps wanting to represent turbulent waters, a cataract (the second cataract?). There are two signs that correspond to Gardiner O 49 (city ideogram), the first surmounted by a bird figure and the other with an unknown sign, which according to Murnane (1987:283) could be a placenta, although it might be a bird without a head. As has been already explained, it would represent the standard of Qustul and its death (Jiménez-Serrano 1998). The last group of the relief shows ‘another prisoner, facing to the right and seated on the ground, with his arms bound behind his back but (unlike the prisoner above, without any feature at his hands.



Fig. 3. The “major” relief of Gebel Sheikh Suleiman (Murnane 1987).

This man, however, is transfixed by an arrow in his chest and his neck is connected by a thick hawser to the prow of a ship to the right. The top of this hawser also serves as a ground line for a round -topped booth or hut. Below this,

between the prisoner and the ship as well as underneath them both, lie four corpses tumbled in death (Murnane 1987:283).

There were different interpretations about this document and its meaning. In the early 1950s, Arkell (1950:28) followed by Emery (1961:59-60) ascribed it to Djer. For Emery, the figure holding the Nubia sign represents the Egyptian capture of this region, but he could not confirm if it was merely a punitive raid or a conquest. W. Y. Adams (1977:138) accepts the traditional opinion about this relief and he dates it in the reign of Djer, at the beginning of the First Dynasty. His interpretation on the meaning of the relief centres on the symbolic importance of it being in Nubian territory, and not on the military consequences. According to him, it was only an attack on two Nubian villages, in which there were not many deaths.

Shinnie (1996:51) presents the actual state of the investigations, in which there are many doubts about the attribution to Djer of this relief. Williams (1986:171) affirmed that this relief could be Nubian and it would then represent the victory of the A-Group rulers over Egypt, a fact that must be rejected because of the discoveries in recent years in Abydos and in the Delta.

The first doubts about its attribution to Djer were mentioned by Helck (1970:83-85) who thought that the relief could have had some later addition (e.g. city signs, the falcon and other parts). He believed that the serekh originally did not have any name written inside it, thus it would be dated earlier than Djer's reign. But according to W. Y. Adams (1985:190) this is a speculation. Murnane (1987:284) after having re-analysed the relief in situ, confirmed that the serekh is earlier than First Dynasty and Djer's inscription was made later.

Williams and Logan (1987:264) state that if Djer's name is disregarded the falcon redrawn on the serekh, there would be no space for any hieroglyphic inscription left, thus we would have to ascribe the group of empty serekhs of Kaiser and Dreyer's Horizon A. Then it would be contemporary with the rulers of Qustul. However, our own analysis of the evolution of the early Egyptian royal name leads me to date it to the end of Naqada IIIB period (Jiménez-Serrano in press). It would have been carved when Egypt acted against the Qustul dynasty, which produced a crisis in Qustul.

This is demonstrated in the relief in the man besides the serekh holding the bow, the city signs - one crowned by a falcon that would symbolise Egypt and the second bird (Jiménez-Serrano 1998) represents the standard of the Qustul rulers, as well as by the dead men. The fact that this relief is placed in the border (?) of the territory controlled by Qustul shows that the Egyptian monarch ordered these scenes to be carved as a record of his power. The additions that were made afterwards have to be connected with the campaign that Horus Aha waged

encloses (the temple of ?) Hesat'. For *phr*, see Faulkner (1962:93). I also disagree with Weill (1961, 2:31), who translated the interior of the enclosure as "circular procession (*šnj:t*) of the cow *hs3:t* (or *sh3:t hr* ?)". The quantity and the type of the offerings would have appear in the missing part of the label.

Egypt and Lower Nubia at the end of the fourth millennium BC (Fig. 5)

The Egyptian trade with Lower Nubia can be traced back to the beginnings of the fourth millennium BC. It consisted of exchange of Egyptian raw material for Central African products (about trade and cultural contacts in North-eastern Africa during this period, see Manzo 1996). However, Egyptians were also exporting manufactured objects, such as pottery and other goods (wine or beads, for example), which Lower Nubians did not produce but were seeking these. This trade was reflected in the economies to the south of the First Cataract and supported the social differentiation process.

The growth and expansion of the A-Group settlements in the whole Lower Nubia increased the demand for these goods, as it is possible to see in the site at Khor Daud where the highest concentrations of pots correspond to the Naqada IIB-D periods. From this moment, we witness the emergence of the great tombs with rich funerary furniture and with imported objects that justify the power of the new elites. Elites acted as intermediaries between the Egyptian palace traders and those who procured the products of the Central Nile and gold from Wadi el-Allaqi. This explains the reason for the location of the two most important cemeteries; Sayala was at the entrance of Wadi el-Allaqi whose mineral and metallic wealth has been mentioned before, and Qustul, which was at the entrance of the Second Cataract. Overland trade routes along the river had to pass by it.

In these beginnings, it is possible to differentiate two areas with these rich graves: Sayala (tombs 5, 1, and 2 at Cemetery 137) and Qustul (L28 and L29), dated to Naqada IIIA1 period (or even Naqada IID period).

The fact that some Egyptian objects appeared in the A-Group tombs (not only in the most important ones) does not indicate an acculturation of the people of Lower Nubia, but rather the possibility of the existence of a common background, which could be traced back to the early Neolithic. In addition, Nubian elites adopted Egyptian icons (e.g., the reliefs on the surface of the incense burners and some of the seal-impressions).

In the next chronological phase (the end of Naqada IIIA.1 period), Qustul probably assimilated (militarily ?) Sayala, because Cemetery 137 was no longer used. Moreover, this phase shows an increase in the variety and antiquity of the funeral furniture in the following burials of rulers of Qustul that can be explained only by a process of centralisation. Qustul would have annexed Sayala for two

reasons: Qustul became hereby the only intermediary between Egypt and the Central Nile, and would also monopolise the ideology that justify the power of the emerging elites, which arrived from Egypt. This situation of control of Qustul over Sayala would be maintained for some years, as demonstrated by the levels of wealth of tombs L24, L23, L11, and L19 of Qustul. Meanwhile, the relations between Qustul and Egypt would have been deteriorating, as can be demonstrated by the representation on the bowl from L6 (contemporary to L23 - Williams 1986:171), in which it is possible to see a bird attacking (?) the sign of Hierakonpolis.

This overall situation finished in an open conflict, which would be reflected in the low levels of imported Egyptian pottery in the Qustul tombs (L22 and L5). The confrontation finished with the success of the Egyptians, who engraved the "Minor" relief of Gebel Sheikh Suleiman (Scorpion II ?) and, later, the "Major" relief at the same place (Horus Ka) (Jiménez-Serrano 2001). Likewise, the relations between Egyptians and the elites of Qustul changed either because the Egyptians placed a ruler of their choice over them or because Nubians themselves placed one according to the Egyptians' wishes. The result was that the ruler buried in tomb L2 had the highest number of Egyptian stone vases and imported Egyptian pottery.

One of the consequences of this first Egyptian intervention was the partition of Lower Nubia in two proto-kingdoms. Thus, Sayala acquired its "independence" again, as indicated by tombs of cemetery 142 (Nos. 1, 7, and 4). The new rulers of Sayala were buried in another necropolis, because they were probably not related to the rulers buried in cemetery 137.

Meanwhile, in the cemetery L of Qustul, the three tombs that followed tomb L2 are poorer with the quantity and quality of the grave goods. Thus, from the three tombs L30, L1, according to Smith (1994:375) contemporary to the Egyptian monarchs Horus Aha and Djer- and L8, only one has some imported Egyptian pottery. Therefore, it can be concluded that Egyptians decided that they did not need intermediaries in their trade with the Central Nile. Accordingly, in the reign of Horus Aha and Djer, Sayala and Qustul proto-kingdoms were eliminated. This coincides with the moment when Djer added his name to the "Major" relief of Gebel Sheikh Suleiman. A final archaeological confirmation of the violent end of the rulers of Qustul is the destruction of cemetery L (Williams 1986:183).

Acknowledgements

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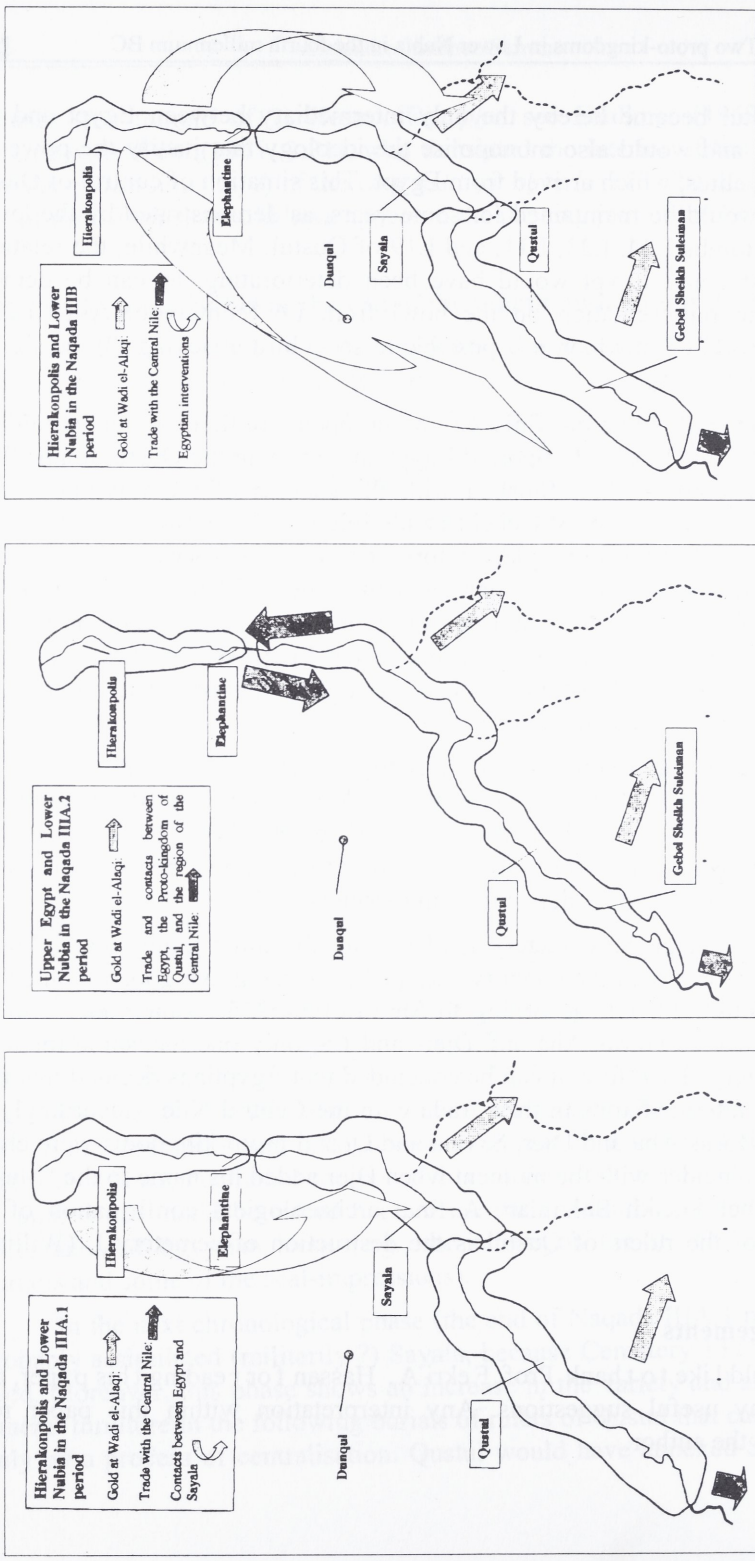


Fig. 5. Egypt and Lower Nubia at the end of the fourth millennium BC.

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