

THE NUBIAN PHARAOHS: BLACK KINGS ON THE NILE

BY CHARLES BONNET AND DOMINIQUE VALBELLE, WITH A FOREWORD BY JEAN LECLANT. PP. 215, COLOR FIGS. 211. THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY IN CAIRO PRESS, CAIRO 2005. \$49.95. ISBN 978-977-416-010-3 (CLOTH).

After briefly catching the world's attention during the 1960s, when an international archaeological salvage campaign was carried out between Aswan in Egypt and Wadi Halfa in the Sudan, Nubia returned to its quiet, almost anonymous existence. It took a while to realize that south of the man-made Lake Nasser (as it is called in Egypt) or Lake Nubia (as it is known to the Sudanese) lies an archaeological promised land. Despite the fact that entire buried cities were to be discovered on the banks of the Middle Nile, very few archaeologists decided to explore the sites of Upper Nubia and Central Sudan. The logistical difficulties of mounting an archaeological excavation in the backcountry of the Sudan meant that only the most intrepid scholars undertook the challenge, among them a Swiss archaeologist, Charles Bonnet. He led the team from the University of Geneva that in 1973 began excavating the remains of the city of Kerma.

The site, located south of the Third Cataract of the Nile, had previously been explored from 1913 to 1916 by Reisner's Boston expedition. Reisner worked mainly in the cemeteries, excavating enormous tumuli of the chiefs of Kerma. The Swiss mission concentrated its activity in the urban area near a large mudbrick structure known as the Western Deffufa. The patient and diligent work of Bonnet and his colleagues unearthed the foundations of numerous houses, workshops, and palaces, proving that as early as 2000 B.C.E. Kerma was a large urban center, presumably the capital city and a burial ground of the kings of Kush (Egyptian name for the Kerma Kingdom). Egyptians must have seen Kush as a formidable enemy, considering the size and number of fortresses erected near the Second Cataract by the Middle

Kingdom pharaohs. Eventually, ca. 1550 B.C.E. the Egyptians finally invaded their southern neighbor, destroying Kerma and extending their control of the Nile Valley all the way to the Fourth Cataract.

Bonnet has spent his life excavating the remains of the Kerma civilization, with remarkable results. Field reports were regularly published in *Genava*, and two volumes of final reports have already appeared. In 1990, he organized an exhibition on ancient Kerma in Geneva's Musée d'Art et d'Histoire. The first chapter of this elegantly published book gives an extensive outline of the history of the site from the Neolithic to the Meroitic periods based on the results of three decades of work.

Yet the most dramatic discovery made by Bonnet, and the main subject of the book under review, did not belong to the Kerma culture. It was of a much later date and was the result of a side project on the Egyptian New Kingdom (ca. 1550–1080 B.C.E.) and the native Napatan-Meroitic (ca. 800 B.C.E.–350 C.E.) remains found at a place called Doukki Gel (a Nubian term meaning the "red mound") on the outskirts of modern Kerma. Some of this research was carried out by a Sudanese member of the Swiss team, Salah Mohammed Ahmed, who presented the first major overview of the excavations at the Meroitic temple of Doukki Gel at the Nubiology Congress held in Boston (T. Kendall, ed., *Nubian Studies 1998* [Boston 2004], which should be added to the summary bibliography in Bonnet and Valbelle's book). It soon became apparent that the history of the Doukki Gel temple could be traced back to the Napatan and the New Kingdom periods. It is fortunate that shortly before the discovery of those Egyptian New Kingdom remains, the

Swiss team was joined by an Egyptologist, Dominique Valbelle, coauthor of the book and responsible for the epigraphic aspects of the project.

The discovery of the Doukki Gel temples and the identification of the place as ancient Pnubs is the subject of the second chapter. The original temple dedicated to Amun of Pnubs was founded by Thutmose III but destroyed in the later years of Akhenaten when the site was transformed to the worship of Aten. Nineteenth Dynasty kings then rebuilt the Amun temple. The native Nubian kings who ruled Egypt as the 25th Dynasty rebuilt the temple again, as did their Napatan successors. It was from the latter phase that on 11 January 2003 a cache containing seven monumental standing statues of Nubian kings was discovered. Three belonged to the 25th Dynasty kings Taharqa and Tanutamun, and four represented the Napatan kings Senkamanisken, Anlamani, and Aspelta. Although all the statues were smashed to pieces, it was clear that they were carefully buried and their heads protected. They seem to be made mostly of granite and gabbro, but the authors stress that no mineralogical analysis has yet been carried out. It was fortuitous that at the same time as the discovery, a site museum was erected at Kerma; the statues have now been placed there for storage and display. It must be noted that this is not a unique find, because a similar cache was found in 1916 by Reisner in the precinct of the Temple of Amun at Gebel Barkal, near the Fourth Cataract. Since the last king found in the Barkal cache was also

Aspelta, who ruled in the sixth century B.C.E., it seems likely that both caches contain royal statues destroyed during the Egyptian invasion of Nubia led by Psamtik II (595–589 B.C.E.).

Archaeological and art historical research continues, but the authors rightly felt that a well-illustrated report on this dramatic find should be published as soon as possible. The original French version of the book appeared in 2005 under the title *Pharaohs venues d'Afrique* and sold out quickly. It was followed by German and English translations. The text, accompanied by stunning photographs, is well written and engaging and, although addressed to the general public, it is of high scholarly value. Apart from presenting the history of Kerma, the discovery of the Doukki Gel temples, and a catalogue of statuary found therein, it also contains chapters on the later history of Nubia and on the nature of the ritual deposits in Egypt and Nubia. In a way, the Doukki Gel discovery was a deserving retirement gift to a great scholar who devoted a large part of his professional life to the study of ancient Sudan. *Nubian Pharaohs* is a magnificent book written by two first-rate scholars in a style that appeals to both academics and the general public.

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