

BOOK REVIEW

Ancient Nubia: African Kingdoms on the Nile. Edited by MARJORIE FISHER, PETER LACOVARA, SUE D'AURIA, and SALMA IKRAM, with photographs by CHESTER HIGGINS, JR. Cairo and New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2012. Distributed by Oxford University Press. Pp. xx + 452. Hardcover, \$59.95. ISBN 978-977-416-478-1.

The editors have compiled a beautiful work on ancient Nubia. Its purpose is to “document some of what has recently been discovered” and show “Nubia’s vast beauty, as well as the current state of research into its culture” (1). The book is divided into two parts, the first on specific subjects in history and culture, and the second on specific Nubian sites. Several of the subject chapters are exceptionally good. Lacovara’s chapter on the history of Nubian archaeology is entertaining and clearly written. Morkot’s chapter on Nubian kingship challenges assumptions on matrilineage in Nubia, and critiques reliance on comparative anthropology and external Greek observers. Yellin’s chapter on Nubian religion untangles the interconnections between Egyptian-influenced “elite” temple-based religion and indigenous “non-elite” religion, with its emphasis on worship at natural settings and pilgrimage to sacred places. Haynes and Santini-Ritt’s chapter on Nubian women is quite rich. To their observation (172) that the “king had to be born to a woman who had the title Sister of a King,” we should add that the same succession scheme seems to have held in medieval Nubia.

The book is rich in maps and photographs. But sometimes these photographs come to us in a vacuum. The beautiful blue glass chalice from Sedeinga (116) appears with a caption translating the inscription (“Drink and you shall be alive!”). But the surrounding article says nothing about the chalice or Sedeinga more generally. The reader has no way of knowing that the language of the inscription (Greek) suggests considerable cultural interchange between Nubia and the Mediterranean. A similarly taciturn approach to Hellenism appears elsewhere: the appearance of the Hellenistic sun god Helios at “the southernmost Meroitic monument” indeed “illustrates the cosmopolitan nature” of Nubia (229) but it also does much more. The chapter on Naqa is comparably tight-

lipped in its treatment of the Roman architectural features of the “Kiosk” now dated to the first century AD. The chapter on Meroe refers to Greco-Roman grave goods (267), but we learn nothing about the economic processes bringing them to Nubia’s capital. Complex Mediterranean/African exchanges are at work here, but receive little attention.

This brings us to the nature of Nubia itself, and the challenge of how to take Nubia on its own terms and separate it from its interactions with Egypt. This volume starts off on the wrong foot, with Zahi Hawass, Egypt’s former minister of state for antiquities, whose Foreword casts the story of Nubia as a story of pharaonic Egypt’s involvement in it. The problem recurs in Hawass’ chapter on salvage archaeology, which is more preoccupied with the pharaonic Egyptian than the indigenous Sudanese half of the story. Hawass is not alone in this approach. The chapter on Abu Simbel, for instance, is not really about Nubia at all, but about an Egyptian site that happens to be in Nubia.

The problem is present in more subtle ways and highlights editorial discontinuity. Marjorie Fisher and Peter Lacovara are the first two editors of the four listed on the cover. Fisher’s chapter on “The History of Nubia” speaks of the “rapid Egyptianization” (17) of Nubia’s C-Group, the name given to a people whose material culture appears throughout Nubia from circa 2300 BC. Here she appears to mean only that Egyptian goods began to appear in Nubian graves. Much of the rest of the chapter narrates Nubian history solely through Egyptian involvement. Fisher thinks (84) that Nubia “was clearly influenced artistically by Egypt” during the New Kingdom. When she claims (106) that Nubian influence is also seen on Egyptian iconography, she does not develop the point.

But Lacovara seems more willing to take Nubia on its own terms. He stresses (47) that Reisner was wrong to think of the Kerma culture—an independent Nubian kingdom rivaling Egypt in the Nile valley in the third and second millennia BC—as an Egyptian accomplishment degraded through Nubianization. He also notes (78) that Nubians “were fundamentally more experimental and adventurous” artistically than their northern neighbors, and indeed, highly influential on New Kingdom Egyptian art (83). His best discussion of this theme comes in his chapter on Kushite art and architecture, in which he outlines the artistic innovations of the Nubian rulers of the Twenty-Fifth Dynasty.

Elsewhere in the volume, the chapter on Kerma stresses that site’s local traditions and specificities. Local specificities matter throughout Nubia. Yellin argues that the “Egyptian gods adopted by Nubians underwent a ‘Nubianization’” (126) and that the elements of Egyptian religion surviving the longest in Nubia

“survived because they resonated with aspects of indigenous religion” (143). The chapter on ceramics reports (205) but does not endorse or reject claims that the “resilience of C-Group material culture during the Egyptian occupation was a form of cultural resistance in the face of overwhelming Egyptian military and political might.” This volume cannot solve these questions of Nubia’s relationship with Egypt. Internal conceptual tensions on the issue highlight how much work on Nubia remains. The editors have in the meantime compiled a thorough and aesthetically enticing introduction to the subject.

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