



Frank M. Snowden, Jr. Annual Lectures

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When Greek was an African Language

Stanley Burstein

Introduction

I would like to thank the department of Classics and Eta Sigma Phi for the invitation to deliver the third annual Snowden Lecture and making possible my visit to Howard University and especially for the opportunity to honor Frank. It seems that I have known Frank for my whole career. I first met him through his books at the beginning of my career in the early 1970s and in person something over a decade later. Since then we have done the usual things scholars do: corresponded, met at conferences, and been on programs together. Throughout those many years I have enjoyed and profited immensely from his work.

When Frank published *Blacks in Antiquity* in 1970 there was no name for the field of scholarship to which it belonged. It was a pioneering work in a field that didn't yet exist, the ancient history of the African Diaspora. *Blacks in Antiquity* is a masterful work. After more than three decades it remains unchallenged and Frank in Dante's words is still "the master of those who know." In the time that I have today I could only hope to add a few footnotes to his account of the place of Africans in Mediterranean society. Instead, I will try to tell a different but related story, that of the role of Greek and Greek culture in ancient and medieval Nubia. [1] I hope Frank finds it interesting. A point on terminology first, however. I will use Nubia and Nubians in this paper to refer to the Nile valley south of Egypt and its inhabitants, and Kush, Makuria, Alwah, etc. for the various states in the region. Now for my story.

It is a huge story, literally. Spatially it covers southern Egypt and the northern and central Sudan from the first cataract at modern Aswan to south of Khartoum. Chronologically it spans almost a millennium and a half from the Hellenistic period to the end of the middle ages. It is also a story that could not even begin to be told until recently. In part, this was because of the lack of sources that is the bane of all ancient historians. Until recently, native Nubian sources were almost entirely lacking, and only fragments remain of the once extensive Classical and Arabic accounts of the region and its peoples. Lack of sources was not, however, the only problem. The historiography of Nubia is the oldest body of western historical scholarship dealing with the African interior. [2] Like any historiography, however, it reflects the biases of the various periods in which historians of Nubia wrote.

Put simply, the surviving ancient and medieval accounts of Nubia are profoundly Egyptocentric. [3] Nubia and its peoples and cultures were mentioned only when they were relevant to Egypt; and when they were mentioned, they were discussed from the perspective of Egypt. Not surprisingly, when modern histories of Nubia first began to be written in the 19th century, they were largely based on the classical and Arabic sources, supplemented by Egyptian texts; and they, therefore, reflected the biases of their sources. [4] The problem was compounded, moreover, by the fact that their authors wrote during the heyday of European imperialism in Africa and, not surprisingly, they shared the then current popular view of Africans as inferior peoples, capable, at best, only of receiving and imitating influences from superior foreign cultures.

As a result of these factors, when the presence of the Greek language and Greek influence in Nubia was recognized, no effort was made to understand how they functioned within ancient and medieval Nubian culture. Greek objects found in Nubia were treated instead as indices of Hellenization, which was conceived as a one-sided process of acculturation involving the deliberate decision by non-Greek individuals—usually elites—to transform themselves and their society by abandoning their own culture in favor of Greek culture. [5] The equation was simple. The greater the number of Greek objects and other examples of Greek influence, the greater the degree of Hellenization. One example will have to stand for many. After reviewing the evidence for Greek imports into Nubia, the great Hellenistic and Roman historian M. I. Rostovtzeff concluded that Hellenistic Meroe "with its Hellenistic palaces, its Hellenistic bath, its Ethiopian-Hellenistic statues and decorative frescoes, became a little Nubian Alexandria." [6]

This situation has changed dramatically during the last half century. A new historiography of Nubia has emerged that treats Nubian culture as a distinct entity created by the inhabitants of the upper Nile valley and not as a remote outpost of Egyptian civilization doomed to ultimate decline and extinction because of its location in the interior of Africa. The catalysts for this change were two of the major developments of the Cold War period: the construction of the huge Aswan High Dam and the end of Europe's African empires.

This is not the place to tell either the story of how the Soviet Union came to construct the Aswan High Dam or the end of Europe's imperial dreams in Africa. What does concern us, however, is the fact that construction of the dam was preceded by the largest and most complex archaeological salvage campaign in world history—the UNESCO sponsored international effort to excavate and record every significant archaeological site in the 200 mile stretch of the Upper Nile valley that would be flooded by Lake Nasser, the lake created by the dam. [7] The result was the discovery and ongoing publication of a mass of new native Nubian sources—both textual and material—for the history of just about every aspect of ancient and medieval Nubian life..

Decolonization, on the other hand, transformed the writing of African history, encouraging the emergence of a new historiography of Africa that placed Africans at the center of their history. The Sudan was no exception. As a result, it is possible for the first time to discuss the place of Greek and Greek culture in Nubia in a new way, one that focuses on its function as one element in the long history of a culture that was created by Nubians. In the rest of this paper I will try to give you a progress report on the current state of that story.

When does the history of Greek and Greek culture in Nubia begin? At first glance we seem to have a firm date. According to the second century BC historian Agatharchides of Cnidus, the author of the standard classical account of the region, Greeks first entered Nubia, when Ptolemy II campaigned there in the 270s BC. Precise dates for the beginnings of complex historical processes are rarely what they seem, and, unfortunately, that is true in the case.

While people from ancient Nubia are attested in the Aegean as early as the second millennium BC, [9] direct Greek contact with the region began in 593 BC, when the army of the 26th dynasty Egyptian king Psamtek II campaigned in Nubia. Greek mercenaries were part of Ptamtek's army, and they commemorated their role in his expedition in graffiti scratched on the colossi of Ramses II at Abu Simbel. [10] Four centuries later Greeks again entered Nubia. In the late 330s BC Alexander dispatched a small reconnaissance expedition into the region, allegedly to find the sources of the Nile, and a decade or two later Ptolemy I raided northern Nubia. [11] Greek objects also occasionally reached Nubia before the 270s like a spectacular vase by the 5th century BC Athenian potter Sotades, now in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, that was the prized possession of a Nubian aristocrat buried in the west cemetery at Meroe.

Ptolemy II's campaign, therefore, was not the first but at least the fourth time Greek soldiers operated in Nubia. Why Ptolemy II invaded Nubia is not clear, but Agatharchides suggests that he hoped to put an end to attempts by the kingdom of Kush in the central Sudan to expand its influence north toward the Egyptian border. The details of the campaign are lost, but the poet Theocritus (*Idyll* 16, lines 86-87) claimed that he "cut off a part of Black Aithiopia," presumably the so-called Dodecaschoenus--the roughly seventy-five mile stretch of the Nile immediately south of the first cataract--together with the important gold mining region east of the Nile in the Wadi Allaqi. Inscriptions and coins fill out the picture, indicating that Ptolemy II also garrisoned some of the old Middle Kingdom forts in the second cataract area, and suggesting that his authority temporarily, at least, reached the modern border between Egypt and the Sudan at Wadi Halfa. What set Ptolemy II's Nubian campaign apart from previous Greek incursions south of Egypt, however, was that it opened a period of sustained contact between Kush and Ptolemaic Egypt, and the reason for that was something new: Ptolemy's need to find a secure source of war elephants.

The military use of elephants was millennia old in Asia. The Greeks and Macedonians first encountered them in battle, however, during Alexander's campaigns. Although the Ptolemies like other Hellenistic kings considered these living "tanks" an essential component of their armies, acquiring them was a problem because of their Seleucid rivals' monopoly of Indian elephants and mahouts. They had no choice except to find an African source for elephants and that led to the establishment of close relations between Ptolemaic Egypt and Kush that lasted for the remainder of the third century BC. Armed elephant hunting expeditions, sometimes numbering hundreds of men as well as explorers and diplomats—one named Simonides the Younger even lived at Meroe for seven years and wrote an unfortunately now lost book about his experiences-- freely circulated throughout Kushite territory.

On the Greek side the results of Ptolemy II and his successors' initiative are clear and uncontroversial. Besides gaining access to a ready supply of African products including hardwoods, incense, gold, slaves, ivory, and even animals for Egyptian temples and Ptolemy's zoo including a rhinoceros, the reports Ptolemaic explorers and hunters prepared revolutionized Greek knowledge of the African interior. [12] They recorded the Nile valley between the Egyptian border and Meroe in detail. They correctly identified the Nile's three principal tributaries—the Atbara, Blue and White Niles— together with their native names and meanings. Rumors may even have reached them of the Nile's ultimate source in Lake Victoria in modern Uganda. [13]

The ethnographic map of Nubia also snapped into clear focus. As might be expected, the bulk of the information concerned the kingdom of Kush and its capital, Meroe, the Ptolemies chief rival for influence in Nubia. The reports detailed its relations with other ethnic groups in the region and described the principal features of Kushite culture, especially the public aspects of Kushite kingship including details of the coronation ritual and the succession rules of the Kushite kings, descriptions of Kushite royal regalia and the

practice of human sacrifice at the death of a king.

While the high quality of the Ptolemaic accounts of Nubia and its peoples are clear, so also are their limitations. Ptolemaic diplomats and military officers were good observers; they even recorded a dangerous form of elephant hunting that was still in use in the 19th century. [14] They were not, however, anthropologists. They could, and sometimes did, misunderstand what they saw or were told, once mistaking a troop of chimpanzees for a tribe of tree-living natives. Still, with all their flaws the Hellenistic accounts of Nubia were not equaled until the high Middle Ages. On the Greek side, therefore, the results of Ptolemy II's and his successors' activities in Nubia are clear: Greeks acquired access to elephants and other sub-Saharan African products and relatively accurate information of contemporary Kush and its culture that contemporary historians of the Sudan still find useful. But what about the impact on Kushites and their culture?

Military defeat, loss of territory, and foreign penetration of their territory on a scale unparalleled since the conquest of Nubia a millennium earlier by New Kingdom Egypt characterize the initial Kushite encounter with Ptolemaic Egypt. This would hardly seem at first glance a promising foundation for cultural exchange. Nevertheless, as I mentioned earlier, scholars have long maintained that, despite all these negatives, contact with Ptolemaic Egypt inspired the kings of Kush to pursue a policy of deliberate policy of Hellenization that ultimately transformed their capital Meroe into a "little Nubian Alexandria." The principal evidence for this thesis is a passage from the first century BC historian Diodorus [15] describing a bloody confrontation in the 3rd century BC between a Greek educated king, Ergamenes—Arqamani--and the priesthood of Amon at Meroe. Specifically, according to Diodorus, study of Greek philosophy enabled Ergamenes to brush aside the priests' demand that he commit suicide and to enter "with his soldiers into the unapproachable place where stood, as it turned out, the golden shrine of the Ethiopians, put the priests to the sword, and after abolishing this custom thereafter ordered affairs after his own will."

The Greek bias of Diodorus' account is obvious, but archaeological evidence also leaves no doubt of the far-reaching impact of Ergamenes' revolution. Henceforth Kushite political and religious life was centralized at Meroe. The old royal cemetery at Napata near the fourth cataract of the Nile was replaced by a new burial ground east of Meroe. Kushite royal iconography reveals that the kings of Kush also adopted a new, less Egyptianizing style of regalia. The evidence, moreover, indicates that in the third century BC Kushite kings transferred their patronage from Egyptian gods like Amon to local deities connected with the office of the king but lacking identifiable Egyptian backgrounds such as the lion headed war-god Apedemak. These deities were also worshipped in temples that creatively combined Egyptian and Nubian traditions such as the so-called Lion Temples and the huge pilgrimage site of Musawarrat es Sufra. Finally, a new quasi-alphabetic script for Meroitic was developed to replace Egyptian hieroglyphs, making possible the replacement of Egyptian by Meroitic as the language of government and religion.

While we lack a clear statement of the rationale for these changes, they clearly amounted to a partial declaration of independence from the Egyptian traditions that had been central to Kushite elite culture since the glorious days of the late 8th and early 7th centuries BC when the Nubian Pharaohs of the 25th dynasty had united Kush and Egypt in a vast empire that stretched from the Mediterranean to the central Sudan. But were they also a vote for Hellenization? Such evidence as we have suggests, not surprisingly, that the answer is more complex than a simple yes or no. The Egyptian aspects of traditional Kushite culture were reinterpreted in accordance with local values, but they were not repudiated.

Although they themselves were not Egyptian, the rulers of Kush, like the Pharaohs, had claimed to be sons of the sun god Re and kings of Upper and Lower Egypt. They traditionally had conducted their government in Egyptian; celebrated their exploits in hieroglyphic inscriptions; and were buried with Egyptian rites in pyramids decorated with excerpts from the Book of the Dead and other traditional funerary texts. Even the reform by Ergamenes and his successors of the Kushite monarchy was expressed in forms that were derived ultimately from Egypt. Not surprisingly, therefore, it was the Egyptian side of Ptolemaic civilization that attracted the Kushites in the decades following Ptolemy II's Nubian campaign. Thus, the royal titularies of the

third century Kushite kings and their regalia echo those of the contemporary Ptolemies. Even when they borrowed an office from the Ptolemaic government, they used the Egyptian designation for it, not the Greek. [16]

Similarly, when Kushite kings used Greek architects and masons to build temples, as they did at the pilgrimage center of Musawwarrat es-Sufra, south of Meroë, the temples they built were adaptations of Egyptian, not Greek temples. A good example is the so-called Lion temple, excavated and partially restored by the East Germans in the 1960's. Here in an impressive series of reliefs accompanied by texts-- based on Egyptian originals that from Philae and inscribed in hieroglyphs typical of the early Ptolemaic period--the Kushite king Arnekhamani, is depicted wearing a Ptolemaic style crown and receiving pledges of victory from the Kushite pantheon. Only now, however, the pantheon is headed now not by Amon but by the native war god Apedemak, who also wears a similar crown. By contrast, the evidence for Greek influence in Hellenistic Kush is easy to find but limited in scale and scope.

The most dramatic examples are the possible adoption of the use of war elephants and the construction in the so-called royal enclosure at Meroe of a small water sanctuary decorated with statuary modeled on Greek originals. The discovery of a set of Greek flutes—one of the few ever discovered—in a tomb at Meroe suggests that Greek musicians may have performed for elite audiences at there. Otherwise, however, the evidence consists of a limited range of luxury goods such as metal vessels of various types--goose head wine strainers, drinking cups, buckets and basins--and fragments of wine amphorae, which are found in palace complexes and royal or noble tombs at Meroe and Napata.

Clearly, the development of a taste for Greek wine by the Kushite aristocracy and possibly also the use of war elephants, were the most notable results of the exposure to Greek culture in Hellenistic Kush. As for knowledge and use of the Greek language, however we explain Ergamenes' Greek education—a "wandering scholar" has actually been suggested [17] —the evidence is scant. An inscription from Philae [18] and the historian Diodorus' (3.11) claim to have spoken with Aithiopian ambassadors at Alexandria, however, suggest that knowledge of Greek was limited and that its primary use was communication with Ptolemaic diplomats and officials. In the Roman period, however, the scope of Greek influence and the use of Greek both increased and began to affect core areas of Kushite culture, particularly religion.

ROME AND KUSH [19]

As was true in the case of the Ptolemies, the first encounter between Rome and Kush was hostile. Following the collapse of Ptolemaic power in northern Nubia after the Roman conquest of Egypt in 30 BC, both Kush and Rome rushed to fill the vacuum with predictable results. Fresh from the suppression of a revolt in southern Egypt, C. Cornelius Gallus, the new Roman Prefect of Egypt, crossed into Nubia in force, appointed a Roman client ruler for Lower Nubia, and forced local Kushite officials to recognize Roman suzerainty and to agree to pay tribute to Rome. Roman suzerainty over Kush proved ephemeral, however. A decade of raids and counter-raids by Kushite and Roman forces convinced the emperor Augustus to withdraw Roman forces from all Nubian territory but the Dodecaschoenus. A long period of what probably should be called cold peace followed that lasted until the mid-3rd century AD.

However we characterize relations between Kush and Rome, the fact is that almost two and half centuries of relative peace led to unprecedented prosperity in Kush. Trade with Roman Egypt expanded in tandem with growing Roman demand for the traditional products of Africa—gold, ivory, hard woods, slaves, and exotic animals, now desired both for Egyptian temples and the Roman arena. The archaeological evidence for this prosperity is still evident today in evidence for greatly expanded temple construction and renovation—most Kushite temples date in their present form from this period—and increasingly wealthy royal and noble graves. Not surprisingly, Kushite exposure to Greek and Greek culture also increased greatly beginning in the late first century BC.

The evidence of that exposure is abundant, but how Nubians responded to it differed depending on the nature of their relationship to Rome. In northern Nubia the Roman presence was direct and intense. Northern Nubia was treated as an extension of Roman Egypt and the Roman footprint on the land was heavy. They laid out roads, built temples and forts, and installed garrisons at strategic points. They also replaced Egyptian with Greek as the language of administration and law, introduced new taxes. Roman officials "rode circuit" in the region, thereby reducing the authority of local judicial officials. Imported trade goods, pottery and particularly wine circulated freely.

For most of the local population this was the extent of their contact with Greco-Roman culture. As elsewhere in the Roman Empire, however, the Romans encouraged the assimilation of members of the local elite, and some took advantage of the opportunity, becoming part of the local Roman establishment, joining Roman auxiliary units, and even identifying with Rome. Most such individuals are invisible to us, but we have evidence for one, a Nubian named Paccius Maximus, who received a Greek education, became an auxiliary cavalry officer, composed complex avant-garde Greek poetry, examples of which he had inscribed on the walls of local temples at Kalabsha and Hieria Sycaminos, and even referred to his own native Nubian language as a "barbarian" language. [20]

Further south in independent Kush, however, the situation was different. The physical evidence is abundant, but its significance is ambiguous. Despite extensive looting of graves, temples, and other sites since antiquity, numerous objects imported from Roman Egypt during the Principate have been discovered on Kushite sites. As was true in the Hellenistic Period, the bulk of this substantial corpus of imported classical objects consists of a wide variety of small but high quality domestic goods: metal, glass, and ceramic objects including lamps, drinking vessels, dishes and other eating utensils; items related to personal adornment such as rings, jewelry, beads, and mirrors; and household furnishings including the remains of furniture and decorative objects, and, of course, large numbers of wine amphorae. [21]

Nevertheless, despite the generally peaceful relations between Kush and Rome and growing trade, Kushite attitudes toward Rome seem to have been ambivalent at best when not openly hostile. Particularly revealing is how the Kushites commemorated their escape from Roman domination in the 20s BC. We may even possess the Kushite account of that event on an inscription that is now in the British Museum, but our inability to understand Meroitic forbids certainty. [22] Fortunately, a photographic record still survives of the now lost decoration of a memorial temple the Kushites built in the Royal Enclosure at Meroe. [23] That decoration consisted of frescoes depicting bound Roman prisoners and other enemies under the feet of a seated queen while under the threshold of the temple they placed a bronze head of Augustus taken from an imperial cult statue at Syene, where it would be stepped on every time someone entered the shrine, a common way for Kushites to symbolize their supremacy over enemies.

At the same time, there clearly was a renewed emphasis on Kushite tradition. So, unlike Hellenistic Kushite kings, who often modeled their titularies on those of the Ptolemies, Roman period Kushite kings ignored the titularies of the contemporary Roman emperors and modeled theirs instead on those of the Twenty Fifth Dynasty and their successors, thereby reaffirming their ties to the founders of their kingdom.

Not surprisingly, therefore, while there is evidence for the incorporation of significant elements of Greek material culture in Kushite elite life and even, as we'll see, for the teaching of Greek at Meroe, except for limited penetration of Greek cults, particularly that of Sarapis, [24] there is no evidence for significant Hellenization. Instead, developments in Kush paralleled those in Roman Egypt where "Greek" and, one should add, Greek art, had become, in the perceptive characterization of David Frankfurter "simply a neutral lingua franca, the medium of broadest circulation." [25] As such, Greek and Greek art were both, therefore, also available for the expression of Kushite concepts and values without signifying acculturation to Greek culture. In the area of art the result was the creation of an eclectic art that combined Greek and Kushite elements to express Kushite concerns.

Examples are the victory stele of Prince Sherkarer at Jebel Qeili with its Greek style solar deity, the fresco of Herakles as master of animals from the royal enclosure at Meroe, the use of Greek architectural orders—specifically Corinthian—on Meroitic temples, and the adaptation of the iconography of the Greco-Egyptian god Sarapis to portray the Kushite royal god Apedemak. The use of Greek themes in Kushite religion was not limited, however, to public culture but extended into funerary religion as illustrated by a pair of remarkable blue glass flutes from a tomb at Sedeinga, that were broken into dozens of pieces during a late version of a traditional Kushite burial ritual, the breaking of the red pots. [26]

The flutes, which bear Greek inscriptions reading "Drink, you shall live," also raise the question of the knowledge of Greek at Kush. While we probably should not expect to find assimilated individuals like Paccius Maximus at Meroe or elsewhere in independent Kushite territory, the discovery in the royal enclosure at Meroe of a column drum with the Greek alphabet does suggest that Greek was taught at Meroe. As in the Hellenistic period, the initial motive was probably pragmatic; the Kings of Kush needed officials like the appropriately named Great Ambassadors to Rome who were fluent in both Greek and Egyptian to deal both with Roman officials and the priests of the temple of Isis at Philae.

One tantalizing but frustrating piece of evidence, however, raises the possibility that the flute you just saw was not isolated but that the Kushites used Greek or, at least, the Greek script, relatively widely for religious purposes. Sir John Garstang discovered during his excavations at Meroe an offering table in the noble cemetery at Meroe that was inscribed in Greek letters. Unfortunately, all that we have of this important find is a muddy photograph so, barring its rediscovery, we cannot determine whether the offering formula had been translated into Greek or, alternatively, the Greek alphabet had been adapted to write Meroitic just as was being done in Egypt at about the same time. [27]

Can we say anything more about the extent of the knowledge of Greek in Kush? Most scholars doubt it, but there is one piece of evidence that suggests that Greek did, in fact, become fairly widely known at Meroe. Fragments exist of two victory thrones set up at Meroe by kings of Axum bearing Greek inscriptions celebrating the establishment of Axumite authority over Kush in the 4th century AD. [28] Now, Axumite royal inscriptions were regularly inscribed in Ge'ez, Sabaean—a South Arabian language--and Greek. The fact, therefore, that Axumite kings chose Greek and not one of their other official languages for their monuments at Meroe suggests that they believed that it was the language most likely to be understood there. Unfortunately, this has to remain only a suggestion for the moment.

Be that as it may, the establishment of Axumite suzerainty over Kush marked the beginning of a profound transformation throughout Nubia. That transformation took almost three centuries and changed fundamentally the political and cultural life of Nubia. The first step in this transformation was the disappearance of the kingdom of Kush in the mid-fourth century AD, and with it the political order that had dominated the upper Nile valley for more than a millennium.

More than a century of conflict followed between two of Kush's former subjects, the Nobatai—the ancestors of the contemporary Nubian peoples--and the Blemmyes. By the end of the 5th century AD that struggle had ended with the victory of the Nobatai and the replacement of the Kushite empire with three Nobatai dominated kingdoms: Nobadia in northern Nubia, Makuria in central Nubia, and Alwah in southern Nubia. By the end of the sixth century AD the three kingdoms had converted to Christianity--specifically, to the Monophysite form of Christianity followed by the Coptic Church to the present. Fast forward almost another century and the new Nubian kingdoms were faced with a new political reality: the establishment of Arab rule in Egypt and the eastern Mediterranean and isolation from what was left of the Roman Empire.

CHRISTIAN NUBIA [29]

Taken together these three developments mark the end of the ancient history of Nubia. [30] As usual, our limited sources preclude a detailed narrative of these events, allowing only brief snapshots of scattered

episodes such as the defeat of the Blemmyes by the Nobadian king Silko in the mid-fifth century AD, the evangelization of Nubia by missionaries sent by the Roman emperor Justinian and his wife Theodora in 541 AD, and, most remarkable, the dramatic defeat of two Arab invasions of Nubia and the consequent conclusion of a unique treaty in 652 AD—the so-called *baqt*—that guaranteed the independence of the Nubian kingdoms—now reduced to two, Makuria and Alwa—for over 500 years. [31] This was the only time in the Middle Ages that Muslims exempted a non-Muslim state from conquest.

Archaeology makes clear the scope and scale of the transformation. Throughout Nubia from Philae in the north to Musawarat es Sofra in the south worship of the old gods of Egypt and Kush ceased and temples were re-consecrated as churches while new churches and monasteries were built. From a land of Egyptian style temples Nubia became a land of churches—well over a hundred are known. [32] Nor was the change limited to the public aspects of religion. Pagan symbols disappeared from Nubian pottery. The most dramatic change, however, was at the personal level in funerary religion and it is visible archaeologically in cemeteries throughout Nubia.

For millennia the peoples of Nubia had provided the dead with elaborate tombs, rich funerary gifts, and ritual offerings. Suddenly, this all ended. In Christian Nubia the dead were buried in Spartan graves that, according to the archaeologist William Y. Adams, were "narrow vertical slot[s] in which the body" was "laid on its back...without any covering except perhaps for a crude 'lean-to' of bricks over the face..." and "wrapped in a shroud" accompanied by only "a few small articles of personal jewelry...." [33] It was as though a chasm had opened between the newly Christianized Nubian kingdoms and the Pharaonic traditions that had been introduced into Nubia by the pharaohs of the 25th dynasty over a millennium and a half before. Few aspects of Kushite elite culture crossed that chasm. One of those privileged few was the Greek language. Indeed, the Middle Ages were to be the golden age of Greek culture—Christian Greek culture, to be sure—in Nubia.

This is not the place or the time to rehearse the long history of the Nubian Christian kingdoms. Suffice to say that the Arab geographers describe both Makuria and Alwa as strong and prosperous states with numerous cities and towns. Makuria—our sources primarily concern Makuria—not only maintained its independence until the 14th century AD but was strong enough to intervene in Egyptian affairs and on one occasion in the mid 8th century the Makurian king Kyriakos even forced the emir of Egypt to release the Coptic Patriarch of Alexandria from prison.

The revelation of the place of Greek cultural elements in the lives of these kingdoms has been gradual and is still ongoing, but already it is clear that Greek was the official language of government and religion for most of their history. The distinguished church historian W. H. C. Friend well summed up the initial impression created by the wide use of Greek and the extensive influence of Christian Greek art in Medieval Nubia in the title of one of his articles: "Nubia as an Outpost of Byzantine Cultural Influence". [34] So, for example, Christian Nubian political terminology is almost entirely borrowed from the late Roman Empire. Terms such as *basileus*, *eparchos*, *domestikos*, *meizoteris*, and even Hellenized Latin terms such as *rix*=*rex*, *primikerios*, not to mention, Augustus and Caesar, abound. One king of Makuria was even called the "New Constantine". [35]

At first glance, we seem to be looking at a Nubian version of the late Roman imperial government, but first impressions are often misleading, and that is the case here. The Nubian kingdoms were not bureaucratically organized centralized states like the Roman Empire, but segmentary states like Kush and other African states. [36] They consisted, that is, of alliances of regional monarchies linked to a paramount ruler by personal ties, and that reality is reflected in the use of these terms with *basileus* and Augustus referring to paramount rulers, *eparchos* and *rix* to regional governors, and those such as *domestikos* to the paramount's household. In other words, Roman terms were not mechanically copied but selectively borrowed and adapted to a new Nubian reality.

The glory of Medieval Nubian civilization was its religious art. [37] Only brief allusions in Arab accounts and a few fresco fragments were known prior to the discovery by a Polish expedition of the main cathedral of Faras, the principal city and one time capital of Nobatia, buried to its roof in sand. Excavation revealed that the cathedral and its decoration were largely intact and, more remarkable, that the cathedral was an artistic palimpsest with multiple layers of frescoes preserved. Careful separation of the different layers has allowed the reconstruction of a detailed history of Nubian fresco painting from the construction of the cathedral in the 8th century AD through its peak in the 12th century to its abandonment in the 15th century. Themes include episodes from the Old and New Testaments, saints, and Nubian political and ecclesiastical figures. Technically, stylistically, and thematically, Nubian Christian art has clear connections to Byzantine art but with its own distinctive characteristics such as the inclusion of elements of portraiture in its depiction of contemporary figures.

Even more remarkable is the survival of the Greek language after the Arab conquest of Egypt. [38] Arab geographers claimed that the Nubians possessed books in Greek and prayed in Greek, and their claims have been fully confirmed by the UNESCO archaeological salvage campaign. We now have hundreds of Greek inscriptions and graffiti as well as the tattered remains of the cathedral library at Qasr Ibrim, which was destroyed in an Egyptian raid in 1173 AD led by Shams ed-Dawla Turanshah, the brother of the famous Saladin. [39] The most spectacular and revealing find, however, is the 12th century tomb of Archbishop Georgios from Old Dongola, the capital of Makuria. [40] The texts on the tomb's walls include religious formulae, magical signs, the beginnings and ends of all four gospels, the Greek text of an extra-biblical text known as the "Speech of Mary to Bartos," and Coptic homilies. Taken together with the manuscript remains and inscriptions, Archbishop Georgios' tomb leaves no doubt that cathedral libraries at major centers such as Faras, Qasr Ibrim, and Old Dongola possessed a wide variety of religious texts including bibles, church canons, saints' lives and homilies, hymnals, and other liturgical texts, and even magical texts.

Greek was not confined to books, however, but was a living language, at least as far as the clergy and governing class was concerned. So, numerous graffiti painted or scratched on the walls of pilgrimage churches—over 650 such graffiti—many written in the first person—have been counted on the walls of one such church—point to widespread functional Greek literacy in these two groups. [41] For evidence of more than this minimal literacy, however, we have to turn to funerary stelae, the most common form of Greek inscription found in Nubia.

Hundreds of these stelae have been discovered from all over Nubia. [42] They seem to be unique to Nubia and began to appear in the 8th century AD. They contain versions of a Byzantine prayer for the dead that was probably introduced into Nubia then or a century earlier and were made for all sorts of people from kings and bishops to common men and women. That the Nubians were not simply mechanically copying empty formulae but understood these texts and their theology is clear from the freedom with which they modified the basic prayer to suit the individual being commemorated. Particularly interesting in this regard are these two stelae from Nuri near the fourth cataract. They date from the late 9th or 10th century AD and contain abbreviated versions of the standard prayer. [43] The first reads:

John, the servant of Christ, fell asleep by the order of God the Lord, the omnipotent One; in Pachon, 28th day. And now You, Good God, rest his soul in the bosom of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob....

And the second:

By the inclination and will of God the creator of everything who has arranged disorder into order. Elisabeth died in the month of Choiak. (God) rest (her).

What sets these two inscriptions apart from all other Nubian funerary inscriptions is the fact that both contain phrases translated from Coptic. [44] So, in the first the vocative "You, Good God", is modeled on Coptic

grave stelae; while in the second the usual description of God as "the omnipotent One", *pantokrator*, has been replaced by *pantotektor*, "the all builder," a unique word that is virtually unattested in either classical or medieval Greek but is, however, a perfect translation of the standard description of God in Coptic grave stelae, *damourgos m pterif*, "creator of everything". In other words, the provincial priest who wrote these texts was probably trilingual, understanding Greek, Coptic, and, of course, Nubian. Ironically, the most important example of these clerics' linguistic virtuosity ultimately threatened the survival of Greek in Nubia.

The 10th century AD Arab geographer al-Aswani observed that the Nubians possessed Greek books, which they translate into their own language. [45] Contemporary Nubian is no longer a written language, but sometime in the 8th or 9th century the Greek alphabet, supplemented by signs borrowed from the Coptic alphabet and even one from the old Meroitic script, was adapted to write Old Nubian. [46] A religious literature composed primarily of translated patristic texts gradually developed. Less than a hundred pages from Old Nubian books survive, but they confirm al-Aswani's claim that the Nubians translated Greek religious texts directly into Old Nubian.

At first, Old Nubian was used only for religious purposes, but by the 12th century AD, it was being used for legal and commercial texts, and Old Nubian vocabulary was making its way into Nubian Greek texts. History was repeating itself. Just as the invention of the Meroitic script marked the beginning of the end of the use of Egyptian in Hellenistic and Roman Kush, so the invention of the Old Nubian script was inexorably leading to the marginalization of Greek in Medieval Nubia. That process had not yet been completed, however, when Nubian Christian civilization came to an end in the late 14th or 15th century AD.

The end was gradual and the process complex. The replacement of the Fatimid rulers of Egypt with the more aggressive Ayyubids and Mamlukes, increasing Muslim settlement in Nubia and intermarriage with the local population, and endemic dynastic strife in Makuria all played a part. In any event, by the early 14th century AD the kings of Makuria had converted to Islam, and the kingdom itself disappeared soon afterwards. Alwaha in the south and a fragment of Makuria called the kingdom of Dattawa with its capital at Qasr Ibrim, however, survived probably for another century. Even more remarkably, so did Nubian Greek.

One of the most important discoveries of the UNESCO salvage campaign was the tomb of probably the last archbishop of Qasr Ibrim, a Nubian named Timotheus. He had been consecrated by the Patriarch of Alexandria in 1372 AD and sent to Nubia. When he died, he had buried with him his consecration documents. These were in Coptic and Arabic. The Coptic text, however, was preceded by the Patriarch's greeting to Timotheus' Nubian congregation, which was composed in halting Greek and followed by a postscript in equally unsteady Greek written by an Egyptian bishop explaining that he had witnessed Timotheus' consecration. [47] Greek remained the official language of Nubian Christianity right to the end of its long and remarkable history.

CONCLUSION

The survival of Greek and Greek culture in ancient and medieval Nubia is unique. Many cultures on the periphery of the Greco-Roman world used Greek and adopted aspects of Greek culture in antiquity, but they gradually disappeared when these cultures lost contact with the Roman Empire. For a good example of the normal pattern we need only look to Nubia's eastern neighbor, the kingdom of Axum in northeastern Ethiopia and Eritrea.

Greek was used in Axum for diplomacy and commerce with the Roman Empire from at least the first century AD to the end of antiquity and is found on inscriptions and coin legends. When, however, the Arab conquests severed ties with Rome, Greek disappeared, being replaced by Ge'ez for literature and Arabic for diplomacy and commerce. Why the difference?

A first step on the road to an explanation is the recognition that Nubia was probably never totally isolated from the Byzantine Empire. Sporadic contact occurred, probably with Islamic Egypt as intermediary, and Nubian pilgrims are attested at Jerusalem where they could have met visitors from Byzantium. Some may even have visited Constantinople themselves. So, the French chronicler Robert of Clari describes a meeting in 1204 between the leaders of the Fourth Crusade and a Nubian "king" who had come to Constantinople with ten companions—he had started with sixty—as part of a pilgrimage that was supposed to include Rome and the shrine of St. James of Compostella in Spain. [48]

Whether or not Robert of Clari's Nubian king completed his ambitious journey is unknown, but there is no reason to assume that he was unique. Such occasional contacts combined with imports of Byzantine goods could account for the knowledge of Byzantine artistic and architectural trends archaeologists have documented in Nubia. They would not, however, be sufficient to account for the survival of the Greek language. For that more would have been required, especially since obvious alternatives with apparent advantages were readily available, namely, Coptic, which was the language of the Nubians' co-religionists in Egypt and was used in Nubia by Egyptian priests, and, of course, Arabic, the language of the Islamic rulers of Egypt. Two factors can be suggested.

First, unlike the situation in Axum, there was no local written language in Nubia for the Nobatai and Blemmyes to use after the collapse of the kingdom of Kush. As a result, they were forced to turn to Greek or Coptic, the two foreign languages in use in Nubia in late antiquity, and Greek had significant advantages over Coptic in this regard, since it had been widely used for public purposes in northern Nubia for centuries and was, therefore, integrated into the life of the region. Moreover, Greek also enabled the Nobatai and Blemmyes to conduct diplomatic relations with Roman Egypt in particular and the Roman Empire in general. In addition, as a papyrus letter discovered at Qasr Ibrim and written in startlingly ungrammatical but still intelligible Greek has revealed, Greek also served as a neutral vehicle for Nobatai and Blemmyes to communicate with each other. [49] Second, and equally important, Greek was the language in which Christianity came to Nubia, and, thanks to the wiles of the Empress Theodora, only in Nubia was Greek identified with Monophysitism and not orthodoxy as it was in Egypt and elsewhere.

This is certainly not the whole story. There are still many gaps in our knowledge. We do not know, for example, how Greek was taught in Nubia. But these three factors do suggest how Greek and Christianity could have become so intimately intertwined and so entrenched in Nubian life and culture by the seventh century AD that Greek could resist both Coptic and Arabic and survive for almost another millennium before both disappeared with the conversion of Nubia to Islam in the sixteenth century AD.

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7. Cf. Torgny Säve-Söderbergh, *Temples and Tombs of Ancient Nubia: The International Rescue Campaign at Abu Simbel, Philae and Other Sites* (London, 1987).
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9. Frank Snowden, Jr., *Iconographic Evidence on the Black Populations in Greco-Roman Antiquity in The Image of the Black in Western Art*, Vol. 1 (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1976) 136.
10. Russell Meiggs and David Lewis, *GHI*, 7.
11. Stanley M. Burstein, "Alexander, Callisthenes, and the Sources of the Nile," *Graeco-Africana*, 63-76.
12. Stanley M. Burstein, "Exploration and Ethnography in Ptolemaic Egypt," *The Ancient World*, 31 (2000) 31-37.
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23. Cf. László Török, *Meroe City: Ancient African Capital, John Garstang's Excavations in the Sudan, Part One: Text* (London: The Egypt Exploration Society, 1997) 145-151.

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33. Adams, 480.

34. W. H. C. Friend, "Nubia as an Outpost of Byzantine Cultural Influence," *Byzantinoslavica*, 29 (1968) 310-326.

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49. *FHN* 319.

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