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A reconsideration of the 'disappearance' of Nubian 'A-Groups' and the subsequent 'hiatus' in Lower Nubia (ca. 2900-2300 BC)

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Abstract

The sudden 'disappearance' of Nubian 'A-Groups' and the subsequent 'hiatus' are topics researched by specialists in Lower Nubia. However, no consensus has yet been achieved to propose a feasible explanation of these topics. In this article, I propose that both the 'disappearance' and the 'hiatus' should be questioned because other explanations based on the archaeological and written evidence are also plausible. These alternative explanations focus on processes of identity change.

Keywords: Lower Nubia- 'A-Groups'- Ethnogenesis- Identity.

Introduction

This paper is focused on the processes identified in Nubian scholarship for the 'disappearance' of Nubian 'A-Groups' and the subsequent 'hiatus' which took place in Lower Nubia. Before developing these topics, I will present information about the 'A-Groups' which will be useful for understanding these themes.

The 'A-Group' name was created by G. Reisner, who applied A, B, C and X Group denominations to designate new cultures' materials discovered at the beginning of the twentieth century.¹ Most researchers continued using these appellations, except W. Adams who used the concept of 'horizon' to avoid the implicit social connotation, which involves the use of the term 'Group'.² Hence, there is a generalised consensus to consider the 'A-Group' as a set of communities that inhabited Lower Nubia and shared a common material culture.³

However, I agree with M. C. Gatto who preferred to use the concept of 'A-Groups' rather than 'A-Group' to define the people who lived in Lower Nubia during the fourth millennium BC, due to differences in the material culture discovered at different sites.⁴ M. C. Gatto re-examined the evidence, especially the funerary records, and noticed differences in the typology of tomb shafts, of pottery and of evidence associated with burials, such as grave goods.⁵ She considered the 'A-Group' culture not to be homogeneous. Rather, in Lower Nubia, she argued that there were at least two groups with the same cultural background but with different characteristics in the cultural material. One of these groups was localised in the Wadi Allaqi and its hinterland, and

¹ Reisner 1910.

² Adams 1977.

³ Williams 1987; O'Connor 1993: 21- 22; Hill 2004: 56- 57; Török 2009: 48.

⁴ Gatto and Tiraterra 1996: 331-334; Gatto 2004.

⁵ Gatto 2004.

the other was in the Second Cataract Region. Pottery and palettes from pre-dynastic Egypt were discovered in the first region, which probably indicates that trading was the most important subsistence activity. Regarding the Cataract Region, M. C. Gatto suggested that the cattle skins found in the graves and dung found in some kinds of pottery could be linked to an agro-pastoral subsistence order, rather than an exchange pattern.⁶

Furthermore, the inhabitants of Lower Nubia developed different types of economic activities depending on the resources that they could exploit.⁷ This variability probably caused different types of political structures during the period ca. 3400-2900 BC. Specifically, researchers have proposed the existence of 'states' or 'chiefdoms' in areas where the exchange relationships seemed to be important to the economic and political structure, such as in the Qustul and Sayala areas.⁸ This provides another type of evidence which demonstrates the existence of the 'A-Groups'.

In these regions, cemetery L in Qustul and cemetery 137 in Sayala showed marked social differentiation, judging from the size of the tombs, the prestige goods found in them (amulets, maces, stone vessels, pottery from Egypt, the Levant and Mesopotamia, and cylinder-seals),⁹ and the small dimension of the sites (they had a small number of tombs). Also, objects that appear to display royal symbolism from Upper Egypt (such as stone vessels, a gold mace handle with a pink quartz mace head, palettes), objects with representations closely linked to the proceeding pharaonic iconography (such as the

⁶ Gatto 2004.

⁷ Quintana 2012.

⁸ Williams 1987: 20; O'Connor 1993: 21-22; Hill 2004: 56-57; Török 2009: 48.

⁹ Williams 1980, 1987; Jimenez Serrano 1997.

Qustul incense burner¹⁰ and a lion's head with suspension hole green glazed quartz¹¹); and finally, fine pottery (*egg-shell* pottery).¹²

Thus, this evidence could have been connected to minorities who monopolised the exchange relationships between Egypt and the areas surrounding Lower Nubia: on the one hand, inhabitants from Qustul probably controlled the exchange between Upper Nubia and Upper Egypt; on the other hand, the population from Sayala had power over the routes which were closed to Wadi Allaqi (an important area for gold).¹³ The exchange relationships started to be an important economic resource for some Nubian 'A-Groups' since the beginning of the states in Upper Egypt (Nagada, Abydos and Hierakonpolis). The appearance of elites within these states generated an increase in the demand for luxury goods in Lower Nubia because these elites legitimised themselves through prestige goods.¹⁴

From 2900 BC, this political context started to change. For a long time scholarship has identified this process as the 'disappearance' (2900 BC) and subsequent 'hiatus' (2900-2300 BC) of Nubian 'A-Groups'.¹⁵ Scholars equated the absence of material culture and inhabitants in Lower Nubia along the Nile Valley from ca. 2900 BC with the concept of 'disappearance', while through the related concept of 'hiatus' they considered the subsequent period to be 'culturally impoverished', characterised by the absence of any inhabitant or material culture in the region.¹⁶ Both concepts - 'disappearance' and

¹⁰ Seele 1974; Williams 1986, 1987.

¹¹ Firth 1912.

¹² O'Connor 1993: 9; Fuscaldo, pers. comm. 2012.

¹³ Jimenez Serrano 2003.

¹⁴ Campagno 2002.

¹⁵ Adams 1977; Nordström 1972: 28-29; O'Connor 1993: 21-22.

¹⁶ Adams 1977; Nordström 1972: 28-29; Smith and Giddy 1985; O'Connor 1993: 21-22.

'hiatus' - were supported by the findings coming from sites located near the Nile Valley in Lower Nubia.

Researchers suggested many different hypotheses with regard to this situation: on the one hand, the constant military pressure exerted by the recently unified Egyptian state;¹⁷ on the other hand, the environmental problems caused by a decrease in the flooding of the Nile.¹⁸ In addition, there was no agreement with regard to the date of the whole process. H. Nordström stressed that the 'end' of the 'A-Group' culture and Nubian communities took place during the First Dynasty (3000-2890 BC),¹⁹ whereas W. Adams maintained that it happened during the Second Dynasty (2890-2686 BC).²⁰

With respect to the 'hiatus', some scholars agreed that Lower Nubia was culturally impoverished and almost depopulated from 2900-2300 BC,²¹ while other specialists postulated that this area was never completely depopulated given the presence of nomadic communities.²² Various scholars have implied that the 'disappearance' and the 'hiatus' were evidenced by the absence of any characteristic material culture in the Nile Valley of Nubian 'A-Groups',²³ however I will argue that this suggestion is based on a problematic assumption that the material culture of an ethnic group is static.

I propose that other explanations may be feasible. The growing power of Egypt as a unified state may have caused some communities from the Nubian 'A-Groups' to give up their role as trade intermediaries (primarily, the communities which were settled in

¹⁷ Arkell 1961: 40-41; Emery 1965.

¹⁸ Manzo 1999; Adams 1977.

¹⁹ Nordström 1972.

²⁰ Adams 1977.

²¹ Adams 1977; Smith and Giddy 1985; Bonnet 1994-1995: 143.

²² Lupo 2004: 43; O'Connor 1993: 21-22

²³ Adams 1977; Smith and Giddy 1985; Bonnet 1994-1995: 143.

the Sayala and Qustul areas). The control of trade networks was a vital resource for these populations, and the loss of such control may have forced them to migrate to other regions or engage in a nomadic lifestyle. Egyptian elites controlled the exchange routes of prestige goods. They were important to consolidate their power, legitimise themselves, and eliminate potential competition or rivalry that could occur with the Nubian elites.

During the next 600 years, I suggest that these communities moved to other areas far away from the Nile Valley (such as Laqiya), which would explain the lack of archaeological remains along the Nile Valley and the new findings provided by the excavations that have taken place in desert regions.²⁴

In order to argue these hypotheses, it is important to use concepts that take into account ethnicity, ethnic identity and ethnogenesis processes. They allow a more dynamic analysis of the material evidence and written documentation. For this last reason, I discuss the terms 'disappearance' and 'hiatus' in this paper because a.) 'disappearance' is a very limited term that refers more to extermination or extinction rather than a process of change; and b.) 'hiatus' refers to the absence of material culture and population in Lower Nubia even though such absence can be called into question by new archaeological data provided in the last few decades.

Thus, in the following pages, I develop my perspective about these topics. Firstly, I introduce my theoretical tools; secondly, I describe the evidence (documents, archaeological registers, and representations), and finally, in the last section, I present my analysis and conclusion.

Theoretical Tools

²⁴ Lange 2004.

The concept of identity involves both the self-identification of the group as well as the material conditions and impositions of identity set by the 'other'. Continuing with the preceding idea, Guillaume Boccara suggested that identities:

...are always in motion and depend on historical context, the moment of social life and the nature of the contact. It is useful to think of the relation with the outside as a structural element of the internal reproduction of a society.²⁵

Identity also has to be considered from multiple angles, because it represents an individual as a collective being creating internal experiences in a person, like behaviours which are a product of repetition and institutionalised practices.²⁶ In summary, identity is the result of collective practices that are institutionalised and generate differentiation from the 'other'.²⁷

Ethnicity is not understood as an 'essence',²⁸ but as a continuing and changing identity construction in relation to an 'other' and a specific historical context:²⁹

The concept of ethnicity refers to the study of variable, unending processes by which actors identify themselves and are identified by

²⁵ Boccara 2003: 91 '*...están siempre en movimiento y dependen del contexto, del momento de la vida social y de la naturaleza del contacto. Conviene pensar la relación con el exterior como un elemento estructural de la reproducción interna de una sociedad.*' (My translation).

²⁶ Voss 2008: 13-14.

²⁷ Voss 2008: 16.

²⁸ When I refer to ethnicity as an essence, I mean that it is understood as an ontological fact, independent of the individual. In other words, ethnicity is intrinsic to human nature as an extension of the subject's biological being (Restrepo 2004: 15-16).

²⁹ Smith 2006: 6.

others on the basis of the dichotomy Us/Them, established from cultural traits supposedly derived from a common origin and cast into relief through social interactions....³⁰

This definition takes into account the internal and external processes that participate in the identity construction process, suggesting a dialectical relationship between them.

The ethnogenesis concept is understood as a process in which a group enters into a dynamic restructuring and redefinition of its identity with the end result being the emergence of a new identity. This different identity is always a result of specific socio-historical dynamics.³¹ In general, this type of concept was developed to explain processes of the colonial world. However, Thomas Levy has suggested that ethnogenesis processes can also be the result of local competitive interactions within a community.³²

Regarding the relationship between material culture and ethnicity, I propose that the cultural materials cannot be correlated with a specific fixed identity of an ethnic group, because the significance of places and things is never static and these places and things have different connotations depending on the purposes of their uses.³³ The style of cultural material and expression of ethnicity can mutate depending on geographical and historical context. Cultural material is constantly subjected to reproduction and transformation:

³⁰ Poutignat and Streiff-Fenart 1995: 154. '...le concept d'éthnicité: celui de l'étude des processus variables et jamais finis par lesquels les acteurs s'identifient et sont identifiés par les autres sur la base de dichotomisations Nous/Eux, établies à partir de traits culturels supposés dérivés d'une origine commune et mis en relief dans les interactions sociales.' (my translation).

³¹ Voss 2008: 9-40.

³² Levy 2009: 156.

³³ Voss 2008: 4.

Rather, the signification of self-conscious identity is linked to the generative structures which infuse all aspects of cultural practice and social relations characterizing a particular way of life, and which in effect underlie the generation of ethnic identity.³⁴

It is not easy to incorporate these ideas into our analysis of Nubian archaeological material. However, according to Sian Jones, specialists must not only identify stylistic boundaries of the material culture, they should also place the cultural material and ethnicity relationship within a socio-historical context while taking into account social aspects of the organisation and distribution of material and symbolic power.³⁵

Material and written evidence connected to 'A-Groups' communities

The material evidence is from sites in the Wadi Shaw region (Laqiya) and Egyptian sites such as Buhen and Elephantine during the period 2900-2300 BC.³⁶ Furthermore, rock drawings such as at the Gebel Sheikh Suleiman relief and written documents are important evidence.³⁷

³⁴ Jones 1995: 187.

³⁵ Jones 1995: 203.

³⁶ Emery 1963; Lange 2003; Raue 2008.

³⁷ Regarding the writings, their origin is Egyptian (Nubian writing was not developed until the first millennium BC), but through references about them, it is possible to understand part of Nubian history. The Palermo Stone (O'Mara 1979; Scalf 2009), the biography of Uni (Lichtheim 1973: 18-22; de Miroschedji 2012) and the biography of Harkhuf (Lichtheim 1973: 23-27; Goedicke 1981) are useful for this paper; these sources will be discussed in more detail later.

Material culture related to Nubian 'A-Groups' during 2900-2300 BC

As noted by Mathias Lange (2003, 2004), an archaeological site considered Nubian, dated from 2900 to 2300 BC, was found in the region of Wadi Shaw. This site, named Wadi Shaw 82/52, may indicate the existence of a small population in Lower Nubia during the Old Kingdom (2686-2125 BC).³⁸ This dating was suggested by the identification of a *Maidum Egyptian* ceramic bowl,³⁹ which is characteristic of the Fourth Dynasty (2613-2494 BC) and early Fifth Dynasty (2494- 2345 BC), and by carbon 14 studies obtained from coal found in fireplaces on the site.⁴⁰

Wadi Shaw lies 180 kilometres south of the Egypt-Sudan border and about 360 kilometres west of the Nile Valley region. It was found on a *playa*⁴¹ and had several scattered concentrations of archaeological material such as objects of grinding, bones, stone artefacts, pottery, jewellery and artefacts made with egg-shells of ostrich.⁴²

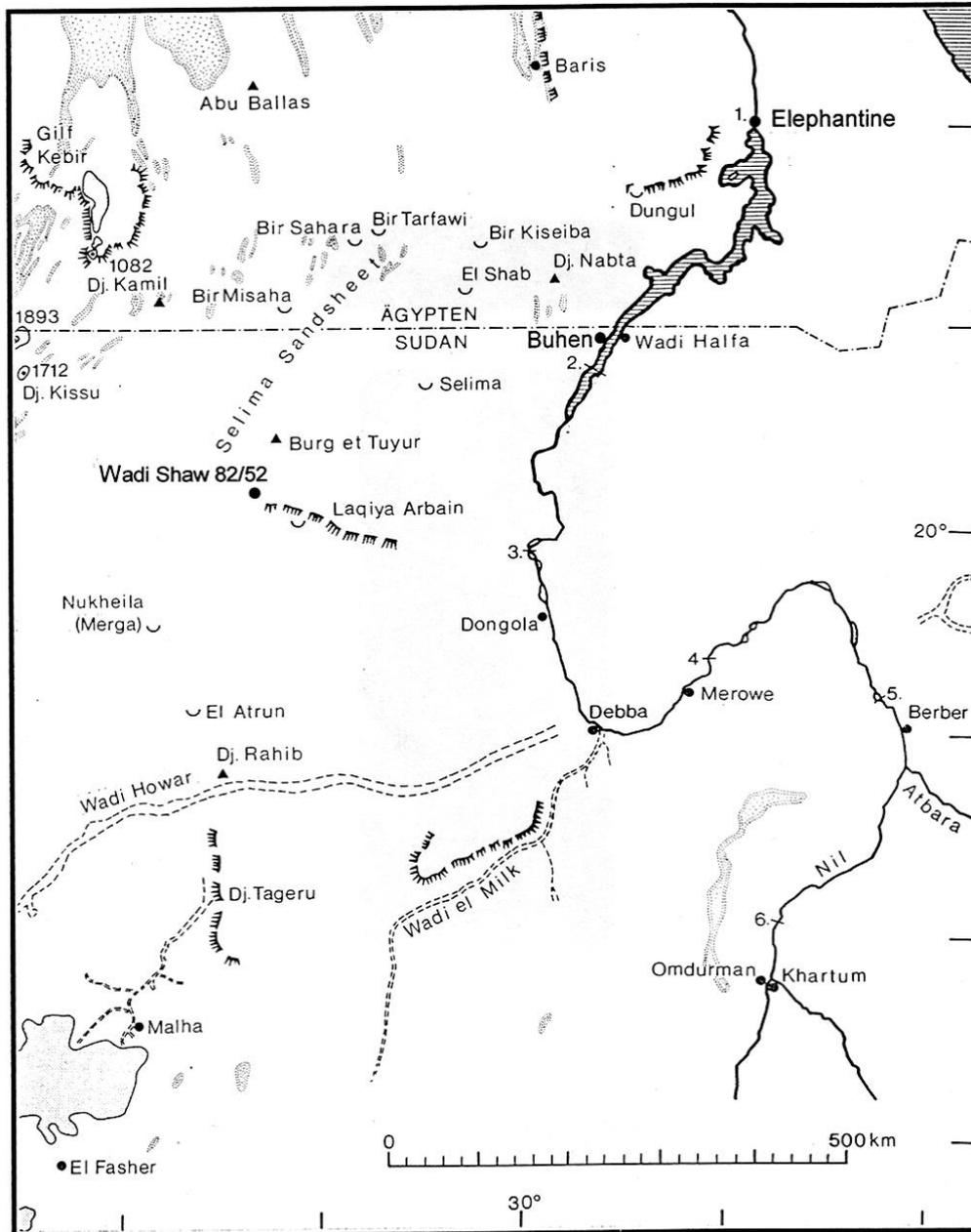
³⁸ Lange 2003: 123.

³⁹ These type of vessels were made with Marl clay (calceo- ferruginous clays which are found along the river valley between Esna (south) and Cairo (north) with sand or finely calcium carbonate as inclusions) or Nile silt (alluvial silt from the river or nearest canals with straw, ash, dung or sand added as temper. They show the high quality of the pottery because they were produced for the elite tombs and used for serving or as flower vases (Bourriau 1981: 52).

⁴⁰ Lange 2004: 315-317.

⁴¹ The concept of *playa* or *sakha* is an international term used by geomorphologists who refer to a saline or alkaline plain in a desert environment (Dr. Federico Isla, pers.comm).

⁴² Lange 2004: 315.



(Lange 2004: 316)

Bones of cattle (*Bos taurus*), sheep (*Ovis ammon*), goats (*Capra hircus*), and the remains of wild mammals like gazelles (*Gazella dorcas*, *Gazella dama*) and antelopes (*Oryx gazella lady*, *Addax nasomaculatus*) were found at this site. These animals lived in an environment characterised by a temporary pasture that was dependent on an

annual rainy season (as evidenced by the analysis of recovered coal). According to Mathias Lange, this evidence could be related to the possible existence of pastoral nomadic communities at this site, where hunting was a complementary activity.⁴³

The lithic materials consisted of 13,000 pieces composed of a variety of quartz and quartzite stone, and a type of flint. Most of the objects were borers, and they were probably used to make egg-shell beads and quartz jewellery. From the study of four discovered hearths at this site, Mathias Lange suggested that the production of stone objects, decoration of ostrich egg-shells, preparation of food, and grinding of haematite (colour powder) were the activities that were developed around them.⁴⁴

The pottery can be classified as imported or local. With respect to the first, the *Maidum Egyptian* ceramic bowl typical of Dynasties IV and V of Ancient Egypt was identified. This finding can be related to exchange networks between the inhabitants of Wadi Shaw and Egyptians. The local pottery vessels were exemplified by 'A-Group' and 'C-Group' pottery (2500-1550 BC) such as the black-topped rim typical of the red-polished black-topped pottery (a jar and a vessel).⁴⁵ According to Mathias Lange, these types of vessels allowed the visualisation of certain continuities between 'A-Group' and 'C-Group' material cultures.⁴⁶

Wadi Shaw 82/52 was the only Nubian site identified during the Old Kingdom, but useful evidence can be found in other Egyptian locations. W. Emery (1963) identified Nubian

⁴³ Lange 2004: 315.

⁴⁴ Lange 2004: 315.

⁴⁵ These types of vessels were one of the most typical Nubian A- group wares. They were made by alluvial clay and ash used as temper. They were almost always rippled burnished, given an exterior red coating. There were different several shapes of this type of pottery such as: shallower variants, conical bowls, tall cups, etc. (Williams 1986: 27-30).

⁴⁶ Lange 2004: 317.

pottery from the Fourth and Fifth Dynasty levels in the settlement at Buhen. Other important findings are two Nubian burials in Adindan that were recorded by Bruce Williams.⁴⁷

Dietrich Raue, based on his investigations of the Elephantine site, analysed the relationship between Nubians and Egyptians. He gave an account of the archaeological material identified from 3500/3300 BC to the Old Kingdom. Since the Naqada II phase, Egyptian vessels (for storage and processing of bread) and different types of containers from Nubia were identified at Elephantine ...on *Elephantine a complete set always consists of both features: Nubian and Egyptian*.⁴⁸

Raue suggests that this site and Buhen were places where Egyptians and Nubians met. He named objects (the prototype of the V shape cooking vessel)⁴⁹ from the material culture 'Dynastic A-Group' (from the sites localised on Qustul area).⁵⁰ The material culture was registered in Elephantine in the context of the Second (2890-2686 BC), Third (2686-2613 BC), and Fourth (2613-2494 BC) Dynasties. Moreover, other pottery items with a single row of incised triangles were identified there from the Second Dynasty through to the Fifth Dynasty (2494-2345 BC).⁵¹ Different objects were found from the Fourth and Fifth Dynasties. For example, a decorative pattern of incised

⁴⁷ Emery 1963; Williams 1989: 122.

⁴⁸ Raue 2008: 3.

⁴⁹ They were bowls with red painted interiors (parallel lines, simple bands or strips, swags, or zig zag patterns). Two types of shapes were used with a flattened rim: on one hand, open shallow convex bowl; on the other hand, a vessel with flat or slightly curved base. They also were close- burnished inside and out. (Williams 1986: 61).

⁵⁰ It is important to indicate that only Raue (2008) used the term 'Dynastic A-Group' culture. I use it only to respect his terminology.

⁵¹ For an image and description of this pottery see: Firth 1912: 201.

pending triangles filled with short incised strokes was discovered in objects from the Fourth Dynasty,⁵² and there is a successor of the *egg-shell* pottery together with the chevron frieze appearing in the Fifth Dynasty.⁵³ Finally, the last examples of V shape cooking vessels were identified from the Sixth Dynasty (2345- 2184 BC.).⁵⁴

In summary, different goods (such as grinding objects, stone artefacts, pottery vessels, artefacts made with egg-shells of ostrich, and cattle bones) were recorded at the Wadi Shaw 82/52 site, which suggest the presence of populations in regions distant from the Nile Valley. These materials were related to 'A-Group' pottery, which was also found in the Buhen and Elephantine sites. The presence of these items would indicate the absence of 'disappearance' and 'hiatus' processes in Lower Nubia, and they would demonstrate the existence of a migration process in which inhabitants from the Nile Valley migrated to others areas, like Wadi Shaw or regions close to Egyptian sites. Furthermore, this evidence reveals the durability of the 'A-Group' material culture until the end of the Old Kingdom. Nubian communities probably moved to different areas to take advantage of available resources in order to continue trading with Egyptian sites located on the border area.

⁵² Raue used the concept of *dent du loup* pattern to describe this type of decoration.

⁵³ The term of egg- shell was developed by Nordström. It makes reference to a type of ware characterized by very thickness walls. We have to consider that B. Williams does not agree to use this terminology because he suggests that this distinction (thickness walls) is not sufficiently to justify the use of this category. (Nordström 1979: 63; Williams 1986: 105).

⁵⁴ Raue 2008: 4.

The inhabitants of Lower Nubia in the Egyptian Texts: Palermo Stone, Harkhuf Biography, and Uni Biography

Ancient Egyptian texts reflected the way this society understood the world and its relationships.⁵⁵ Foreigners were qualified as 'enemies' in a stereotyped form, and Nubians were not an exception to this rule. However, the Palermo Stone, and the Harkhuf and Uni biographies provide useful information on the inhabitants of Lower Nubia during the Old Kingdom. The Palermo Stone was dated to the Fifth Dynasty, and it is the official record maintained by the kings of Egypt during the Old Kingdom.⁵⁶ The main topics of this source are the beginnings of the state as well as the expansion and consolidation policies carried out by the Egyptian state. The Uni Biography was dated to the Sixth Dynasty and refers to Uni, a royal official in Nubia who served the kings Teti (2345-2323 BC), Pepi I (2321-2287 BC), and Merenre (2287-2278 BC).⁵⁷ The Harkhuf Biography was dated to the Sixth Dynasty, and documents Harkhuf's trips to Nubia. At first he acted as an intermediary between Nubian chiefs and Egyptian kings and as a supervisor of the Egyptian caravans, while later he became the governor of Upper Egypt.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Written documents were imbued with Egyptian world view about the 'other'. Thus, these records reflect the ideological Egyptian stereotypes, which present Nubian ethnicity in negative terms (Smith 2003: 1-5). Furthermore, ethnic stereotypes had an important role in the state ideology as a legal tool for the early chiefs of Ancient Egypt. According to Stuart Tyson Smith: 'The political use of the ethnic 'other' is particularly applicable to the highly idealized construction of ethnic identities reflected in ancient Egyptian ideology. Egyptian ideology created a topos, or stereotype, of distinctive ethnic categories presenting Egyptians as civilized and foreigners as barbaric enemies. Egyptian art depicts Nubians with stereotypical dark skin, facial features, hairstyles, and dress, all very different from Egyptians and the other two ethnic groups, Asiatics and Libyans.' (Smith 2003: 6).

⁵⁶ Breasted 1906: 51.

⁵⁷ Miroschedji 2012.

⁵⁸ Goedicke 1981.

After this brief introduction to the different documents, I would like to present certain ideas and phrases which are useful for my research. The Palermo Stone referred to raids conducted by Egyptians, in which they took cattle and captives from Lower Nubia. Clearly, this document pointed to the existence of a domination relationship between Egyptians and Nubians.

Abd 16 nswt dpwt 60
aD tA- nHs jnt anx sKrw 7000 KAw srw 200000
Kd Smaw- mHw tA snfrw Hwwt
jnt dpt mDw 40 mH aS
mH 2 DbA 2⁵⁹

However, the Uni and Harkhuf biographies suggested the presence of trade and violent conflicts between Egyptians and Nubians. In the following pages, I present some examples from these sources.

Here, I consider a phrase, which is related to conflict and domination aspects as evidenced from the Uni Biography:

...jj n mSw pn m Htp
xbAn.f tA Hr Sa
jj n mSw pn m Htp

⁵⁹ Month 16, 60 royal boats

I attack the Nubians' land, bringing 7000 living captives and 200,000 bulls and sheep

Building in Lower and Upper Egypt Snefru's royal residences

Bringing 40 boats with cedar

2 cubits and 2 fingers.

pds n.f tA HrSa
jj n mSw pn m Htp
sSn n.f wnnt jnbw.f
jj n mSw pn m Htp
Sr n.f dAbw.f iArr(w)t.f
Jj n mSw pn m Htp
st xt n.f xt m -----nHsw.f nb
jj n mSw pn m Htp⁶⁰

This biography also suggested the existence of trade relations and chiefs who allowed the supply of goods:

...hAb Hm.f r SAd mr 5m SmAw
r irt wsx wiA 3 sAT 4
m Snd n WAwAt
sT HKAw xAstw nw jrTt WAwAt jAm
mDA Hr sAT xt r s

⁶⁰ This army returned at peace
It destroyed the land in the sands
This army returned at peace
It devastated the land in the sands
This army returned at peace
It sacked the existing walls
This army returned at peace
It cuts its figs and vineyards
This army returned at peace
While it set fire to all Nubians
This army returned at peace...

jw jr n mj Kd n rnp wa
mHj
ATp m mAt aA wrt r “mrn- ra xa nfr” bnbnt⁶¹

As noted above, the presence of peaceful and conflict relationships were also noticeable in the biography of Harkhuf:

...jn n xrt xAst (w) nb n nb Hr.f
jn n jnw n nsw Xkrt
jmy- r xAstw nb nt tp- tsy
Dd nrw Hr Hr m xAst (w)
jr r Hsst nb Hr.f ⁶²

In summary, these documents referred to several issues: first, they mentioned periods of both conflict and peace (connected to resource provisioning) between Nubians and

⁶¹ ...His majesty sent me to dig five canals in Upper Egypt
to build three wide boats and four tugboats
in acacia wood of Wawat
then the chiefs of foreign lands of Iretet, Wawat, Yam
Medja cut the wood for it
I did everything in a year
put afloat (the boats)
Loaded with red and very large granite for the pyramid 'Mernere appears in splendour'...

⁶² ...who brought things from all the foreign lands for his lord Horus
who brought tribute/products to the Royal Ornament
supervisor of foreign lands in this south
who attack the terror for Horus in foreign lands
who does please his lord Horus ...

Egyptians; second, they named different groups as living in Lower Nubia and, in the Palermo Stone, the presence of captives, which in turn suggested the existence of a large population in Lower Nubia; and thirdly, they described the relationship between royal officials and the Nubian chiefs who were recognised by Egyptian officials to establish trade networks and collaborate in attacks on 'rebels'. It should be noted that these three documents were intended to comment on Egypt's power and exalt officials' roles, so it is an unavoidable fact that exaggerations exist within them.

Inscriptions and Representations

Gebel Sheikh Suleiman Inscription

This inscription has been considered as important evidence to show Egyptian incursions or Egyptian domination in Lower Nubia. It was dated to the First Dynasty and it was located to the south of Buhen, close to the Second Cataract.⁶³ This inscription was complemented by several scenes which will be discussed in the following pages.



(Needler 1967: 87)

I will describe this scene from left to right. The first representation is a serekh, a rectangular frame with a sunken walled niche part at the bottom that includes a falcon

⁶³ Roy 2011: 217.

(Horus).⁶⁴ I suggest that it could be a serekh because this type of representation appeared in other contemporary places like the royal funerary stele of Uaydi of the First Dynasty.⁶⁵ Next to the serekh, there is a man standing unlike anyone else in the scene. He is holding an archaic type of bow with both hands that symbolised Nubia: tA-syt. This image could be one of the first representations of this object symbolising Nubia. There are two standards in the centre of the illustration that are related to the symbolisation of two settlements. (There are two signs, one is a three-spoked circle topped by a hawk, while the second wheel is topped by a sack-like object). Finally, in the right section, there is a typical boat of the period surrounded by kneeling and lying figures.



(Needler 1967: 91)

A short distance from this scene, another image was recorded that is connected to the previous drawing. It comprises a scorpion (1) as a central character who is holding a human captive (2). The person appears tied by a rope held by another individual located behind him (3) (the subject was likely a bound captive). Immediately below these three figures the following can be observed: a foot (4) and another person (5). Only that

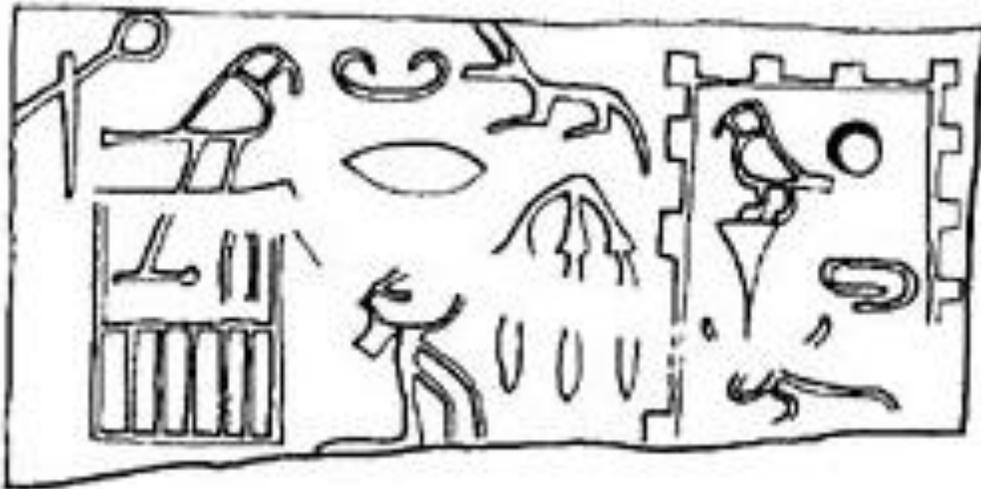
⁶⁴ Wilkinson 1995: 161.

⁶⁵ Wilkinson 1995: 161.

person belongs to the scene, and he is watching and controlling the main scene while holding a bow with an arrow pointed at the captive.⁶⁶

These images can be interpreted in two ways: on the one hand, the representation of the character standing with a bow in his hands (symbolising Nubia), people lying at the bottom of the boat and a scorpion holding a captive prisoner may suggest a possible triumph of Egypt over Lower Nubia; on the other hand, this drawing could be Nubian, because there were Nubian pottery and amulets with scorpion representations since the Neolithic period in this area, and also Nubian elites could have emulated Upper Egyptian iconography to legitimise their power.

Aha label from Abydos (3000 BC)⁶⁷



(Wilkinson 1999: 179)

⁶⁶ Needler 1967: 88.

⁶⁷ I am grateful for the personal explanation given by Dr. Josep Cervelló Autuori (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona) which was very important for the analysis of this label.

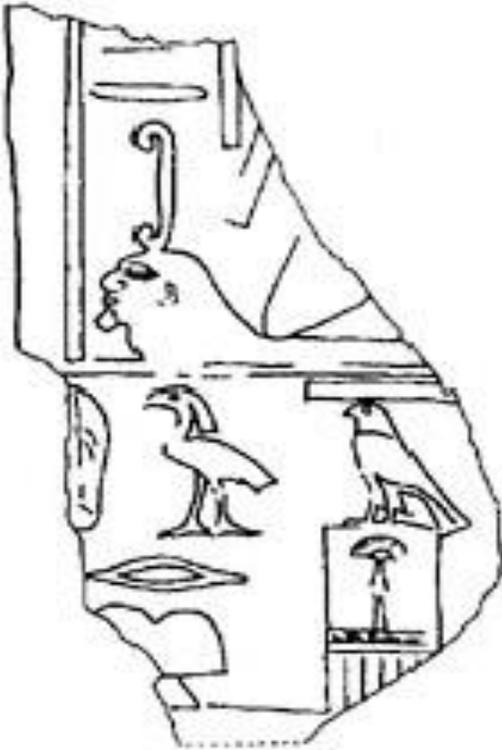
Several issues should be considered with regard to this image: on the one hand, it was located in a funerary context; on the other hand, this representation was found in a fragment label (in the missing bottom part may have been written 'oil of good quality', its origin and its quantity).⁶⁸ Furthermore, this representation is imbued with a series of truly symbolic items (such as the serekh and the Pharaoh's name on the left of the image), and finally, it is clearly related to Nubia by the 'tA-sty' hieroglyph (the bow).

This group of signs comprises three events of a year of King Aha's reign in three successive columns of text, from left to right: the first, '(Massacring) Nubian people' (signs: tA sty + determinative of captive); second, 'Creating a statue Khentiamientiu' (signs : E15 (lying jackal) + ms)⁶⁹; third, '(Foundation) of Hr- PXR –IHW fortress' (the circle behind the hawk is the hole in the label, it is not a hieroglyphic sign).

⁶⁸ Helck 1987.

⁶⁹ In archaic texts, the term ms, 'birth', metaphorically means the manufacture and commissioning ritual use of a statue of the deity or king in question (Josep Cervelló Autuori, pers. comm.).

Stele of Khasekhem from Hierakonpolis temple



(Wilkinson 1999: 179)

This stele was found in Hierakonpolis temple and dates to the Second Dynasty. It is important to take into account that it was in a temple. Therefore, it was most likely used for sacred activities and by elites who had exclusive access to the temple.

Researchers have suggested that it emphasised the triumph of Egypt over Nubia, mainly due to the character with the hieroglyphic tA- sty in his head.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Wilkinson 1999: 179; Török 2009: 50.

In summary, the existence of conflicts between Nubians and Egyptians during the Old Kingdom is evidenced by the iconographic material. However, most of these representations were Egyptian, which means they could be referring to historical facts or are simply connected with symbolic ideas related to the prestige of the Pharaoh.

A Reinterpretation of the Evidence

A disappearance or an identity redefinition?

Through an interpretation of the evidence, I suggest that instead of disappearance there was an ethnogenesis process that involved an identity redefinition of nubians, mainly, in the Sayala and Qustul areas. Egyptian elites, from a unified Egyptian state, succeeded in monopolising trade networks and thus depriving some of the Nubian communities of their intermediary role.⁷¹ This is evidenced by the abandonment of the funerary sites in Sayala and Qustul (L and 137 sites), the absence of material culture along the Nile Valley, and by the lack of prestige goods. In other words, during 3400-2900 BC, the Nubian identity of these regions had been based on its role as an intermediary between Upper Nubia and Upper Egypt, but this identity was redefined by the new historical context.

This process of identity redefinition began with the movement of Nubians away from the Nile Valley to desert areas (demonstrated by the archaeological remains found in the Laqiya region). The migrants who settled in these areas, not only developed hunting, grazing and herding activities, but they also exchanged goods with Egyptian centres in

⁷¹ It is not easy to define the Egyptian methods used to gain control and power. On the one hand, violence could have been an important resource which was evidenced by iconographic representations and by the Nubian migration from the Nile Valley to desert areas. Nevertheless, there is no registration of material evidence which involves conflict such as weapons, mutilated bodies, or settlements destroyed. On the other hand, Egyptian elites may have sent intermediaries with expeditions and caravans to get the goods.

Elephantine and Buhen. These communities, before Egyptian pressure, were characterised by a semi-sedentary order along the Nile Valley, where they later adopted a nomadic settlement pattern. Thus, I suggest that this population was involved in a re-nomadisation process. This Egyptian pressure also affected Nubian communities that were not part of this trade network which is suggested by the absence of residential, funerary, and ceremonial sites along the Nile Valley. However, it is not viable to suggest a hypothesis as to why these communities were affected given the scarcity of evidence.

Was there a hiatus in Lower Nubia?

An analysis of archaeological and written evidence together with representations and inscriptions suggest that there was not a hiatus in Lower Nubia, because this region was populated in areas far away from the Nile Valley during the period from 2900-2300 BC. There are two important points related to the archaeological evidence for this statement: first, the archaeological site Wadi Shaw 82/52 represents the presence of a population during 2900-2300 BC; second, the existence of pottery similar to vessels from L funerary site (from Qustul) and objects related to 'A-Group' culture until the Sixth Dynasty at the Elephantine site, demonstrate a continuity of material culture and also might suggest a possible exchange route between Laqiya inhabitants and Egyptian sites (Buhen and Elephantine). It is probable that Nubians traded cattle and wild animals for Egyptian products.

Written documents reflect a historical context that is similar to the archaeological evidence. They revealed the existence of a population in Nubia that owned cattle and settled in different zones as Iretet, Setju, Wawat, and Yam. For example, the Uni Biography states:

...m mDA nHsw jAm nHsw

M WAwAt nHsw m KAAw
nHsw m tA- THmH..⁷²

These documents also described the existence of leaders and a group of warriors that may have played a role in some of the conflicts between Nubian communities. For example, an important phrase from the Harkhuf Biography is: Xr s Htp n HKA IAm pf -'I brought peace to this chief from Yam'. However, these historical records also emphasised the importance of trade networks between Egyptians and Nubians.

In the Harkhuf Biography the need of Nubian products to satisfy the demands of the Pharaoh was expressed:

...jn n jnw m hAst tn r aat wrt
nn wt spj jn nt mjtt r tA pn Dr- bAH⁷³

Conclusion

In this paper, I focused on two topics: on the one hand, the 'disappearance' of Nubian 'A-Groups' (2900 BC) and, on the other hand, the 'hiatus' that took place subsequently (2900- 2300 BC). Regarding the first, I proposed that there was not a 'disappearance' of Nubian culture or inhabitants, I argued that there was an ethnogenesis process that caused an identity redefinition. The identity of these communities was based on their role as intermediaries between Upper Nubia and Upper Egypt, but this identity entered a process of redefinition because of Egyptian pressure to control the exchange relations.

⁷² ...Medja Nubians, Nubians from Yam
Nubians from Wawat, Nubians from Kaau
Nubians from Tejemej land...

⁷³ I brought excellent and large products from this land
There was never any occasion when products like these were brought to this land.

Referring to the second topic, I proposed that during the period 2900-2300 BC Lower Nubia was populated in desert areas, as evidenced by the material culture of 'A-Groups' identified in the Laqiya region. Furthermore, I suggested that the material culture named 'A-Groups' did not disappear in 2900 BC, because 'A-Groups' pottery was found in Egyptian sites (such as Buhen and Elephantine) and in Nubian sites located on Laqiya. Finally, written documents made reference to the existence of the Nubian population possessing livestock. They were identified by specific areas such as Nubians from Iretet, Setju, Wawat, and Yam, and each area had a leader. These sources show the existence of a population in Nubia. And, these documents do prove that there was not a complete hiatus in this area.

To summarise, both the archaeological and written evidence show that Nubia was populated during 2900-2300 BC, and that this population maintained contact with the Egyptians during that period. It is clear that they were settled in the Wadi Shaw area (Laqiya) and close to Egyptian sites such as Buhen and Elephantine as demonstrated in the archaeological record, but also it is possible that other areas in the desert were inhabited as evidenced by written documents. The new socio-political situation could have caused a re-nomadisation in 'A-Groups', which developed different types of economic activities like herding and hunting. Moreover, these communities also moved to Egyptian sites to establish trade relations.

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