



**“BACKWATER PURITANS”? RACISM, EGYPTOLOGICAL STEREOTYPES,
AND COSMOPOLITAN SOCIETY AT KUSHITE TOMBOS**

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ABSTRACT

Egyptological and more popular perceptions of Nubia and the Kushite dynasty have framed Kush as a periphery to civilized Egypt. But to what extent was Nubia a “backwater” to “effete and sophisticated” Egypt, as John Wilson once asserted? It is clear from recent archaeological work at Tombos and elsewhere that Nubia was not an unsophisticated backwater. Objects with Egyptianizing motifs in the international style asserted a cosmopolitan social status that connected their owners to an international elite culture that spanned Nubia and Egypt and extended across the Mediterranean during the Iron Age. The Kushite civilization that flourished for a thousand years was not an imperfect imitation of ancient Egypt, as some Egyptologists have asserted, or even the fount of Egyptian civilization, as some Afrocentric scholars have argued. Instead, Kushites adapted and integrated features taken from Egypt and the Mediterranean world to create a new and vibrant African tradition.

Egyptological and more popular perceptions of Piankhi’s “conquest” of Egypt in the mid-/late 8th century BCE typically consider Nubia and Nubians as a periphery to civilized Egypt, interlopers in the broader Mediterranean world (FIG. 1). Even though Kushite pharaohs had ruled in Egypt for decades by this time, they are still depicted as invaders, barbarians at the gate,¹ “Egyptianized” converts to the more sophisticated culture of their northern neighbors.² John Wilson, writing in the 1950s, influenced this lingering dismissive attitude towards Nubian civilization through his negative characterization of the Kushite Dynasty:³

From a capital at the Fourth Cataract, Pi-ankhi, an Ethiopian, ruled the Sudan and Nubia. His culture was a provincial imitation of earlier Egypt, fanatical in its retention of religious form... The story of Pi-ankhi’s conquest of Egypt is an extraordinarily interesting human document, particularly in the contrast between this backwater puritan and the effete and sophisticated Egyptians.

He goes on to say, “Thus Egypt fell under the nominal rule of an Ethiopian from the despised provinces and under the effectual rule of a woman.”⁴



FIGURE 1: Map of Nubia and Egypt.

The woman he refers to is the Kushite God's Wife of Amun Amenirdis, who occupied a powerful sacred and secular position at Thebes, so he manages to be both racist and sexist.⁵

The trope of Kushite rulers as fanatical puritans is one that has had an enduring appeal, turning piety, in principle a positive trait, into a negative one. For example, Gardiner and Assmann have characterized Piankhi's campaign as a "holy war," a view endorsed more recently by Fletcher.⁶ Even more dramatically, Toby Wilkinson introduces Piankhi under the heading "The Black Crusader,"⁷ emphasizing both the negative trope of religious fanaticism and the racialization of Nubia and Nubians as "black" in contrast to Egyptians, implying an essentialized racial divide between Egypt and Nubia that would not have been acknowledged in

antiquity.⁸ Elsewhere he characterizes Piankhi as "pious and pugnacious in equal measure" and states that he sent his soldiers "forth with crusading zeal... Theirs was a divine mission..." and that "under Kushite rule, military strength would go hand in hand with moral absolutism. Might and right would prove a dangerous combination."⁹ Unlike Wilson, he also emphasizes Kushite agency and military power and the creativeness of the Kushite archaizing art style, although he undermines these more positive statements by dismissing Piankhi's outrage at the mistreatment of his horses by saying: "The Nubian pharaoh would not be the last monarch in history to prefer horses to people."¹⁰

For Egyptologists, Nubia has historically been perceived as an uncivilized periphery, dependent on Egypt.¹¹ However, there have been notable exceptions, including Egyptologists such as David O'Connor, but especially scholars from the more recently established field of Nubian Studies, such as Peter Shinnie, Bruce Trigger, and Lazlo Török,¹² who all treat the kingdom of Kush on its own terms, rather than as a kind of inferior extension of ancient Egypt. African and African American scholars have for a long time emphasized the importance of

Nubian/Kushite civilization. W. E. B. DuBois argued that "Ethiopia," by which he meant Nubia/Kush, arose as a distinctive tradition separate and independent from Egypt.¹³ While he notes Egyptian influence leading up to the Kushite dynasty, he also acknowledges the Napatan and Meroitic kingdom's distinctive Sudanese features, including in theology, feminine royal power, and political organization. Cheikh Ante Diop and Ivan Van Sertima, founding figures in the Afrocentric movement, also emphasized the importance of Nubia.¹⁴ However, their diffusionist arguments focus on Nubia as providing a southern Nilotic origin for pharaonic civilization, reflecting a kind of reverse Egyptocentrism. Nubia is at least important, but it is defined with reference to Egypt, rather than being regarded as a distinctive African civilization engaged in a complex relationship with its northern neighbor. More recent scholars from Africana studies have adopted a more nuanced view from an Africanist perspective that avoids the kind of simplistic diffusionist arguments that have sometimes



FIGURE 2: Tutankhamun's painted box (Egyptian Museum, Cairo; photo by the author).

characterized Afrocentrism. For example, drawing on the pioneering work of William Leo Hansberry,¹⁵ Africana scholar Salim Faraji approaches Nubia and Egypt from a perspective that situates both civilizations within larger developments in Africa, while exploring the complex interrelationships between the two.¹⁶

Nevertheless, Egyptological and popular views of the Kushite dynasty continue to emphasize Nubian inferiority, stressing themes such as the derivative nature of their civilization, which ebbed and flowed with Egyptian influence, and their unreliability and weakness as rulers and allies. Depictions of Nubians from earlier periods of Egyptian history, such as Tutankhamun's painted box (FIG. 2), reinforced ideas about Kushite inferiority, exacerbated by a modern racialization of the depictions, as in a 2008 issue of *National Geographic* magazine.¹⁷ One illustration in particular from that article, depicting Piankhi's "conquest" of Egypt, was clearly influenced by older representations of the Nubian "other." In fact, Piankhi's "invasion" was really the suppression of a northern rebellion against Kushite rule in Egypt,¹⁸ established at least starting with his father Kashta.¹⁹ The imagery also creates an imagined ethnic contrast between Kushites and Egyptians that is more

informed by modern predispositions than ancient realities. The Kushite warriors of Piankhi's army are shown fighting with bows, spears, and daggers to the Egyptian's khepesh (curved) style swords, Nubian dark skin and heavy musculature contrasting with the lighter skin and build of the Egyptians, rough-cut hide and leopard-skin kilts compared to Egyptian neatly hemmed white linen kilts, and with kinky hair adorned with feathers for the Kushites versus the longer straight hair of the Egyptians.²⁰

At first glance, the images of Kushite and Egyptian soldiers seem to be similarly contrasting on Tutankhamun's box, but a closer examination reveals a set of overlapping characteristics between the artistic trope of Egyptian self and Kushite other.²¹ For example, the hairstyles of the Egyptian and Nubian soldiers are quite similar, contradicting the *National Geographic* illustration. In keeping with New Kingdom military traditions, Egyptians had adopted the Nubians' tightly curled hairstyle, and Egyptians in general had curly hair. Some of the Nubians on Tutankhamun's box are wearing linen kilts, and the Egyptian soldier in the middle wears a kind of loincloth with leather webbing that was also borrowed from Nubia and appears on Kushite soldiers in



FIGURE 3: Procession of Nubians with a giraffe at Persepolis, Iran (photo by Mostafameraji; Wikimedia; CC BY-SA 4.0).

the scene. Many of the Kushite soldiers do wear leather kilts, but Nubians were master leather workers, so it should also come as no surprise that their kilts are neatly hemmed, in contrast to the rough garments in the *National Geographic* illustration. And it is the Egyptian who wields a dagger, although the Nubians do have bows, reflecting their fame as archers. The dividing line between Egyptians and Nubians is also blurred by the appearance of Nubians as an integral part of the Egyptian force accompanying Tutankhamen, especially on the hunting scenes from the lid of the box, where some of them are represented as charioteers, a high-status military role.²²

The implied contrast between primitive and barbaric Nubians conquering their more sophisticated northern neighbor serves to reproduce and perpetuate a colonial and ultimately racist perspective that justified the authority of modern Western empires, in this case over “black” Africa, whose peoples could not create or maintain “civilized” life without help from an external power. In America,

the trope of subordinate Nubians played into justifications for segregation and discrimination, often informed by the representation of foreigners in Egyptian art.²³ But it is important to recognize that Tutankhamen’s artisans, and the others who preceded and followed them, had a specific purpose in mind, the creation of negative ethnic stereotypes that emphasized the inferiority and disorganization of the “barbarians” who surrounded the inner order.²⁴ This is masterfully rendered in microcosm on Tutankhamen’s box with the Egyptian soldier confidently striding on the battlefield, surrounded by a chaotic array of dead and dying Nubians.

About a thousand years later (c. 450 BCE), Herodotus painted a similar picture of “barbaric” chaos with his description of the varied ethnic components of Xerxes’s army, including Nubians clad in leopard skins, wielding crude weapons.²⁵ In both ideologies, foreign enemies were used to represent the disorder that surrounded a civilized inner order, emphasizing the moral and political authority of their core civilizations. The Persians

FIGURE 4: Tanutamani and Qalhata, from their tombs at el-Kurru, Sudan (photos by the author).



themselves, however, had a different idea when depicting Nubians (FIG. 3). At Persepolis (c. 519 BCE), Nubians are exotic—note the rather strange giraffe at the back—but depicted in an ethnic stereotype that is not necessarily negatively marked as unsophisticated and “barbaric.” Instead, Nubians and other foreigners with their gifts represent the diversity of the empire paying homage to the Persian king as an all-lord whose rule encompasses numerous peoples.²⁶ The iconography that surrounded the Persian king further emphasized this

notion of order from diversity by interweaving iconography from across the empire and drawing on elements from the Iron Age international style (like the rosettes here), a topic that I will return to for Nubia.

Of course, Kushite kings depicted themselves with their own take on pharaonic kingship, such as this distinctively Kushite image of Tanutamani and his mother Qalhata from their tombs at el-Kurru (c. 650 BCE) (FIG. 4). At first glance, these scenes seem to imitate Egyptian forms, but this breaks down under

closer examination. Tanutamani wears the Kushite cap crown with double uraei (cobras), as well as jewelry emphasizing the ram imagery that Kushite culture lent to the iconography of Amun. He also wears a distinctive fringed cloak that became a standard part of Kushite royal regalia. His mother Qalhata wears the same cloak but has the usual Egyptian queen's vulture crown. These royal tombs also highlight the prominent role of queens in Kush compared to the more subordinate role of queens in Egypt.²⁷ The scale and layout are equivalent, and both have similar funerary vignettes and texts. As Susan Doll has demonstrated,²⁸ the texts and selections of religious motifs in these tombs, while they superficially look Egyptian, move beyond traditional Egyptian theology.

Over the course of the 20th and into the 21st century, many Egyptologists have emphasized Nubian inferiority. In 1909 Breasted, founding director of the Oriental Institute and, like Wilson who succeeded him, a highly influential Egyptologist, summed up the Kushite dynasty by asserting that:²⁹

Assyria was never dealing with a first class power in her conquest of Egypt, when the unhappy Nile-dwellers were without a strong ruler; and for such a ruler they looked in vain during the supremacy of the inglorious Ethiopians. Withdrawing to Napata, the Ethiopians ... gave their attention to the development of Nubia. As the Egyptians resident in the country died out and were not replaced by others, the Egyptian gloss which the people had received began rapidly to disappear, and the land relapsed into a semi-barbaric condition.

Breasted places a great deal of emphasis on the relative degree of authoritarianism in native Egyptian vs. Kushite regimes. Egypt thrives only with a strong ruler, which Nubia cannot provide. The notion of Kushite decline is another strong Egyptological trope. As recently as 2004, Donald Redford made a similar argument:³⁰

Although Kushite kings continued to be buried in pyramids according to Egyptian custom up to the early Christian era and to employ Egyptian art and architectural forms even longer, these cultural manifestations

became increasingly bastardized and degenerate ... and they survived largely cut off from the north, a culture gone to seed in terms of its Egyptian roots.

Similarly, Cyril Aldred notes that Tanutamani was driven by the Assyrians "into his Kushite domains, where he and his successors became more and more Africanized and ceased to pay any direct role in Egyptian affairs,"³¹ again drawing an essentialized line between Egypt and Nubia/Africa. The emphasis on imitation and rise and fall with the ebb and flow of interaction with Egypt assumes that influence went in only one direction,³² from Egypt to Nubia, civilizing the primitive natives, who were in any case capable of only a "provincial imitation" and went into inevitable decline after that direct influence stopped. A tour itinerary for June 2020 organized by Egyptologist Coleen Manassa Darnell includes language that reflects a similar attitude towards Nubia. Rather than characterizing the region as the home of vibrant civilizations with a deep and mutually influenced relationship with Egypt, her southward gaze takes a decidedly colonial view.³³

This morning, SUDAN steams toward Aswan at the frontier of traditional Egypt, where ancient Nubia begins. The mighty desert slowly replaces cultivated land as we proceed up the Nile. It is easy to see that this is where pharaonic civilization once ended. The lands above the great cataracts nourished the Nile Valley with mineral-rich silt during the floods. Nubia also provided Egypt with gold, precious woods and ivory, as well as soldiers for its military machine.

As pointed out in a recent Hyperallergenic article by Katherine Blouin, Monica Hanna, and Sarah Bond, this view of Nubia as a source of raw materials and soldiers, having nothing more to give Egypt, is informed by a sense of nostalgia for the British Empire, expressed in this particular cruise by a kind of imperial cosplay, including the colonial subtext of a divide between civilized Egypt and barbaric Nubia implied in the passage just quoted.³⁴ Even the name of the restored steamship that features in their tour, the *Sudan* (FIG. 5), represents a kind of double colonial past, both British and Egyptian (as in the "Anglo-Egyptian Sudan"). This attitude bleeds into some of their Egyptological interpretations,³⁵ in

particular, their use of the term “durbar” from the British Raj for the Egyptian ceremony of “presenting *inu*” reflects a similar sensibility.³⁶

This viewpoint draws upon a long tradition in Egyptology. Barry Kemp articulated a common idea of ancient Egypt’s “civilizing” effect, asserting that “Egyptian culture must have had a considerable glamour in the eyes of Nubians.... It is not hard to understand how, in an age innocent of the esoteric delights of ‘folk culture’, many of the local products, such as the decorated hand-made pottery and mother-of-pearl trinkets, did not survive the flood of cheap mass-produced Egyptian wares....”³⁷ He concludes that “some recognition, at least, should be given to the positive side of this early attempt to extend what, to the Egyptians themselves, was a civilized way of life.”³⁸ Consciously or unconsci-

ously, this attitude goes back to Herodotus, who takes a similar view, noting of Egyptians deserting the garrison at Elephantine around 600 BCE and settling in Ethiopia, meaning Nubia: “From the time that this settlement was formed, their acquaintance with Egyptian manners has tended to civilize the Ethiopians.”³⁹

As I have noted elsewhere,⁴⁰ Kemp’s notion of a “civilizing” mission is anachronistic and owes more to 19th- and 20th-century justifications of imperial domination through an appeal to a constructed past, particularly the notion of Romanization, which has now been replaced by more nuanced post-colonial perspectives such as entanglement.⁴¹ Far from blind “fanatical adherence” to Egyptian theology, the Kushite ram cult attested at Kerma profoundly influenced the theology and iconography of Amun-



FIGURE 5: The steamship *Sudan* (photo by David Ooms; Wikimedia; CC BY 2.0).



FIGURE 6: Statue of Amun as a ram with Taharqa (c. 650 BCE, National Museum, Khartoum) (photo by the author).

Re, one of Egypt’s most important deities.⁴² Temples constructed in Nubia during the New Kingdom empire and later emphasized Amun’s Kushite ram form (FIG. 6). The sacred mountain of Gebel Barkal became a major center for the worship of the god, explicitly referred to in Egyptian theology as his birthplace and as the southern Karnak, mirroring Amun’s chief temple complex in Egypt. As depicted in Taharqa’s Mut temple (B-500), a new theology of the god showed him residing within the mountain of Gebel Barkal, in contrast to the traditional origins of Amun in the watery abyss of Nun before creation.⁴³ This sacred complex became a focus for both Egyptian and later Kushite kingship ceremonies.⁴⁴ Török observes that Amun’s ram resonated with that of another ram deity, Khnum, the patron god of Aswan, who was himself arguably Nubian and was likely influential in the adoption of the ram-

headed manifestation of Amun-Re.⁴⁵ Intriguingly, Török also notes that the Kerman ram iconography may already have been influenced by Egyptian art, pointing to a very long history of mutual influence.⁴⁶ Similarly, Solange Ashby’s work on inscriptions and the intercultural history of the cult of Isis at Philae temple demonstrates a similar continuing religious engagement and influence flowing from Nubia into one of Egypt’s most important cult centers into the late antique period (c. 450 CE), showing that the idea of separation and one-way influence is more an artifact of Egyptological bias than Egyptian cultural dominance and Nubian isolation.⁴⁷

ENTANGLEMENT AND INTERNATIONALISM AT TOMBOS
The evidence from older excavations and increasingly from newer projects, such our work at Tombos, contradicts Kemp’s assumption of the

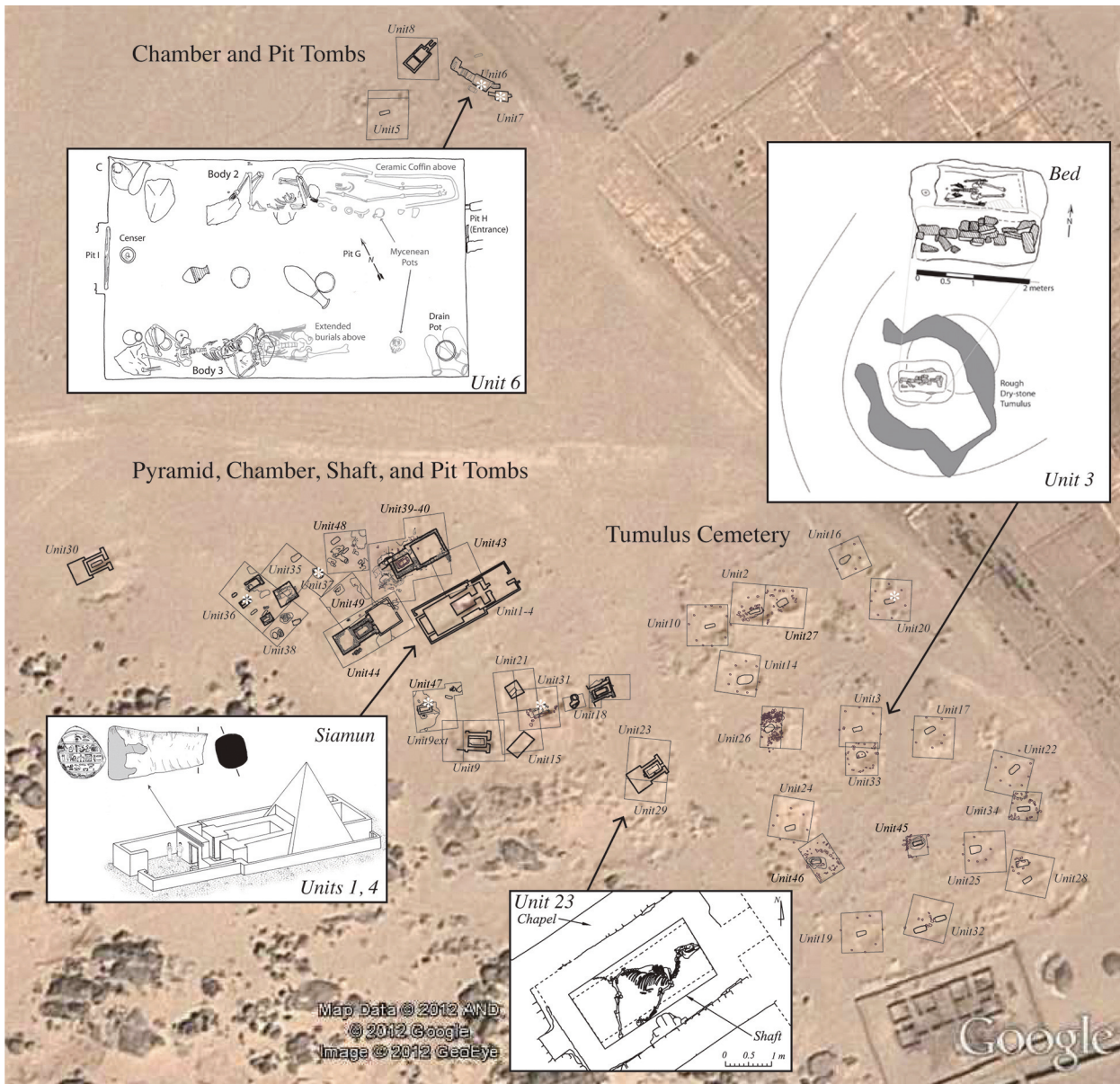


FIGURE 7: Plan of the cemetery at Tombois, flexed burials indicated by an asterisk (Tombois Project; plan by the author and Nadedja Reshetnikova).

disappearance of Nubian material culture in the face of Egyptian cultural hegemony, as well as the notion of Kushite isolation.⁴⁸ Tombois lies at the headwaters of the third cataract, where granite outcrops cross the bed of the Nile. The rapids of the cataract created a natural geopolitical chokepoint that formed an internal boundary within the New Kingdom empire,⁴⁹ marked by Thutmose I's impressive stela

and several smaller panels commemorating his defeat of Kush. Inscriptions were added when the colony was established around the reign of Hatshepsut/Thutmose III. We have recently identified a massive, fortified enclosure, which covered around 60,000 square meters, but I will focus on our work in the cemetery.⁵⁰

We have clear evidence for settler colonialism and

the introduction of Egyptian funerary practices,⁵¹ including small pyramid chapels and elite practices such as the provision of heart scarabs, shabtis, and even a spell from the Book of the Dead bizarrely transferred onto a skull (identified as BD 17 by Rita Lucarelli and Irmtraut Munro). Despite the dominant Egyptian character of the cemetery, Nubian material culture such as black-topped pottery, incised and mat-impressed cooking pots, and ivory ornaments continue to appear. Female Nubian members of the community maintained traditional burial practices linked to Kerma, including the presence of flexed burials (all of women). The appearance of Egyptian amulets in these contexts, including the dwarf god Bes, along with the juxtaposition of Nubian and Egyptian burial practices in the same tombs (FIG. 7), points toward an initial phase of mutual cultural entanglement rather than unidirectional "Egyptianization."⁵²

Starting in the Ramesside Period, these entanglements deepened and became more overt with the addition of a separate cemetery with Nubian-style tumulus (mounded) superstructures that also reflect entangled practices (FIG. 7), as supine burial position and amulets related to deities such as Isis attest. Tumuli also appear at other sites during this period, most notably Amara West,⁵³ suggesting that Egyptian cultural hegemony was breaking down in the colonial sphere in spite of continuing investments in colonial infrastructure and the arrival of colonists, but perhaps tracking with the importance of locals in the colonial bureaucracy.⁵⁴ One remarkable feature of Tombos is its continuity, which provides evidence for a thriving community with mercantile connections with Egypt through the early Napatan or Third Intermediate Period, demonstrated through a long series of radiocarbon dates and ceramics, including a large number of marl-clay transport and other smaller vessels imported from Egypt. This pattern contradicts the models of collapse and decline in the absence of Egyptian influence discussed above, instead pointing toward deepening cultural entanglements and continuing engagement between Nubia and Egypt as opposed to the usual model of isolation during the so-called dark age between the end of the empire and the Kushite Dynasty. I will talk first briefly about the mixed practices and material culture from these tumuli, focusing on a rich assemblage of jewelry from one tomb. Then I will discuss examples from the older part of the cemetery, finishing with elements from the extra-

ordinary burial of a soldier or more likely officer in the Kushite army, which was located next to a Twenty-fifth Dynasty pyramid complex.

Despite the use of tumuli, the dead were buried in Egyptian fashion in east-west-oriented shafts, supine with head to the west to face the sun's dawning on the eastern horizon, with the exception of a subadult with head to the east and two women in flexed position (FIG. 7), reinforcing the gendered dynamic of this distinctively Nubian burial practice at Tombos. There is also ample evidence for wrapping that likely represents mummification, or at least heavy binding, as well as indication in some cases of decorated anthropoid coffins. As Riggs points out, the ancient Egyptians emphasized the process of binding more than the preservation of the body, in particular evisceration,⁵⁵ which is typically thought of as an integral part of mummification but in fact was rare and strongly correlated with the highest elite.⁵⁶ At the same time, the use of beds in traditional Nubian fashion was common, with trenches appearing in many tombs for the legs and even clear remains of the termite-eaten beds themselves. Black-topped pottery also continues to appear. One tomb had a rich group of jewelry, including several Egyptian amulets but favoring particular deities, such as the dwarf gods Bes and Pataikos and the goddess Isis. Nubian-style jewelry also continues to appear, including red seashell beads and glazed quartz crystal (FIG. 8). An unusually large faience scarab with a unique design appears to be an innovation, much like the unique combinations and generation of novel texts traced by Susan Doll in the royal tombs,⁵⁷ but on a more prosaic level. The remarkable Pataikos amulet from the tomb is a masterwork and configured in an innovative way. Two-sided amulets like this one were extremely popular throughout Kush, especially in the somewhat later Twenty-fifth Dynasty royal burials at Kurru and Meroe.⁵⁸ Taken together, this pattern, which is also reflected at other sites,⁵⁹ contradicts the notion of the inherent appeal of Egyptian practices and material culture. Instead, these tombs show that, far from abandoning Nubian culture or passively adopting Egyptian forms, Kushites were selectively adapting elements from Egypt and interweaving them with local practices and material culture, resulting in considerable variability both within and between sites and regions during and after the colonial era.⁶⁰ Even more, they were creating innovative new forms



FIGURE 8: Egyptian amulets from a richly appointed tumulus burial, including the goddess Isis and dwarf gods Bes on the left and Pataikos to the right; detail of the unusual scarab with procession; red seashell beads; and a glazed quartz ornament (courtesy of the Tombos Project).

based on Egyptian designs, such as the scarab with its unique offering motif and perhaps the elaborately decorated Pataikos.⁶¹

Burials continued in the older part of the cemetery, including both the construction of new

tombs and reuse of older ones. Built over Eighteenth Dynasty tombs and debris, a large mud-brick monument from either the end of the New Kingdom or the early Napatan period (FIG. 7, units 39–40) provided a calibrated radiocarbon date of 1130–930

BCE from charred rope found in the construction debris (Oxcal, 90.8% probability, D-AMS 027308). The monument has a unique stone-lined shaft that represents a local innovation, although, unfortunately, fallen beams of granite that originally sealed the shaft have delayed further exploration. An early Napatan period flexed bed burial of a woman lay in the shaft of another tomb (unit 31), continuing the pattern in the older part of the cemetery. Another pyramid complex had a Ramesside period duck censor still lying next to the entrance to the burial chamber (unit 23). A radiocarbon date from the ashes inside confirms the Ramesside date based on the style of the pot and reflects the main period of use of the tomb (Oxcal, 1230–1048 BCE, D-AMS 027883). The early Napatan/Third Intermediate Period burial of a horse about halfway down the shaft sealed the earlier deposits (FIG. 9). The horse was deliberately

laid out and wrapped in a shroud, which provided a calibrated radiocarbon date of 1004–894 BCE (Oxcal, 95.4% probability, D-AMS 017601), just after the end of the New Kingdom empire.

Horse burials such as the one found at Tombos provide another feature that represents a particularly complex long-term entanglement. Sacrificed horses, other animals, and human burials were again seen as a return barbarism by earlier scholars (and to some extent still today) but, as noted above, really represent practices with a long history in the region.⁶² Horse and other equid burials appear first among the Hyksos in the Nile Delta, who introduced horses to Egypt, but the practice was not widely adopted. They do appear in a handful of colonial-era and Napatan-period contexts in Nubia. With the first Kushite royal burials of the Twenty-fifth Dynasty, they reached their most elaborate



FIGURE 9: Horse burial from the shaft of the Unit 23 pyramid complex (photo by the author).

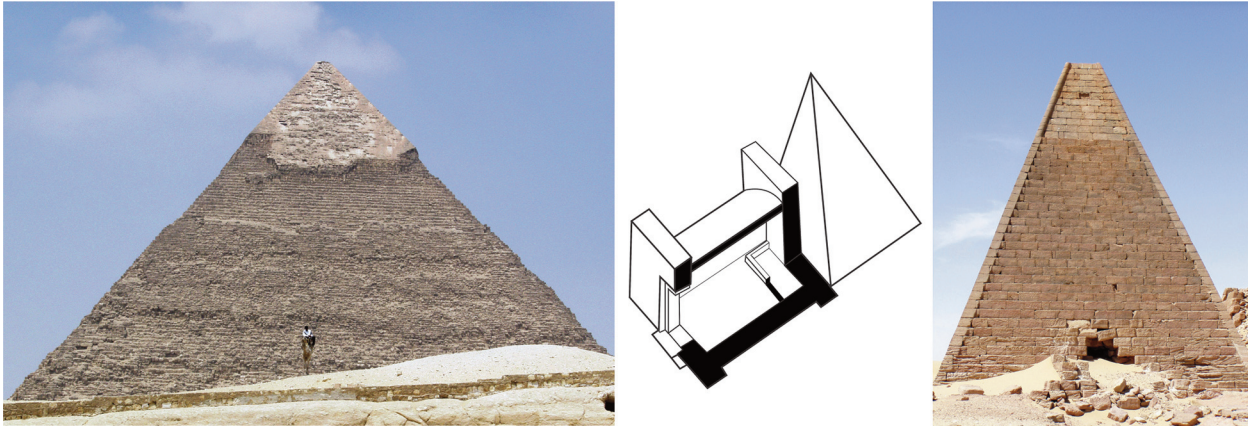


FIGURE 10: Royal limestone pyramid of Khafre at Giza (Fourth Dynasty), private Kushite mud-brick pyramid at Tombos (c. 700 BCE), royal sandstone Kushite pyramid at Barkal (c. 90 BCE) (photos and plan by the author).

form, with whole chariot teams buried in intricate trappings.⁶³ The Tombos horse, a mare, had a scarab and bead that were probably attached to her tack, as well as an iron cheek piece.⁶⁴ Horses and chariotry were prestigious, valuable, and a show of military power, reflecting Kush’s well-equipped army as opposed to Breasted’s notion of an ineffective military and Wilkinson’s dismissive comment on Piankhi’s irrational outrage over the mistreatment of horses. Wear on the bones at her withers suggests that the Tombos horse was part of a chariot team, but the burial is much earlier than the Kushite royal tombs, dating to a time when Nubian horses and trainers were famed in western Asia and were specifically in demand in Assyria.⁶⁵ Far from being an isolated backwater, Kush was heavily engaged in the wider world during its so-called dark age.

By the Twenty-fifth Dynasty at Tombos, we see a strong pattern of mutual influence and cultural entanglement rather than a new wave of provincial “Egyptianization.” The use of pyramids as a burial monument by kings, queens, and the elite, such as the Twenty-fifth Dynasty pyramid from Tombos (FIG. 10), illustrates this principle. Egyptologists often see these tombs as an imitation of Egyptian royal pyramids, but there are several problems with this view.⁶⁶ First, the last royal pyramid in Egypt was built at the beginning of the Eighteenth Dynasty, hundreds of years before the first Kushite royal

pyramid was built. Of course, the royal pyramids at Giza and elsewhere in Egypt were still impressive monuments when Kushite pharaohs ruled as Egypt’s Twenty-fifth Dynasty, but the layout of the Kushite pyramids is also not consistent with these earlier Egyptian royal monuments. Instead, they more closely resemble New Kingdom private pyramids with a pylon-fronted chapel abutting the eastern side of the pyramid, which would have provided a more immediate model to adapt in a monumental form, the result of a long-term entanglement with Egypt and the Egyptian colonists who came with the conquest. This entanglement had a profound impact on burial practice, with pyramids used for both royal and elite burials down to the end of the Meroitic period (c. 300–350 BCE).⁶⁷

The broader process of entanglement is illustrated by the remarkable tomb of a soldier from c. 700 BCE, located adjacent to the pyramid complex. On the one hand, he was buried in Egyptian tradition, extended with head to the west to take advantage of the rejuvenating power of the rising sun (FIG. 11). Although organic preservation was poor, enough evidence remained to clearly indicate that he was mummified and placed in an anthropoid coffin, which was then placed upon a bed in a Nubian tradition that continues to this day. He had traditional black-topped style pottery that had an entangled twist, having been thrown on a wheel,

FIGURE 11: Napatan Twenty-fifth Dynasty soldier's tomb (unit 9a) (plan by the author and Sydney Hengst).



and was innovative in its shape. A compound bow with traditional microlith-tipped arrows lay next to the bed, but also a stack of iron weaponry, including javelin/harpoons and a spear reflecting the latest technology.⁶⁸

As in the tumuli, he had amulets reflecting a narrow selection of Egyptian deities, including Pataikos, as before, but adding Amun-Re, who had

become the preeminent Kushite state deity (FIG. 12). Quartz and hematite beads show a Nubian color sensibility resonating with the older practice of decorating tombs with black and white stones. The biconical shape mimics Nubian ivory beads, which also appear at Tombos. A remarkable copper-alloy scarab has a unique variant on a widespread cryptographic inscription,⁶⁹ expanding and adapting



FIGURE 12: Jewelry from the soldier’s tomb (photos by Bruce Williams and Elisabeth Drolet).

it to specifically reference Amun instead of a generic god. The only parallel for a copper scarab such as this one comes from the cemetery at Sanam, across the river from the Kushite capital at Napata.⁷⁰ This object represents a sophisticated bit of theology, proceeding from an Egyptian form but innovative. Given the lack of parallels to the north, it was very likely made in Nubia.

Although the mummy had been disturbed in

antiquity, the rest of the tomb was intact, preserving several remarkable items. A set of copper-alloy bowls and a uniquely decorated cosmetic box and contents demonstrate the cosmopolitan nature of Kushite society at this period, contradicting Wilson’s comments about Nubia as an unsophisticated backwater. Two metal bowls were chased with groups of bulls, a third with cows (FIG. 13a). Similar imagery of bulls charging ahead with horns down



a



b

FIGURE 13: a: Copper alloy bowl from the tomb with images of bulls (Sudan National Museum, Khartoum, photo by the author). b: Gilt copper bowl from Cyprus (courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art, 74.51.4554).



FIGURE 14: a: Side of the cosmetic box showing Nefertum emerging from a lotus flanked by a cow and calf. b: White in the visibly induced luminescence image indicates the use of Egyptian blue (Sudan National Museum) (photos by Tombos Project conservator Elisabeth Drolet). c: Ivory plaque from Arslan Tash, Syria, c. 8th century BCE (Louvre) (photo by Rama; Wikimedia; CC By-SA 3.0 France).

appears in western Asia, as on a gilt copper bowl from Cyprus (FIG. 13b) and on what is surely a locally produced faience bowl from a queen’s tomb at the royal cemetery of el-Kurru.⁷¹ These cattle motifs are common in the international style, appearing in multiple media, in particular ivory and on metal vessels (FIG. 13).⁷² Cattle played a central role in Nubia and various northeast African societies, ancient and modern,⁷³ and the cattle theme here and elsewhere in the tomb would have had a natural appeal to the owner, reflecting how an accumulation of individual choices might drive the consumption of foreign goods and motifs.⁷⁴

The cattle theme continued in a unique and elaborately decorated wooden cosmetic box. On the first side exposed, a cow suckling a calf appears in an openwork papyrus-swamp background, with a frieze of lotuses along the solid base. The motif matches one that plays a prominent role in ivory decoration and on metal bowls in the international style, including a very similar motif on furniture elements from Nimrud.⁷⁵ Another side continues the papyrus-swamp theme, but with an image of the solar god Nefertum as an infant, or alternatively Harpocrates, emerging from a lotus at the moment of creation, flanked by a cow and calf (FIG. 14a). A visible-induced lumin-

c

FIGURE 15: a: Faience vessel from the soldier's tomb with attached Bes figurines and lid with a frog on a lily blossom (photo by the author). b: Faience double vessel from Rhodes with faux frog lid spout, late 7th to early 6th century BCE (courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1996.164) (photo by Rama; Wikimedia; CC By-SA 3.0 France).



a



b

escence photograph (FIG. 14b) brings out some of the detail and indicates the presence of the valuable pigment Egyptian blue, which fluoresces in white here and reflects the high quality of the craftsmanship. This motif is also common in the international style,⁷⁶ in particular ivory plaques from Arslan Tash and Nimrud where the deity is flanked by west-Asian-style winged deities and is thought to represent Harpocrates (FIG. 14c), an overlapping imagery symbolizing the infant Horus, who was raised by his mother Isis in a swamp.⁷⁷ But there is another infant god who rises from a lotus, Nefertum at the moment of creation, which seems more apropos here, given the theme of fecundity.⁷⁸ In any case, the Nubian artist has again innovated, with a cow and calf instead of the winged deities, creating an otherwise unattested motif. The other two sides also had cattle-related, marshy motifs. One side was badly damaged by one of the metal bowls, but two cattle can be reconstructed, perhaps a bull and a cow as on the Cyprus bowl. Another fragile but better-preserved side shows a woman walking through a swamp carrying a yoke with two pots, accompanied

by a calf. This theme is rarer than the suckling cow and

Nefertum/Harpocrates motifs but finds a parallel on a Ramesside or possibly Third Intermediate Period silver vessel from the Tell Basta Treasure.⁷⁹

The box contained a variety of cosmetic equipment, but along with these were three extraordinary faience vessels (FIG. 15a). The most elaborate vessel is masterful in its quality and control of color. In particular, the rendering of attached Bes figures is of a quality that compares well with the most elaborate statuettes from the royal cemetery. The lid represents a frog on a lily flower and is amazingly detailed. Frogs also play a special role in Kushite theology, so its combination with Bes reflects the selectiveness of Nubian adaptations of Egyptian motifs and deities. The bottle itself echoes Old Kingdom stone vessels with its simple lines, collared rim, and lug handles, perhaps tying into the Kushite archaizing style. The closest parallel for the frog lid comes from across the Mediterranean, from a site in Sicily.⁸⁰ A similar lily lid without the frog found upstream at Sanam suggests that it may have been a local product

exported down the Nile. This kind of lid was incorporated into the international style, similar lids appearing with various animal heads for knobs in the Aegean, albeit of poorer quality.⁸¹

Aegean double vessels provide another striking parallel, although there are also significant differences (FIG. 15b). They take the form of a woman kneeling with a jar in front that has a similar design to the Tombos vessel, including a faux frog lid that serves as a spout for pouring.⁸² Although at least one example does substitute Bes for the woman, the addition of the Bes figurines and lack of the attached figure vase and different purpose of the Tombos vase provides contrast, as well as the exceptional quality of craftsmanship in the Nubian example. Other motifs such as those appearing in the Kushite soldier’s tomb and elsewhere in Nubia appear across the Mediterranean, including cattle imagery from as far away as Italy and examples of scarabs with the simpler cryptographic inscription from as far as away as Sicily and Carthage. Imported shells from the Red Sea at Tombos and elsewhere demonstrates Kushite ties within Africa (FIG. 8).⁸³ Kushite and later Meroitic objects and influence, including metal vessels, some of which were Mediterranean imports, appear as far south as Sennar, at sites such as Jebel Moya,⁸⁴ Geili,⁸⁵ and Markwar⁸⁶ along the Blue and White Niles.⁸⁷ Similarly, the fortress of Galah Abu Ahmed, at the entrance to the Wadi Howar, is suggestive of trade to the west, toward Chad.⁸⁸ Kush was neither isolated nor provincial.⁸⁹ The archaeological record instead reflects a cosmopolitan society with wide-ranging contacts, embedded in Africa, and engaged in the Middle East and broader Mediterranean world.

ENEMIES OF THE STATE, THE KUSHITE DYNASTY AND THE FOREIGNER *TOPOS*

Breasted and Wilson should have recognized that the account of Piankhi’s triumphant suppression of a rebellion in northern Egypt was a masterpiece that played upon and adapted earlier Egyptian forms to legitimate Kushite rule, at the same time redefining Egyptian kingship along Kushite lines. Their roles as the founding and second directors of the University of Chicago’s prestigious Oriental Institute gave their Egyptocentric and frankly racist views on Nubia an outsized impact that is still felt in the field. As a result, the notion of the civilizing nature of Egyptian influence, and a countervailing decline in its absence, is deeply embedded in Egyptological narratives

about Nubia that ultimately treat too literally the ancient Egyptian foreigner *topos* of barbaric “other” against civilized Egypt.⁹⁰ Piankhi’s campaign of the late 8th century BCE was a sophisticated enactment of a very Kushite concept of Egyptian kingship.⁹¹ He spent much of his time seeking divine approval by visiting temples—he would never have assaulted the great temple of Ptah as depicted in the *National Geographic* illustration. Instead, he offered mercy to those who surrendered, taking them to task for mistreating his horses and criticizing Libyan “fish eaters” as unclean, schooling them on how to approach a pharaoh, and perhaps engaging in an ethnic slur reinforcing their otherness.

Kushite kings such as Taharqa, or rather their ideologues, deployed the Egyptian symbolism of the foreigner *topos* to legitimate their own authority in Nubia, Egypt, and abroad. At Kawa, Taharqa is shown trampling Asiatics in a very similar way to Tutankhamen on his painted box in a trope that goes back to the Old Kingdom (FIG. 16a).⁹² This imagery both resonated with the international style (a lion trampling an Asiatic is featured on the gilt bowl from Cyprus shown in FIGURE 14) and was reproduced on modest items such as this scarab from the Tombos soldier’s tomb to disseminate the message across a broad range of society (FIG. 16b). In order to accomplish this, Kushite rulers drew on the earlier New Kingdom *ma’at* theology that emphasized the king’s role in pacifying the earthly forces of chaos, symbolized by foreign enemies. But this was no puritanical imitation of earlier models such as the trampling motif on Tutankhamen’s painted box; instead we can see it as a clever adaptation of traditional Egyptian forms that allowed Kushite rulers to leverage power and authority in Egypt as well as in Kush.⁹³

The motif of dominating foreign enemies continued to be deployed in Meroitic Kush, with a distinctive twist at Naga’s Lion Temple, dedicated to the Nubian god Apedemak (FIG. 17). At first glance, we see the typical temple-pylon scene of the king slaying enemies, but on the right appears not King Natakamani but rather Queen, or *Kandake* (the Meroitic word for queen regent), Amanitore, who ruled as Natakamani’s equal. The powerful symbolism of Kushite *kandakes* played a role in the recent revolution—when Alaa Salah exhorted the crowd to stand up against dictator Omar el Bashir, she was hailed as the new *kandake*.⁹⁴ Women played a central role in the revolution, drawing on the



a



b

FIGURE 16: a: Tutankhamen on his painted box, shown as a sphinx trampling an Asiatic and Nubian (photo by the author). b: Scarab from the Tombos soldier's tomb showing Shabaka as a griffin trampling an Asiatic (photo by Bruce Williams).



FIGURE 17: Apedemak temple pylon at Naga, Sudan, showing King Natakamani and Queen Amanitore slaying enemies (photo by the author).



FIGURE 18: Back of the Naga temple, with Amanitore and Natakamani balanced by a three-headed Apedemak (photo by the author).

Kushite precedent of female power.

We can also see this dynamic in Amanitore’s placement as an equal balancing the role of the king in worshiping and receiving the blessing of Apedemak throughout this temple (FIG. 18). This pattern demonstrates the more prominent and independent role of Meroitic queens in iconography and political life and ritual practice than the institution of queenship in Egypt. As Welsby observes, the triple-headed Apedemak in this scene does not represent Indian influence,⁹⁵ as some have suggested, but is instead a clever adaptation of Egyptian/Meroitic canons designed to balance the figures of king and queen equally between the god.

On the pylon, a lion appears at Natakamani’s feet, mauling an enemy in keeping with their bellicose lion-god patron. On the other side, he peeks out

from behind Amanitore’s skirts, swatting at the enemies that she dominates. The motif of a lion consuming a prisoner is another one that goes back to the international style, as seen in ivories from Nimrud,⁹⁶ one repeated in Kushite statuary with a dramatic example from Basa, near Meroe.⁹⁷ No doubt Wilson would disapprove of the political and ideological prominence of Kushite queens compared to their more subordinate role in Egypt, but monuments such as the Apedemak temple do not reflect a “bastardized and degenerate” imitation of Egyptian themes but instead provide an example of the transformative interplay between Kushite ideology, Egyptian forms, and Mediterranean connections.

While only a handful of royal women wielded a power equivalent to kings in Egypt, during the

Meroitic period numerous *kandakes* were either sole or co-ruler.⁹⁸ Perhaps the most famous was *Kandake Amanirenas*, who defeated the Romans under Augustus in 25 BCE, decapitating a statue of the emperor and carrying the head back to Meroe, where it was buried under the threshold of a temple, to be trod upon any time one entered.⁹⁹ Objects from this period found in the royal cemetery, such as a remarkable rhyton in the form of a mounted Amazon, auloi, and lamps that include both locally made and imported examples in the classical style, reflect the cosmopolitan nature of Meroitic civilization.¹⁰⁰ Meroitic rulers were also patrons of the Temple of Isis on Philae Island, at the border between Egypt and Nubia. As Solange Ashby points out in her book *Calling out to Isis*, Nubian priests attained the highest positions in the temple and operated with a sophisticated knowledge of Egyptian hieroglyphs, hieratic, and demotic, while not abandoning Meroitic in devotional inscriptions. Nubian priests were the last practitioners of Egyptian religion, which survived until the mid-5th century CE.¹⁰¹

CONCLUSIONS

There is strong evidence that the Kushite-Egyptian relationship was characterized by patterns of mutual influence rather than a one way "Egyptianization" of Nubian society that ebbed and flowed with the presence of Egyptians.¹⁰² Monuments such as the Kushite pyramids were not inspired by re-engagement with Egypt or leftovers of Egyptian influence but had become a quintessentially Nubian form long before these monuments were built, perhaps as early as the Ramesside period.¹⁰³ Kushite leaders and military were not weak or indecisive, as Breasted charged, but instead for a hundred years faced off against the greatest military the region had seen, aided by iron weaponry that was surely already being produced at Meroe and a sophisticated use of horses and chariotry. The Assyrians even sought out Kushite horses and trainers before coming into conflict with the Kushite dynasty (early to mid-8th century BCE).¹⁰⁴

Similarly, it is clear from recent work at Tombos and elsewhere that Nubia was not an unsophisticated backwater. There is no a priori reason to see Kushites as passive consumers and every reason to think that they were active participants in the diverse expressions of the Iron Age international style, perhaps creating objects such as the faience vessels

and the bowl from Kurru and certainly being selective in their choice of motifs, whether acquired through trade, specially commissioned, or made locally. The consumption of this material culture was balanced by the retention and continuing development of objects and practices that reflected ties to a deeper Nubian past. Kushites selectively adapted Egyptian imagery and practices, advancing theology, and reconfiguring the very nature of kingship and queenship on their own terms. The ongoing practice of producing and consuming art in particular styles, whether local or international, minor or monumental, created linkages among those who were entangled with it,¹⁰⁵ reinforcing the authority of Kushite rulers for another thousand years until the dissolution of the Kushite state.

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Notes

- 1 Heard, this volume.
- 2 E.g., Emery 1965; David 1988; Grimal 1992; Perry 2004; Wilkinson 2010; Bennett 2019.
- 3 Wilson 1951, 292–293.
- 4 Wilson 1951, 293
- 5 Cf., for George Andrew Reisner, Minor 2018.
- 6 Assmann 2002, 326–329; Gardiner 1964, 343; Fletcher 2015, 277.s
- 7 Wilkinson 2010, 391.
- 8 Smith 2018b.
- 9 Wilkinson 2010, 396–397.
- 10 Wilkinson 2010, 396.s
- 11 For discussion, see Morkot 2003; Williams and Emberling 2021.s
- 12 O’Connor 1993; Shinnie 1967; Trigger 1976, 138–148; Török 1997.
- 13 Du Bois 1947, 32–33.
- 14 Diop and Diop 1974; Van Sertima 1994.
- 15 Hansberry 1974.
- 16 Faraji 2012 and in this volume.
- 17 Draper 2008, 36–37.
- 18 Grimal 1981.
- 19 Török 1997.
- 20 Draper 2008, 36–37.
- 21 Smith 2018b.
- 22 Davies and Gardiner 1962.
- 23 Faraji 2012, 6–30; Heard, this volume.
- 24 Smith 2018b.
- 25 Rawlinson and Blakeney 1964, 147.
- 26 Gates-Foster 2014.
- 27 Ashby 2021.
- 28 Doll 2014.
- 29 Breasted 1909, 560–561.
- 30 Redford 2004, 146.
- 31 Aldred 1998, 179.
- 32 E.g., Van de Mieroop 2021, 156.
- 33 Darnell and Darnell 2020, 4.
- 34 Blouin et al. 2020.
- 35 Darnell and Manassa 2007.
- 36 Smith 2017.
- 37 Kemp 1978, 34–35.
- 38 Kemp 1978, 56.
- 39 Rawlinson and Blakeney 1964, 126.
- 40 Smith 1997.
- 41 Dietler 2010; Smith 2021.
- 42 Gabolde 2018; Bonnet and Valbelle 2004; Valbelle 2003, 156.
- 43 Wilkinson 2003, 77–78, 92–93.
- 44 Kendall 2008.
- 45 Török 2009, 224–226.
- 46 Török 2009, 151–152.
- 47 Ashby, 2020, no. 50.
- 48 Smith and Buzon 2014a.
- 49 Morkot 2013.
- 50 Buzon et al. 2016; Smith 2018a.
- 51 Smith 2021.
- 52 Buzon et al. 2016.
- 53 Binder, Spencer, and Millet 2011.
- 54 Morkot 2013.
- 55 Riggs 2014, 75–108.
- 56 Smith 1992.
- 57 Doll 2014 and in this volume.
- 58 Dunham 1950, 1955, 1957.
- 59 Binder et al. 2011; Spencer 2014.
- 60 Smith and Buzon 2014b; Smith 2021; Lemos and Budka 2021.
- 61 Bornemann and Smith 2020.
- 62 Gratien 2002.
- 63 Schrader et al. 2018.
- 64 For a very early date for iron, see Ali 2011.
- 65 Heidorn 1997.
- 66 Török 1997, 118–121; Ambridge 2007; Smith 2007.
- 67 Francigny 2016.
- 68 Smith 2007.
- 69 Giveon 1974.
- 70 Griffith 1923.
- 71 Dunham 1950, fig. 31e, Pl. LXIV A–B.

- 72 See Feldman 2014.
- 73 Emberling 2014.
- 74 Dietler 2010.
- 75 Cf. Smith 2007, 10–11, pl. XII; Mallowan 1978, 56–58, fig. 65; Feldman 2014.
- 76 Feldman 2014.
- 77 Caubet 2017.
- 78 Wilkinson 2003, 135.
- 79 Lilyquist 2012, fig. 42b.
- 80 Hölbl 2016.
- 81 Webb 1978, 40, figs. 153–154, pl. VI.
- 82 Webb 1978, 11–19, pls. II–III.
- 83 Jesse et al. 2006.
- 84 Addison 1950; Brass 2014.
- 85 Crawford and Addison 1951.
- 86 Dixon 1963.
- 87 Addison 1949; Eisa 2014; Ali 2016; Eisa 1999.
- 88 Jesse et al. 2006; Jesse 2014; Lohwasser 2006.
- 89 Vincentelli 2018; Lohwasser 2014.
- 90 Smith 2018b.
- 91 Grimal 1981.
- 92 Macadam 1949, 61, pl. IX.
- 93 Smith 1998.
- 94 Engeler et al. 2020.
- 95 Welsby 1996, 182.
- 96 Feldman 2014.
- 97 Rilly 2013, 48.
- 98 Ashby 2021; Lohwasser 2001.
- 99 Welsby 1996, 68.
- 100 Doxey et al. 2018, 151–155.
- 101 Ashby 2020.
- 102 Morkot 2003.
- 103 Cf. Silliman 2009.
- 104 Heidorn 1997.
- 105 Feldman 2006, 2014.

