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The Roman Egyptian-Nubian Frontier during the Reigns of Augustus and Amanirenas: Archaeological Evidence from Talmis, Qasr Ibrim, and Meroë

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Abstract
Augustus' imperial campaigns were memorialized throughout the empire in his *Res Gestae*. The scene described is of a single, crushing Roman victory over Lower Nubia. Some scholars, such as László Török (2009) and Solange Ashby (2020), have aptly taken issue with the validity of Augustus's claims; however, there remains a prejudice in the historiography that favors Roman and textual sources. In this study, the author highlights archaeological evidence from three Nubian sites in the invaded region mentioned in Roman sources—Talmis, Qasr Ibrim, and Meroë—in order to provide a novel and more nuanced interpretation of interactions at the frontier than Roman authors provide. It is concluded that the Roman Egyptian-Nubian frontier during the time of Augustus was not singular; in fact, the border was dynamic—at times characterized by hostile militaristic tensions, at other times by peaceful exchange. The author further asserts that, despite Augustus's imperial claims of territorial control, the Roman Egyptian-Nubian border is instead better understood as a cultural "Third Space."

Imperio nostro fines auxi (I increased the boundaries of our empire).

—Augustus, *Res Gestae* 26

The Battle of Actium, in 31 BCE, witnessed the defeat of Cleopatra VII and Mark Antony—relinquishing Egypt into the hands of the emerging Roman Empire. When Octavian, later Augustus, became king of Egypt, the territory was established as a private imperial possession. It was through Egypt that Augustus pushed his empire's frontier farther south into Nubia.[1] Augustus's imperial campaigns, including those into Nubia, were memorialized throughout his empire in his *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*. In it he boasts (*RG* 26):

> On my command and under my auspices two armies were marched at nearly the same time into both Ethiopia and Arabia—which is called "Fortunate" [*Eudaemon*], and a magnitude of the enemy of both peoples were cut down in battle with several cities also being seized. Ethiopia was reached as far as the town of Napata, to which the nearest (city) is Meroë.[2]

The scene described is of a single, crushing Roman victory over Lower Nubia as far as the site of Napata. Though the later accounts of Strabo (*Geographica* 17.1.54), among others, such as Pliny the Elder (*Naturalis Historia* 6.35) and Cassius Dio (*Historia*

Romana 54.5), provide slightly more nuanced narratives, Strabo's and Dio's accounts are notable in their inclusion of a description of Meroitic retaliation. Nevertheless, the classical accounts, in general, and often the historical narrative most repeated, remain favorable to the Romans and describe interactions at the frontier as one defined by Roman territorial acquisition and foreign coercion. This narrative is one that relies largely on Roman source material (in Greek and Latin), often to the complete ignorance of Nubian or Meroitic, mostly archaeological, evidence. There are notable exceptions to this, of course, with certain scholars, such as László Török,[3] aptly taking issue with the validity of Augustus's claims (and the classical material more broadly), while Solange Ashby brings attention to the much overlooked Nubian textual material.[4] Török specifically, for example, mobilizes a wide range of textual and archaeological evidence to show that Augustus condensed multiple years of numerous campaigns into a single event within a monumental, political narrative.[5] Additionally, in the last decade there has been a notable growth in Nubiological publications, such as Solange Ashby's *Calling Out to Isis: The Enduring Nubian Presence at Philae* (2020), that have made Nubian textual records more accessible to ancient historians and archaeologists.[6]

Nubian archaeological and epigraphic evidence challenges Augustus's narrative and offers two alternative reconstructions. First, at the Nubian capital of Meroë, the Meroitic political narrative presents Rome as subjugated and defeated at the hands of the Nubians. Second, at Talmis and Qasr Ibrim evidence suggests Romans and Nubians were worshipping the same gods alongside each other and possibly were co-habitating—at the very least peaceful negotiations and cross-cultural exchange is evident. Thus, we cannot simply take Augustus's word about the nature of the Roman Egyptian-Nubian frontier at face value.[7]

A Historiographic Problem

The term "Nubia" is not without issue here. It is likely based on a 4th-century CE Greek term, *Noubades*, for the people who resided in region of the Central and Upper Nile Valley generally understood to encompass the region beginning roughly where the Blue and White Niles meet in Khartoum and extending to the southern border of Egypt, at the first Nile cataract.[8] Nubia occupies much of what is modern-day Sudan. The indigenous name for this region is not known, in part perhaps because Meroitic is still not entirely understood.[9] The ancient Egyptians used many terms to refer to the people and regions of Nubia, often referring to it as "Kush." This term is similarly problematic in that it is an etic, Egyptian term rather than an emic, Nubian term; that being said, it could be argued that the cultural overlap between the ancient Egyptians and Nubians makes this term "Nubian" as much as it was "Egyptian." The Hellenistic, administrative name for Lower Nubia was *Triakontaschoinos*, referring to portions of Nubia incorporating the regions of the first and second cataract.[10] Perhaps the problem with looking for a singular term for Nubia is more fundamental—it is likely, I suppose, that we should not be searching for a singular indigenous term for the entirety of this region, as it was not thought of, from an emic perspective, as a singular "state" in the "traditional" European sense of the word. Instead, Edwards (and many others in following his work) has suggested that Meroitic Nubia was a "segmentary state," with semi-autonomous groups unified by shared ritual investments (i.e., shared religious goals, practices and/or beliefs) that were controlled by an individual or group who thus possess greater political and cultural capital.[11]

The difficulties of studying ancient "Nubia," then, are clearly compounded by its proximity in antiquity to two empires, overwhelming not only in scale but also in historiographic preference: Egypt and Rome. Nubia, thus, falls victim to both Egyptian-centric and Roman-centric scholarship. Burnstein comments on this in his discussion of the influences of Greek culture in Nubia by highlighting that "the surviving ancient and medieval accounts of Nubia are not only limited but profoundly Egyptocentric…. Not surprisingly, when modern histories of Nubia first began to be written in the nineteenth century C.E., they were largely based on classical and Arabic sources."[12] Scholarship from the first two thirds of the 20th century has largely relied upon Egyptian and Roman sources for reconstructing the histories of Nubia, especially for the historical periods of imperial interest in the region (i.e., the Egyptian Middle and New Kingdoms, and the Roman period). An example here is, perhaps, illustrative.

Sir Laurence Kirwan was a celebrated scholar, and certainly his work was foundational in the study of ancient Nubia.[13] Although he was an archaeologist, he too relied on classical texts to frame his reconstructions of Nubian history.[14] In a 1957 article about Rome's southern border (that is, the Egyptian-

Nubian border), he mirrors Augustus's claims of a crushing Roman victory led by the prefect Gaius Petronius, writing about "Roman penetration" into Nubia during this time.[15] He explains that the *Pax Romana* was broken during the time of Petronius when

> The Meroites—Sudanese one may call them—taking advantage of a reduction in the Egyptian frontier garrisons to provide troops for Aelius Gallus' campaigns in Arabia, fell upon the cities of Syene, Elephantine, and Philae….The reprisals, which followed immediately, dealt an almost crippling blow at the power of the kingdom of Meroe and carried Roman arms for the first time deep into the Sudan.[16]

This seems to be almost a direct translation of Strabo's account in *Geographica* (17.1.54). Indeed, he acknowledges his use of Strabo and Pliny the Elder (*Naturalis Historia*) as sources and concludes that:

> It need not concern us here except perhaps to lament that a possible Meroitic version of the story is still largely untranslatable. The Meroites, ill-armed, ill-disciplined but far more numerous, were defeated in a series of battles, and by land and by river were driven southward across the Roman frontier at Maharraqah… Petronius, after the capture of [Qasr] Ibrim, continued further up the Nile capturing five other Meroitic cities…By the end of the first century B.C., Rome (in a military sense) had thus already penetrated far beyond the southern Egyptian frontier. By the middle of the first century A.D. she had advanced…beyond the southern limits of the Meroitic Kingdom, into darkest Africa.[17]

As a history, the near-verbatim retelling of Strabo's account (see below) as fact is problematic; his framing of "darkest Africa" is at best Eurocentric and antiquated (even in 1957) and is racist and derogatory at worst.

Postcolonial theory, birthed arguably by Said's *Orientalism*, has pushed much archaeological and historical scholarship away from these more simplistic narratives that relied entirely, or nearly so, on sources written by westerners and/or colonizers.[18] In fact, Roman archaeologists, pushing back against the notion of *Romanization* (that is, the supplantation of local culture by "superior" Roman culture through imperial measures) were among the first in their field to explicitly employ postcolonial theory in a 1996 edited volume entitled *Roman Imperialism: Post-Colonial Perspectives*.[19] Although most recent scholarship shies away from the simplification and blatant Eurocentrism seen in Kirwan, the narrative of a fixed Augustan-era border, instilled by his prefect Petronius, in Nubia is still repeated.[20] Indeed, much of the innovation in the historiography comes from the field of Nubiology, which remains under-read relative to other publications in the fields of classics and Egyptology.[21]

Frontier—Zone, Boundary, Process?

Modern definitions of frontiers are influenced by our own historical and political pasts; for western scholars, our perspectives were largely born out of late 19th- and early 20th-century policies of colonialism and imperialism (and with it notions of state and race). Early scholarship on the ancient world, for example, was located within a socio-political context of *fin de siècle* nationalism and a belief in an absolute state with defined physical borders. Problematically, this has sometimes been applied wholesale onto the ancient framework, without appreciating that the ancient world may have operated differently. This is perhaps best illustrated by an extreme example from the 1930's. While Germany was attempting to define its physical and ethnic borders, the Third Reich began a *Limesbauprogramm* which it claimed was based on an ancient Roman precedent. In 1936, a leading German historian and archaeologists, Ernst Fabricius, published *Der Obergermanisch-raetische Limes des Römerreiches*, which, clearly inspired by notions of borders and space present in the German *Zeitgeist*, reconstructed the ancient Roman frontier to mirror the developing *Limesbauprogramm*.[22] In this way, a modern political agenda influenced the determination of ancient boundaries in the scholarship, which was then used to justify those same modern borders. When this scholarship, and the scholarship that built upon it, then gets used in later studies (with us now postdating the beginnings of World War II by around eighty years), it is often forwarded along either as "facts" in classroom lectures that have been passed down by generations of teachers or as a simple footnote, and in both cases, divorcing it from

its historical context and faulty methodology (and the same could be said about many other disciplines and other topics as well).

Borders were similarly a concern in late 19th-early 20th-century America. First presented as an essay entitled "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" at a meeting of the American Historical Association, Frederick Jackson Turner's so-called Frontier Thesis was eventually published in *The Frontier in American History* and was later also known widely as the "Turner Thesis."[23] As Turner was an American historian, his frontier thesis was squarely framed with the American West in mind. Nevertheless, it remains applicable outside this context. He argues, for example, that frontiers are never static but instead—in the American context, at least—should be approached as a process of acculturation rather than as lines or areas, contrary to the previously mentioned German definition.[24] This theory seems to hold more weight for the ancient context in which frontiers were perceived as both cultural and physical, although this seems to become conflated at times in the scholarship. Indeed, more recent scholarship has in fact moved away from this nationalistic interpretation of boundaries that emphasizes physical borders. Just in the last few decades, there has been a surge in frontier- and borderland-driven research that has instead favored efforts to describe these spaces as processes or zones of interaction.[25] Influenced in particular by historical archaeology and postcolonial theory, an entire discourse has developed on the nature of the frontier or borderland. Both terms have been nuanced in the literature,[26] but for simplicity here I use "frontier" as a general, non-specific term to refer to these larger ideas, encapsulated by both frontier and borderland studies.

We think of the frontier as a spatial category, but frontiers are not nearly as tangible as one might first suspect. If frontiers do not have to have natural boundaries, walls, or signposts denoting territorial borders, how then do we know when we come across a frontier, and more important for the ancient historian, how do we locate them within the historical records? In answering these questions, I look to Homi Bhabha and Magdalena Naum; the latter defines these spaces as being "physically present wherever two or more groups come into contact with each other, where people of different cultural backgrounds occupy the same territory and where the space between them grows intimate."[27] Frontiers, then, are perhaps better understood as zones of interaction, negotiations, and remaking—what Homi Bhabha calls a "Third Space."[28] The hybrid nature of frontiers means that these zones are dynamic and constantly shifting due to continual negotiations between nodal groups—in this paper the "Romans" and the "Nubians."[29] The assemblage resulting from this Roman Egyptian-Nubian interaction (also entanglement, hybridity) is complicated and difficult to interpret. Aaron de Souza, in analyzing hybrid objects, proposes a new model of "assertive objects" explaining that such objects express "something about the socio-cultural negotiations that arise in situations of cultural contact."[30] For our discussion, I suggest it is best, then, to approximate this process and describe the nature of frontier interactions with as much nuance as is possible, rather than attempt to define a single physical boundary or single characteristic mode of interaction.

I assert that the Roman Egyptian-Nubian frontier under Augustus was a "Third Space," a dynamic zone of interaction wherein processes of cultural exchange were negotiated and reformed between the Roman soldiers and Meroitic Nubians. This zone exists, geographically, along the southern border(s) of Egypt and the northern border(s) of Nubia. Egypt had been under Ptolemaic control since the 4th century BCE but in 31 BCE fell into the hands of Rome, wherein this new frontier took shape. I have decided to investigate the nature of this frontier zone at the moment of its transformation during the reign of Augustus for a number of reasons. Practically, it allows research to be focused and directed. Heuristically, the period of frontier formation logically will express the most self-awareness and intentionality and will encourage the most dialogue. It marks a moment of change. Here, in this transitional phase, I believe the ephemeral processes of negotiation and tension will be pushed to the fore, allowing for scholarly access. These processes are described in Roman texts, notably those of Augustus, Strabo, and Pliny the Elder, and are recorded in the archaeology and epigraphy of the temple complex at Talmis, the settlement and temple sectors at Qasr Ibrim, and the political stronghold of Meroë.

Ancient Conceptions of Space and Place

It is evident that we cannot take modern definitions of borders, space, and place[31] and apply them wholesale to ancient Rome and Nubia, but what then

can we say about these ancient conceptions of frontier? Our knowledge of Nubian perceptions of place is admittedly limited and nascent in its research. With certainty, though, I can confidently argue that Nubians perceived space and place in diverse ways: the city walls that surrounded the palace of Meroë stood as physically delineating boundaries; invisible networks of temples bounded sacred landscapes; and ceramics, languages, material objects, and traditions demarcated cultural zones. Nubians, thus, constructed frontiers, both physical and symbolic, and static and dynamic.

Our knowledge of Roman conceptions of place and frontiers is better formulated, informed by significantly more and varied sources. Roman "teaching maps" express their perception of *limitatio,* or the organization of space.[32] While the term *limes* by the 3rd century CE came to mean "frontier" or "limit," it originally was used to describe either a boundary marker or a section of uncultivated land, such as a road, which acted as a boundary between agricultural plots.[33] Indeed, there existed a dichotomy between administered and unadministered land (*arcere* and *arcifinius*, respectively). This physical manifestation of a frontier may be personified historically by Hadrian's Wall. Natural, physical boundaries are also found in artistic depictions and were manifest historically, exemplified by the Danube River.[34] But this attempt to physically delineate borders was not a central concern of Rome until the time of Hadrian, who ascended the throne in 117 CE, thus postdating our current discussion.[35]

Under the reign of Augustus, the fluctuating frontier, such as that at Qasr Ibrim, was not purely defensive.[36] Breeze notes that "Forts tended to be placed in the major river valleys where the newly conquered people lived, and whose farms could help feed the Roman army…. Even when frontier lines had been established and most regiments moved on or close to it, some forts might be retained in order to help control important activities such as mining operations."[37] In following Breeze, one could then understand the Roman frontier at Qasr Ibrim equally as defensive and as offensive, ensuring the continuation of local activities. Perhaps it is best to consider the Roman frontier here as productive and kinetic (rather than defensive, realized as potential). While Breeze is not speaking specifically of Nubia, it seems reasonable that the Roman military, under Augustus, would have behaved similarly in Nubia as elsewhere in the empire. If Breeze's interpretations are correct and this can be applied to Augustan frontier policy, we can surmise that this policy was not wholly concerned with territorial possession but was more interested in establishing networks of resources for troops, centers for trade, resource extraction, and/or communication nodes.

The Frontier of Roman Egypt and Nubia: The Roman, Textual Evidence

As addressed above, the most common description of the frontier between Roman Egypt and Nubia, as characterized by historians, seems to draw largely on the Roman, textual evidence. Numerous Roman works mention Nubia, which is also referred to as Aethiopia, but only a few are relevant here, notably: Augustus's *Res Gestae*, Strabo's *Geographica* (Book 17, chapter 1), Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis Historia* (Book 6, chapter 35), and Cassius Dio's *Historia Romana* (Book 34, chapter 5). The work of Augustus is of interest to this investigation since he was Roman emperor, leader of the military, and concerned with frontier policy. Strabo was a contemporary of Augustus, and as a geographer he was similarly concerned with issues such as borders and frontiers. Pliny the Elder was born nine years after the death of Augustus and died in the eruption of Vesuvius at Pompeii in 79 CE. His work is of relevance here not only because it is one of the largest, most extensive Roman works to survive to modern day but also because much of what he wrote has been confirmed archaeologically, which arguably makes it slightly more reliable than other contemporary, or near contemporary, authors. Cassius Dio's work postdates the events discussed here by around 200 years and therefore may be a less reliable source than the other three, upon which I will focus my analysis.[38]

The *Res Gestae* (26) expresses Augustus's idealized campaign, memorializing his great works across his empire.

> On my command and under my auspices two armies were marched at nearly the same time into both Ethiopia and Arabia—which is called "Fortunate" [Eudaemon], and a magnitude of the enemy of both peoples were cut down in battle with several cities also being seized. Ethiopia was reached as far as the town of Napata, to which the nearest (city) is Meroë.[39]

At least three incomplete copies of the text are extant, although more are thought to have been inscribed in public-facing locations throughout his empire. Its popularity is exemplified by its recitation by the Senate following Augustus's death.[40] The version discovered at Ankara, which mentions the campaigns in Nubia, was written both in Latin and Greek.[41] It was monumental and public facing, carved into stone atop the Augustan Temple—thus celebrating (the posthumous, divine) Augustus within the growing borders of his empire.[42] It can, thus, best be described as propagandistic and certainly biased. There were differences between the Greek and Latin versions at Ankara. The Greek version was more provincial facing, reducing the "imperialist tone" of the Latin version.[43] This implies the original Latin version possessed underlying biases, which needed to be reduced in the Greek version that was more widely accessible to the local audience at Ankara. The single, crushing Roman victory over Lower Nubia described in his inscription is problematized by archaeology and geographic reality. For example, he writes about "Napata, to which the nearest city is Meroë," but these cities are approximately 270 km apart (about 160 miles), which would not be considered "near" by modern or ancient standards. Further, there is no evidence that Rome occupied Meroë, and in fact Augustus does not claim this directly, but he arguably implies it by mentioning the capital city.[44] While the *Res Gestae* may not be the best source for approximating any form of "historical reality," it remains useful, as it provides insight into Augustan motivation and idealized policy. While never an official province of Rome, the *Res Gestae* text clearly subjugates Nubia as a conquered territory within the landscape of Roman cultural influence and may be emblematic of the general attitude with which Rome engaged in dialogue with Nubia, presumably at the frontier.

Strabo's *Geographica* helps to clarify the narrative of Augustus's campaigns into Nubia. These campaigns were led, Strabo explains, not by Augustus himself but by his appointed prefect of Egypt. Two are of concern here: the second prefect of Egypt, Aelius Gallus, and the third prefect of Egypt, Publius Petronius. Strabo, uniquely among the Roman sources, describes the retaliation of the Meroitic kingdom against Roman invasion, which Augustus conveniently leaves out of his *Res Gestae*. In *Geographica* 17.1.54, Strabo writes,

> But the Aethiopians... attacked the Thebaïs and the garrison of the three cohorts at Syenê, and by an unexpected onset took Syenê and Elephantinê and Philae, and enslaved the inhabitants, and also pulled down the statues of Caesar. But Petronius... quickly turned them to flight.... Among these fugitive were the generals of Queen Candace, who was ruler of the Aethiopians in my time—a masculine sort of woman, and blind in one eye.... After this he set out for Napata. This was the royal residence of Candace.... But though she sent ambassadors to treat for friendship and offered to give back the captives and the statues brought from Syenê, Petronius attacked and captured Nabata… he fortified Primis better, threw in a garrison and food for four hundred men for two years, and set out for Alexandria.
>
> Meantime Candace marched against the garrison with many thousands of men, but Petronius set out to its assistance and arrived at the fortress first; and when he had made the place thoroughly secure by sundry devices, ambassadors came, but he bade them go to Caesar; and when they asserted that they did not know who Caesar was or where they should have to go to find him, he gave them escorts; and they went to Samos, since Caesar was there.... And when the ambassadors had obtained everything they pled for, he even remitted the tributes which he had imposed.[45]

Strabo describes a Meroitic military force successfully attacking the Thebaid region (roughly Thebes to the first cataract at Aswan) and overthrowing three stationed Roman military units at Aswan (which is Syene), Elephantine, and Philae.[46] This contingency was originally led into Dakka by King Teriteqas of Meroë who, upon his death in 25 BCE, was succeeded by Candace Amanirenas.[47] The title "candace" literally means "mother of the royal heir," or perhaps more generally something similar to "queen." Amanirenas—described by Strabo as masculine and blinded in one eye—continued the fight against Roman occupation.[48] Strabo describes the destruction of statues, which archaeological

evidence corroborates and will be discussed further below. Between 25 and 24 BCE, the prefect Petronius retaliated against the Meroitic forces, conquering Dakka (Pselchis), Qasr Ibrim (Primis or Premnis), and Napata (Nabata), admitting, though, that he could hold the territory only up to the second cataract.[49] Petronius set up a garrison at Qasr Ibrim, which they occupied until 22 BCE.[50] Around 22 BCE, Strabo's account picks up and describes Amanirenas marching against Qasr Ibrim. Petronius refers her to "Caesar," that is, Augustus, who is said to be stationed at the island of Samos. There, according to Strabo (17.1.54), they negotiate a peace, establishing a new *fines*, or boundary, at the southern end of the *Dodekaschoinos* (i.e., the Hellenistic administrative region of Lower Nubia) located at Hiera Sycaminos, modern Maharaqqa. This peace did not include the submission of Nubia to Rome, nor Rome's control over Meroë, at this time. Thus, Strabo's account seemingly complicates Augustus's own implied narrative.

Pliny the Elder's account in *Naturalis Historia* supports Strabo's account but generalizes the encounter at the frontier, as the *Res Gestae* does, as one of swift Roman victory.[51] In 6.35 Pliny writes,

> Moreover, in the time of the Divine Augustus the Roman army also penetrated there under commander P. Petronius, himself also the Prefect of Egypt, being of Equestrian rank. That man captured cities, the only ones we have ascertained I will mention in order: Pselcis, Primis, Abuncis, Phthuris, Cambusis, Atteva, and Stadasis—where the Nile, rushing in a crashing noise, has robbed the hearing of those living nearby. He also sacked Napata. However, the furthest point he reached beyond Syene was 870 miles [*mille passus*].[52]

Pliny's account follows the general outline presented by Strabo and Augustus. While he generalizes the nuances of the campaign, akin to the *Res Gestae*, he also includes details omitted even by the more detail-oriented Strabo. Pliny claims that Petronius, on behalf of Augustus, sacked not only Dakka (Pselcis), Qasr Ibrim (Primis), and Napata but also Abu Simbel (Abuncis), Farras (Phthuris, about 40 km north of Wadi Halfa), Cambusis (near the third cataract), Atteva, and Stadasis. Pliny claims the Romans invaded more than 870 (or 970 according to a different manuscript) miles into Nubia, beyond Aswan (or Syene).[53] The Roman mile, or *mille passus*, is approximately 1,480 meters, and a modern American mile is just over 1,609 meters.[54] Thus, 870 Roman miles equals approximately 800 miles (1,287.6 km), with 970 Roman miles equaling approximately 892 miles (1,435.6 km). This is significant because Meroë, the Nubian capital during the reign of Amanirenas and the invasions of Augustus, is located approximately 1,334 km (along the Nile, not as the crow flies) south of Aswan. It is likely, then, that Pliny is indicating the Romans invaded Nubia as far south as the capital city, a point also vaguely implied by Augustus.

Although there are differences between these three Roman accounts, there is no reason to throw one out as contradictory based on their presentation alone, as they roughly follow the same trajectory from Dakka southward toward Napata. They differ on two main points. First, they differ on the nature of the subjugation of Nubia, with Augustus and Pliny describing generalized victories and Strabo describing a more nuanced and dynamic process. Second, they differ on how far the army went into Nubia—Augustus confirms as far as Napata, but mentions it is "nearest to" Meroë, with Pliny indicating more clearly that Meroë was part of the invasion, and Strabo explaining that the Romans were only able to hold onto the area north of the second cataract.

While Augustus and Pliny fail to nuance the processes of the frontier, Strabo presents a tense dialogue at this fluctuating zone that escalated to war and pillaging by both Roman and Nubian forces. Accordingly, dialogue at the frontier during 25–22 BCE could be summarized by these accounts as "militaristic" or "hostile." But in 22 BCE the negotiations at Samos suggest a peaceful resolution between powerful leaders. Thus, the frontier at this moment could be described as "peaceful" or an "armistice." Despite this eventual peace, both Roman and Meroitic narratives mark the other as a hostile enemy; for Augustus this is done rhetorically in his *Res Gestae*, and in Meroë this manifests as the burial of a statue head of Augustus in a place where it could be trampled upon.

It is possible that, based on the Roman evidence for their invasion of Nubia during the reign of Augustus, cultural and/or economic dominance was seen as equally important, or even more favorable, than direct territorial control. Strabo's description of

the Roman withdrawal to Hiera Sycaminos (modern Maharraqa or Mahraqa), the southern limit of the *Dodekaschoinos* after Meroitic negotiations in the winter of 21–20 BCE, indicates that Rome gave up interest in territorial expansion in Lower Nubia. Territorial control was difficult compared to control over Egypt, for example, due to the fact that much of Nubia was unnavigable by water as a result of the numerous cataracts. The occupation of (or attempt to occupy) Nubia may have been more effort than it was worth economically for Rome. Mommsen explains Rome's changing attitude toward the *Dodekaschoinos* in that it "demanded a strong garrison and brought in little to the state."[55] Additionally, Speidel suggests that Aswan (Syene) was a "choke point in the southern defense of Egypt.... Philae, on the other hand, above the cataract, is the gate to Nubia."[56] By controlling these two points, Rome was able to ostensibly control travel and trade between Egypt and Nubia, and therefore exert some essence of economic and/or cultural influence, at least in Lower Nubia. Augustus—wanting, perhaps, to save face after investing men and resources into the invasion of Nubia—seemingly still claimed victory over this region without clarifying its extent.

This is often where the discussion of the Roman Egyptian-Nubian frontier ends, without full consideration of Nubian archaeological evidence that could corroborate or complicate this narrative. Specifically, three sites that are mentioned in the Roman sources are considered, from north to south: Talmis, Qasr Ibrim, and the capital city of Meroë.

The Frontier of Roman Egypt and Nubia: The Nubian, Archaeological Evidence

This section will consider archaeological and epigraphic evidence from three Nubian sites during the reigns of Amanirenas (Nubia) and Augustus (Rome)—that is, when this frontier was taking shape—to better approximate the nature of this zone of interaction.[57] It is worth briefly considering, thematically, the epigraphic activity in the *Dodekaschoinos*, specifically the corpora known as "prayer inscriptions" and "agreements." Ashby, whose study is the most recent and in depth, explains that the "knowledge gained from a close analysis of Nubian prayer inscriptions offers a way to interpret the political, military, and financial relations undertaken at the border of Roman Egypt."[58] Further, the continuity of Roman-Nubian contracts, or agreements, illustrates Nubian-Roman cooperation. When these texts stop, in the 1st century CE, there is a corresponding aggressive Roman military effort building in Lower Nubia that reflects shifting relationships at the frontier.[59]

The northernmost site under consideration is the Temple of Mandulis at Talmis, modern Kalabsha, originally located approximately 50 km south of Aswan. The temple was built at Bab al-Kalabsha but was moved during construction of the Aswan High Dam to a location just south of the dam, beyond the flood waters. Presumably, this site, so close to the Egyptian border at Aswan, would have been securely under Rome's thumb if Augustus was indeed successful in any part of his invasion into Nubia. Talmis was long home to a temple of Mandulis (ancient Merul or Melul), a local Blemmye Nubian sun god who was adopted by some Roman soldiers living in Nubia as a patron deity and was associated with Horus and Apollo.[60] During the reign of Augustus, a large temple complex was built and dedicated to Mandulus, at the site of an earlier New Kingdom sanctuary (temp. Amenhotep II).[61] Thus, Augustus's building activity at Talmis engaged with and bought into the preexisting Nubian sacred landscape; he did not supplant it. Arguably, Augustus's building campaign here could reflect an attempt to emplace Roman cultural influence into this preexisting Meroitic landscape. Indeed, an enduring Roman cultural presence at the site is evinced by the numerous Greek and Latin inscriptions and graffiti found all over the temple.[62] Further, many inscriptions were found inside a *tabula ansata*, suggesting the authors were informed of Roman epigraphic trends. The authorship of these inscriptions is difficult to determine, but likely they were made by someone connected with Latin epigraphic culture, be they Roman or Meroitic.[63]

This evidence alone could indicate Roman occupation of Talmis during this time. However, Meroitic epigraphic evidence, which dates across the Roman period, illustrates that Meroitic Nubian activity also continued at the Temple of Mandulis at Talmis at least through the 1st century CE.[64] Side by side are Meroitic inscriptions in conversation with Roman-era Egyptian hieroglyphs and Greek inscriptions, indicating a shared use of this site by multiple language groups.

At Talmis we do not see a frontier that was hostile or militaristic, as described by the official Roman

(and, as we will see, below, official Meroitic) narratives, but instead the interactions here could be better understood as evidence for productive cultural exchange and a shared locus for the cult of Mandulis.[65] Similar evidence for peaceful and cooperative coexistence can be found at Qasr Ibrim.

The fortified city site of Qasr Ibrim was known to classical authors by its Hellenized name, Primis. The presence of a Roman garrison at the site from 24 to 21 BCE is supported by Strabo's account and the site's archaeological finds, although there remains the likelihood for continued Roman presence at the site after Augustus, as well.[66] The site is notable in that it is one of the few sites in which modern excavation, as opposed to salvage operations, could be conducted due to its location on a high bluff that keeps it out of reach of the waters above the Aswan High Dam. Nevertheless, high water levels and its location make it a difficult site to access, and so the full history of the site is not yet understood.[67] From the Roman period, though, definitive settlement and temple activity can be located. A large defensive tower in the northwest of the complex, interpreted as such by the many ballista balls found there, is dated to the period of Roman occupation (c. 24–21 BCE) by the ceramic assemblage, which included sherds of 1st-century CE Roman amphorae.[68] Along the eastern terraces, but roughly contemporaneous, were organized stone domestic structures whose ceramic assemblage points toward both a Roman and a Meroitic occupation.[69] This possibly suggests a period of cohabitation, which is supported by mixed Meroitic and Roman finds in Qasr Ibrim's hinterlands.[70] At the very least there is neither evidence of a destruction layer nor a mass exodus of Romans leaving Qasr Ibrim that would indicate anything but a period of cohabitation, or habitation by peoples invested in Meroitic- and Roman ware-cultures.

An additional Roman domestic site was located just south of Qasr Ibrim and has been interpreted by Horton as either the initial siege camp or summer quartering for the army.[71] An enigmatic podium may or may not be contemporary to Augustus and the prefect Petronius. Frend's investigation into the issue prompted him to concluded that a dating to "Petronius' occupation in 23 BC seems a reasonable hypothesis."[72] Horton, however, disagrees; he suggest that the so-called Temple 5 and Podium at Qasr Ibrim likely postdate Roman military occupation because their orientation "represents significant breaches in any fortification scheme."[73] He instead considers these structures to be part of the period immediately following what he refers to as the "military occupation" and suggests "they might best be interpreted as an attempt by the Romans to develop Ibrim as a cult centre.... In doing so they would neutralise Ibrim's military significance, without having to demolish the fortification walls."[74] Indeed, it seems likely that Augustus (or more rightfully, perhaps, Petronius) here, as in Talmis, was investing in local, Meroitic religious landscapes. The presence, however, of both early Meroitic and 1st-century BCE Roman pottery in the hinterlands and across domestic sectors could be suggestive of Meroitic and Roman cohabitation, or at least coordination, even during the three or so years of supposed "military occupation" of Qasr Ibrim indicated by Strabo and suggested by Horton.

Despite the Roman withdrawal to Maharraqa in 21 BCE, the building activity at Qasr Ibrim could be understood as Augustus's efforts to embed Rome within the very fabric of local religious activities in this frontier zone. Similar to his building campaign at Talmis (among others, such as Dendur and Dakka), Augustus played into already established sacred networks, arguably embedding his presence physically and symbolically within the Nubian cultural landscape. However, this sort of interpretation presupposes a dominant Roman culture instilling itself onto a passive Meroitic landscape. The temple building at Qasr Ibrim could equally be understood as Rome acquiescing to a compelling Meroitic culture. Once the Romans at Qasr Ibrim were exposed to Meroitic religion and culture, the temple could have been built by Augustus to appease the Romans who remained at the site after the official military withdrawal, or it could have been a peace offering to the local community. The frontier, as defined by the archaeological evidence at Qasr Ibrim during the reigns of Amanirenas and Augustus, then, can be summarized as briefly defensive and militaristic, but mostly as cooperative and a locus for shared ceramic assemblages and religious experiences.

It was only Pliny who indicated that the armies of Augustus invaded Nubia as far as its capital city of Meroë. The *Res Gestae* clearly implies as much, although it does not claim this explicitly. So far, the archaeological evidence from Talmis and Qasr Ibrim seem to indicate this large frontier zone was dynamic—at times hostile, but mostly characterized

by cooperation and exchange. I have hereto criticized the *Res Gestae* for its propagandistic rhetoric; unsurprisingly, at the capital of the Meroitic Kingdom, too, a strong statement of enmity is articulated. At Meroë, a bronze head of Augustus (EA 1911,0901.1), now in the British Museum, was excavated below the entryway stairs of the "Augustus temple to Victory" (building M. 292) discovered by Garstang and published in 1912.[75] The statue is larger than life size: height, 46.2 cm; width, 26.5 cm; depth, 29.4 cm.[76] It is plastered and inlaid with glass and calcite and reflects artistic trends of late Hellenistic portraiture with its twisted neck and slight frown.[77] Despite the name of the temple under which it was found, the Meroitic temple was neither for nor of Augustus but was so named due to the discovery of this statue head. The temple dates either to the period of Amanirenas (c. 27–25 BCE), as suggested by Haynes, or to the reign of Natakami and Amanitore (c. 50 CE), according to Baud and Matić.[78]

In addition to the Augustus statue head, the temple was highly decorated. Painted plaster covered much of the interior walls of the temple, with scenes depicting a royal couple and associates (possibly princes or members of the royal court) seated on thrones, above bound captives who were depicted on the footstools. One of these captives (M. 292) wears a hat, identified as a Roman helmet, suggesting a Roman military defeat.[79] The location of the statue head of Augustus below the temple entry stairway is also significant. In this location, Augustus and Rome could be symbolically trampled upon by everyone entering and exiting the temple—an ultimate humiliation in defeat. Interestingly, this seems to confirm some of Strabo's account.

It is under the direction of Amanirenas that the Meroitic soldiers, according to Strabo, "pulled down the statues of Caesar."[80] This, then, would suggest that the event described by Strabo, the burial of the British Museum head of Augustus under the temple stairs, and the image of a subjugated and bound Roman soldier are near contemporaneous, and all speak to an event in which Rome was defeated by Meroë. The wars between Amanirenas and Rome may also be included in the so-called Hamdab Stela, though the stela is not yet fully understood.[81]

Thus, at the capital city of Meroë, Rome was officially vilified. The Nubians were described in Roman sources as being brutish and aggressive—hostile against Rome. This sentiment seems to be partially echoed here in the archaeology of Meroë. Royal Meroitic displays do disparage Augustus and his Roman soldiers. Just as Augustan imperial propaganda displayed in the *Res Gestae* described a sweeping defeat of Nubia, Meroitic royal imagery suggests a Nubian victory over a wretched Rome. The presence of the buried head of Augustus under the temple stairs, to be eternally and ritually trampled upon, at the very least suggests that we cannot rely on Rome's victorious narrative. But it also suggests that we cannot rely entirely on the rhetoric of Meroë, either. The rhetoric of both Rome and Meroë are valid and speak to real, lived ideologies of these states, but it is at the "in-between" sites of Talmis and Qasr Ibrim that perhaps the most reliable evidence for the lived realities of the frontier are excavated.

Concluding Remarks

The Roman Egyptian-Nubian frontier was a "Third Space," a dynamic zone of interaction, negotiation, and remaking. The official narratives on both the Roman and Meroitic sides were propagandistic, each marked by their counterpart as an ideological "other" and an enemy. On the ground, however, we see evidence for hostile, militaristic clashes, peaceful coexistence, coordination, economic exchange, and shared religious activities. Within the relatively short frontier history presented here, of just a few years, the zone ebbed and flowed and was dynamic in its characterization. It is clear that Rome, under the direction of Augusts (via then prefect Gallus and the prefect Petronius), never successfully occupied Nubia south of the Hellenistic border of the *Dodekaschoinos*. The archaeological evidence at Talmis and Qasr Ibrim confirm religious syncretism and cooperation between "Nubian" and "Roman" actors. The Roman narratives of a crushing victory over Nubia are incomplete and should no longer be cited as historical fact. Instead, this frontier zone is better described as a cultural "Third Space," a dynamic zone of interaction and exchange, bookended by ideological rhetoric that framed both Rome and Nubia as subjugated enemies.

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Notes

1 The term "Nubia" is not without problem here and will be addressed later in this article. For a historical discussion of Augustus's efforts to push into Nubia, see, for example, Thomas Arnold 1879, 113, and Mommsen 1996 [1885], 223.

2 Translations by Bryan Brinkman.

3 Török 2009.

4 Ashby 2020. See also: Adams 1976; Adams 1983; Alston 1995; Burstein 1988; Burstein 2004; Jameson 1968.

5 Török 2009.

6 Ashby 2020.

7 As I am neither a scholar of the classical world nor a specialist in Nubian history of any time period, it is with some hubris and humility that I share this article. Furthermore, it is with immense gratitude that I give thanks to colleagues who read and reviewed this article. My peers gave me critical, thoughtful feedback, helped with translations, and shared many significant citations with me. Many thanks to their insights and contributions, although all errors of course remain my own.

8 Nubia is possibly related to the ancient Egyptian term for "gold" nbw. It may also be related to the Coptic *noubti*, meaning "to weave," which may then relate to the use of Nubia to refer to a type of scarf. The word "Nubia" is first attested in Medieval Arabic.

9 Rilly 2016.

10 Whereas the *Dodekaschoinos* can be roughly translated as "twelve-mile land." In fact, it occupied an approximately 135 km sector of Lower Nubia between Aswan (Syene) and Maharraqa (Takompso, or Hiera Sycaminos). For a complete definition of *Triakontaschoinos* and *Dodekaschoinos*, see Seidlmayer 2012.

11 Instead, Edwards has proposed that Nubia during the Meroitic Period is best understood by the "segmentary state model." In general he argues that it is best to look at "models of state" developed from "African data" (Edwards 1998, 176).

12 Burstein 2008, 42.

13 Williams 2005; Kirwan 1957.

14 Similarly, Griffith (1917, 160) writes, in reference to the account Strabo provides about Rome in Nubia, that the account "gives us what is no doubt an authentic account of these things from the point of view of the Romans."

15 Kirwin 1957, 13.

16 Kirwan 1957, 15–16.

17 Kirwan 1957, 16.

18 Said 1978.

19 Van Dommelen 2011.

20 E.g., Morkot (2016) writes that "Petronius in 25–24 bce (Strabo 17.1. 53–4) fixed the frontier at Hiera-Sycaminus, where it remained until the reign of Diocletian." Here Morkot is again relying on the account of Strabo and is suggesting, without regard to the nature of this border nor other lines of evidence, that a "fixed" stable border was founded at Hiera-Sycaminus. Perhaps Morkot should be given some leeway, for his entry was required to be very brief, but it reflects, I believe, an acceptance of this general narrative.

21 It is perhaps worth noting that the first version of this article was written in 2009, before much research on this topic was published. That being said, there has been a lot published on Nubian history, language, and archaeology in the last decade—some of which has been brought to my attention by very generous anonymous reviewers

and has made some of my claims here less cutting edge. However, I still think this article has a place, especially in a journal such as this one, with a wide, interdisciplinary audience—not all of whom follow this research. Indeed, there is an enduring problem wherein Egyptologists (such as I) and classicists so often fail to stay abreast of research in Nubiology (excluding *many* scholars, of course, who do this quite successfully, some of whom I have cited robustly). This speaks to the heart of the historiographic problem I outline here—the overreliance on classical literature in our history writing (even to this day) and the failure of many of us to fully appreciate, or to take the time to fully understand, the Nubian evidence (myself sometimes included). So while some of the assertions I make here may not seem particularly revolutionary now to my Nubiology colleagues, I do hope that this study offers an introduction to Nubian studies to a wider audience and encourages all of us to step up a bit and do better as scholars of the ancient world.

22 Moschek 2010.

23 Turner 1976.

24 Turner 1976, 3–4.

25 E.g., van Wolputte 2013; Wilson and Donnan 2012.

26 E.g., Naum 2010; see Adelman and Aron 1999, 814, n. 1, for a literature review related to American history.

27 Naum 2010, 101.

28 Bhabha 1996.

29 These are loaded terms that are in themselves dynamic and difficult to define. The "Romans" in this context refers to a diverse, multiethnic military group that drew on inhabitants (mostly men) of the entire Roman Empire. The defining characteristics of this group for the present discussion are their positions in the Roman army; on the social lives of Roman soldiers, see Alston 1995. The "Nubians" refers also to an ethnically and culturally diverse group who primarily inhabit the area along the Central and Upper Nile Valley between Khartoum and the first cataract, approximately corresponding to modern-day Sudan. Ancient Egypt and Nubia shared overlapping cultures and many inhabitants, especially in the borderlands of Lower Nubia/Upper Egypt, held intersectional identities as both Nubian and Egyptian, with Egypt at times exerting political control over Nubia, and at other times Nubia exerting political control over Egypt (i.e., the Twenty-fifth Dynasty). The term "Nubia" is best understood to be an etic term for this region that became common after the 4th century BCE and is used in part due to the fact that we do not know what these peoples called themselves for much of their history. During the Hellenistic period, Lower Nubia, more specifically, was referred to as the *Dodekaschoinos*. The ancient Egyptians referred to this region as Kush. Different power centers emerged throughout Nubia's long history, but for the time under discussion here, notable is the Meroitic Kingdom that ruled from the capital city of Meroë c. 590 BCE–350 CE. See NOTE 11, above, regarding governance in Nubia during this time.

30 De Souza 2020, 1.

31 Space and place are not synonyms here. Broadly speaking, I am using "space" as an abstract term that refers usually to a physical location. The concept of "place," on the other hand, refers to space with loaded meanings that involves human action. On the diversity of definitions and uses of these two concepts, see Agnew 2011.

32 Whittaker 2000, 295.

33 Maxfield 2016.

34 For more on this frontier, see Wells 2005.

35 Breeze 2008, 61.

36 Breeze 2008.

37 Breeze 2008, 61–62.

38 Furthermore, very little is relevant from Dio, who writes about one paragraph on the topic (although I do appreciatse why its original omission may have been seen as a problem by a reviewer). Uniquely, Dio does present the Nubians, led by Candace, as a rather formidable force in some sentences, whereas in others he explains that the mere insinuation of the arrival of Petronius caused them to hastily retreat in order to escape him—which they did not, resulting in a defeat (34.5.4). Dio relates that it was likely due to the "sand and heat" that he withdrew and "forced" Candace into a treaty.

The Dio translation used here is the Loeb Classical Library edition (1917).

39 Translation by Bryan Brinkman. See also Cooley 2009 for a recent critical edition, with translation in English.

40 Cooley 2014, 215.

41 Likely based on the original copy that was inscribed at the mausoleum of Augustus in Rome; see Cooley 2014.

42 Güven 1998; Cooley 2014, 218–219.

43 Cooley 2014, 221.

44 Cf. those who may see the mention of Meroë simply as a reference point for the lesser-known city of Napata.

45 The translation is Jones's published in volume VIII of the Loeb Classical Library edition (1932, pp. 138–141).

46 For more on these cohorts, see Speidel 1988.

47 Török 2009, 441. Many thanks, however, to a reviewer who points out that "Nubiologists are not yet certain that the Meroitic queen described by Strabo was Amanirenas," with the only "firm evidence to suggest this conclusion" being "the Meroitic-language cartouches of Teriteqas, [Amani]renas, and Akinidad at Dakka."

48 On first reading, I presumed this this to be an insult, but it should perhaps be better understood as an acknowledgement of her military prowess. Specifically, many warriors of antiquity were one-eyed, such as Philip of Macedonia or Hannibal, and this may have been a mark of their expertise in battle. See, for example, Africa 1970.

49 See also Török 2009, 442.

50 Date according to Török (2009, 442); cf. Horton 1991, 268.

51 According to Pliny the Younger (Letter 27), *Naturalis Historia* was Pliny the Elder's last work, which would date it to the Flavian period. Historically, this may be significant—or at least informative—since Vespasian's rule, according to Brinkman (2012), marked a renewed interest in Egypt as a symbol of peace. Brinkman shows that Egypt had been used as a symbol of peace once before, during the reign of Augustus. Whereas Augustus associated the conquering of Egypt (and the defeat of Marc Antony and Cleopatra) as an act marking the restoration of peace, Vespasian used Egypt as a symbol of the restoration of peace following the Roman civil war of 69–70 CE.

52 Translation by Bryan Brinkman, based on Mayhoff 1906.

53 Mayhoff 1906, 506.

54 Brinkman 2017, 666; *Collins English Dictionary* 2019.

55 Mommsen 1996 [1885], 278. Note that the publication is an English translation, without a credited translator.

56 Speidel 1988, 795.

57 There are additional monuments and sites that could be discussed here, such as the Temple of Dendur (now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York), which originally stood near Aswan and was built during the reign of Augustus. For the sake of time and space, I have selected the three monuments mentioned here that reflect different behaviors. Other sites confirm similar behaviors that are exemplified already in the discussions of these three.

58 Ashby 2016, 8; Ashby 2020.

59 Ashby 2016, 90–92.

60 Faraji 2011, 224; Nock 1934.

61 Gauthier 1911–1914.

62 E.g., Gauthier 1911–1914, 239. The most complete discussion of the epigraphic material can be found in Ashby 2020. On the Demotic graffiti, see Griffith 1937, vol. 1, 36–38.

63 E.g., Gauthier 1911–1914, 249, 256, 260, 264, 271, 277, 281. Examples from Philae, Dakka, Talmis, and other temples are observed by Griffith (for example, vol. 2, p. 10). Ashby notes examples of inscriptions in *tabula ansata* that are certainly Meroitic, for example, among feet graffiti at Philae (Ashby 2020, 227–331).

64 Gauthier 1911–1914, 197–198; Ashby 2016, 90–92.

65 See also Ashby's (2020, 167–187) discussion of Roman-Nubian relationships at the frontier.

66 Van der Vliet 2013; Horton 1991, 268.

67 E.g., Rose and David 1998.

[68] Alexander 1988, 78; Horton 1991, 271.

[69] Wilkins et al. 2006; Horton 1991, 271.

[70] "Survey in the hinterlands of Qasr Ibrim, which has taken place during the last three seasons, provides further evidence for Roman and Meroitic occupation" (Horton 1991, 271). See also Rose 1996.

[71] Horton 1991, 271.

[72] Frend 1974, 49. On dating more broadly of the campaigns of Aelius Gallus and Petronius, see Jameson 1968.

[73] Horton 1991, 272.

[74] Horton 1991, 272–273

[75] Context provide in Török 1997, 146; dating of building offered in Shinnie and Anderson (2004, 85) in their publication of D. Harting's 1983–1984 excavations at the site. Haynes (1983) has argued that this head could have been an imperial gift from Rome to the Meroitic kings; others have suggested the head was looted from Qasr Ibrim. Matić (2014) supports the assertion that the head was originally from Elephantine/Philae/Syene region.

[76] British Museum n.d.

[77] British Museum n.d.

[78] Haynes 1983; Baud 2010, 287; Matić 2014, 118.

[79] Shinnie and Bradley 1981, 170; Haynes 1983.

[80] Strabo 17.1.54.

[81] Griffith 1917, 166–168.