Bestock 12 Feb. 2012

“The Princes of Seyala in Lower Nubia” by Harry Smith

The chief issues I am seeing rise to the top in this week’s readings have to do with the nature, extent, and contacts of socially complex groups. In particular it seems that the scholastic focus on the A-Group comes about largely because other late Neolithic cultures in the Sudan did not exhibit the same degree of social complexity. (Wengrow from last week might have laughed about this – perhaps the thread running through the study of prehistory that could constiute a common cause is a yearning for it to be over. We all seem to perk up when we are on the edge of, if not history itself, at least kings.) The doors are then opened to fights about what that complexity means, where it came from, who it influenced, etc. Obviously the most vitriolic fight is that between Williams and Adams. While Williams’ specific point about transference of kingship from Nubia to Egypt is now more or less moot after the discovery of Abydos tomb U-j, there is still quite a bit in those articles to discuss.

In fact, Smith’s article about Sayala is very welcome in the context of a discussion generated by Williams and Adams. It demonstrates that chiefdom/rulership/kingship whatever you want to call it in the A-Group is not as uniform a phenomenon as Qustul alone might suggest. The fact that the principal grave in question has clearly Egyptian iconographically loaded objects marks it as similar to Qustul, but the objects themselves are different and so is the grave type. Smith undertakes a limited description and study of the graves and their artificats from Cemetery 137 near Sayala; grave 1 gets the most attention as this grave is that usually considered to belong to a ruler at some level.

Within grave 1, which was heavily plundered at one end but somewhat protected by fallen rock slabs at the other, the most notable artifact is the much-discussed Sayala mace handle. This object, originaly of wood with gold overlay but now only gold, is decorated with motifs that are individually and in combination directly related to familiar Naqada III iconography from Egypt. I’ve looked into this object in the past and have never seen the slightest reason to doubt that it comes from Egypt. The iconography has its best paralells in ivory objects and here comes the problem – almost none of those ivory objects have been found in situ. As such, it becomes very difficult to maintain that animal imagery of this sort is specifically linked to rulers in Egypt. To very high elites in a stratified society? I’m OK with that. But I’m not quite sure I would say only rulers in Egypt got this iconography (or even maces – maceheads are found in a broader range of tombs than simply rulers in the Naqada III if I remember correctly). Imagery as a whole does not see its steep decline and limitation to the ruler until the start of the First Dynasty itself, I would argue. And here I think is something to play with: what is the relationship between Egyptian iconography and A-Group rulership? Because while those motifs might not absolutley mean ruler in Egypt, in this particular case they have been found in a uniquely large and well appointed grave (for the site, though not quite the region). Am I making too much of a distinction between ruling class and ruler in Egypt? Can we get at the mechanisms of cultural transfer (and/or economic transfer) at this point? Other points of interest about grave 1 include palettes, copper objects and pottery. Certainly the mix of Egyptian and Nubian pottery is to me one of the most fascinating things about this grave (and Qustul, for that matter). The differences in the Nubian pottery between Qustul and Sayala are also very interesting – if these two are not of precisely the same culture, though they are of the same date (on the basis of the Egyptian stuff), what is the relationship between them? Especially given that they both appear to have had high-level access to the Egyptian super-elite?

Smith goes on to identify two other potential chief/ruler whatever tombs at Cemetery 137, and suggests three generations of a single family were buried here together with select family members and retainers. He then turns to Cemetery 142 (precise location relative to 137 is not given, which is irritating, but it is also at Sayala). Though badly plundered, he notes that one tomb in particular was built like the Qustul “royal” graves and probably was similarly appointed. Two or three tombs here he identifies as probably in the chief/ruler level. He dates them slightly later than the Cemeteyr 137 graves and suggests that they represent another family ruling subsequently from the same place. He agrees with Williams’ dating of Qustul, and therefore sees these lines of similarly elite people as being coeval: two different principalities in the Terminal A-Group (and, though not stated, not covering the entirety of A-Group territory it would seem – the relationship between material culture and politics is as murky as ever here).

In demonstrating the very complexity of rulership in the A-Group itself I think Smith does us a service and provides a warning against the kind of simplistic “Nubia had it; they gave it to Egypt” thinking that forms Williams’ final point (much of his pre-final thinking is clearer). In fact, the narrative of the rise of kingship within Egypt, even now that Nubia has more or less been written out of the picture, is far too simplistic. In neither place do we have a uni-local, linear path from social stratification to kingship. Nor is the development and manipulation of iconography within the rise of kingship entirely straightforward. Whatever we conclude about the government in each place, the exchange of both objects and iconography (I don’t buy that the Qustul incense burner was made elsewhere than Nubia, so I accept that Egyptian motifs were being employed by A-Group artists) by the ruling classes in these places is fascinating. This is especially true as it seems to immediately pre-date the near total destruction of the A-Group by the exact same Egyptians who a generation or two before were sending south objects of such high status that they presumably would not have been given to other Egyptians. Perhaps this indicates a mutual recognition of strength; that strength may have made the A-Group more dangerous to the increasingly centralized, rich and beligerent Egyptian state. (This would count as pure speculation as I write, but I would love to talk about evidence for and against and plausibility.)

Many of the disagreements that pop up in this week’s readings I think ultimately boil down to matters of definition. What is a king? What is kingship? What is a ruler? What, for that matter, is a culture? Does everything we call A-Group really belong together? (This problem has been there since the beginning with Reisner’s definition of a B-Group that is now largely seen as being either a variant of early A-Group or a poorer sub-section of the A-Group.)

One discussion I would like to have this week is: what further evidence do we need to really answer questions we have about the A-Group? If we were to design a project to tackle the A-Group, what would our research questions be? Where would we go? Would we survey or excavate? (This is not wholly theoretical, either – there is a big packet of money for work in the Sudan right now that I just found out about.) Would we work within the A-Group area itself or on its edges?