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Archaeology of Nubia

Week 3 reading response

**Bruce Williams. Excavations between Abu Simbel and the Sudan Frontier: Part I – A-Group Royal Cemetery at Qustul, Cemetery L**

In this report, Williams attempts to synthesize the material excavated at Qustul between 1962 and 1964 under the direction of Keith Seele. He begins with describing the spatial arrangement of A-Group findings in the Sudan, for which a map would have been quite useful. He implicitly asserts that the only A-Group evidence found is funerary. He then opens into a discussion of chronology which is a topic of much debate since no independent standard has yet been developed for Nubia. His chronology is developed by “using the dated Egyptian pottery to give order to the sequences, but basing the divisions on changes in A-Group materials and the way in which imports occur, about eight stages or phrases can be recognized” (12). I am not well informed in the processes of developing these sort of chronologies, but it is not described clearly enough for me to feel totally confident in it – at the very least I would need to research this further, but perhaps other people have a better understanding and can share their wisdom.

Qustul mostly dates to the Late A-Group, and as such, Williams delves into the tomb types, material evidence, parallels, dating etc. over the next few chapters. His assessments reflect a clear sense of confidence, that I am surprised by. Having studies this material briefly before, it is apparent how challenging it is to make secure statements for this dynamic period of early history (as it is always challenging to make such absolute statements for any period in history!). For example, Williams comments that the tombs of Late A-Group at Qustul, “reflect clear evidence of class distinction” (14) and later concludes that “the existence of the Pharaonic office at Qustul in A-Group rests on the figure in bark II of the Qustul incense burner and the depiction of palace facades on five incense burners” (147).In discussion of the Qustul incense burner he infers, nay (!) he claims to prove, that from a ‘damaged line’, a vertical line and a ‘raised mass’ he is able to unqualifiedly proclaim: “It is the head of a falcon” (140). The more I study and research, the more I am made acutely aware of the fact that it is nearly impossible to say much of anything absolutely. So, these sorts of comments leave me feeling uncomfortable and skeptical. (or was this just me and Adams?)

On the topic of tomb types – Williams identifies 3 groups of types for humans (very basically: medium, big, and very large/royal). He also identifies one type unique to cattle burials. Interestingly he comments that “most cattle buried in Cemetery L had the heads removed” (16). I am very intrigued by this. Why were the heads removed? Where are those heads?! Where else do we see this practice?

Chapter 4 attempts to synthesize the epigraphic and artistic evidence. Williams includes what he identifies as local evidence consisting of rock art, scratched decoration on ostrich eggs, scratches on imported pottery, painted decoration on local pottery and non-local evidence like cylinder seals, sealings, and Egyptian vessels with painted figures. My biggest question here, and this is likely a product of my lack of knowledge, is how he identifies an imported vessel that has locally applied scratching versus an imported vessel with scratched decoration applied before importation. If he is using imagery to make this distinction, then this is highly problematic, especially considering the sort of conclusions he is drawing from the material.

From the material, Williams makes some major conclusions. He strongly asserts that the royal monarchy of Egypt originated at Qustul and is evidenced primarily by the Qustul incense burner which he claims is mostly intact, while Adams argues the excavator informed him it was originally found in many pieces without a secure associated tomb findspot. (oh the heated debates!)

There is much more to say about this report, but I think I have highlighted some of the major issues of concern that have become hot topics of contention between Williams and Adams in the two articles we have also read for this week. I think this, along with the other two articles we are reading this week, really interplay with each other and should be read thinking about the others.

Also, on an aside, maybe take a second look at the readings about rock art, since it will be the topic of my presentation next week!