

O'Connor, D. (1993) *Chiefs and Kings of Early Nubia: A Short Review*

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Within this chapter of the larger publication *Ancient Nubia, Egypt's Rival in Africa* O'Connor seeks to give a largely descriptive analysis of the chronology and development of the Nubian A-Group in relation to the Egyptian Naqada cultural group. He goes on to examine the evidence for material cultural interactions between lower Egypt and Lower Nubia, before suggesting how the data from lower Nubia can be tied to ideas of social complexity within the A-Group, both in terms of the stratification of access to elements of material culture within the A-Group, and also how the A-Group could have been constituted in terms of a larger social organization. O'Connor's position with regard to social complexity is clear "Some scholars view them [the A-Group] as a people with simple, small-scale political systems. However, the general evidence, on the later A-Group at least, indicates considerable social complexity, and one site suggests a high degree of political centralization." (Pg. 14).

O'Connor within the construction of his argument also makes important points about the nature and scope of the evidence we have for the A-Group. He states that the range of inferences we can make from the evidence available is limited due to the heavy preponderance of data from funerary contexts, and thus a concurrent lack of information regarding settlements, which have been largely left unexcavated. This has led to a skewing effect on the types and relative quantities of material culture, both domestic and imported, that have been recovered from the A-Group cultural area ('Impressionistic rather than specific' Pg. 14). Yet, he also makes a second vital point, although, within this chapter it is relegated to a parenthetical comment "Excavated A-Group cemeteries all lie on the low desert (*easily accessible to archaeologists*)" (Pg. 15 emphasis added). It is an old and often cited adage in spatial analysis that 'what you know depends on where you go, and where you go depends on what you know', thus archaeologists are caught in a recursive bind where low desert cemeteries are the most accessible and predictable elements of the total preserved cultural record available, and therefore are the most often accessed archaeologically, due to the predictable results, however, this often tends to confirm already existing evidence from the same types of context.

A more critical line of argument that could be taken from O'Connor's chapter is that he privileges North-South connects between Egypt and Nubia, rather than seeking a more synthetic picture of inter-cultural contact. In this way O'Connor is acting in the same model as Adams and Williams. He does acknowledge this bias briefly stating that the "Although little direct proof has yet been found. A-Group Lower Nubia must have traded with Neolithic Upper Nubia." In this way O'Connor's approach can be contrasted with that of Rampersad in the *Relationships of the Nubian A-Group*, where certain types of ceramic record are traced through a much

larger range of bordering cultures; the picture produced is more complex, nuanced, and believable. However, we cannot be unsurprised by this biased perspective, the title of the volume from which this chapter is drawn clearly states what O'Connor is examining and the types of issues he wants to address, therefore, he cannot be condemned for carrying out his vision. The fact that we have taken one chapter from a larger volume might also explain my second more critical point, which concerns the articulation between O'Connor's ideas of social complexity, organization, elite consumption of material culture, and trade as a vehicle for cultural contact. Within this chapter I did not get a strong sense of the overarching theoretical models that O'Connor was using to underpin his inferences, which clearly shape his perceptions of the evidence, and more specifically led him to treat the A-Group as one indivisible group "We must conclude, then, that a relatively highly developed social complexity was typical of the *entire* A-Group people in later A-Group times" (Pg. 20 emphasis added). However, it could be that the theoretical position O'Connor takes with regard to social complexity, organization, and how it is expressed in the archaeological record is related in more detail in other sections of this larger work.