Bestock

Hafsaas-Tsakos response

4 March 2012 (Norah is 22 months old today!)

I found this article deeply problematic. Although I absolutely take Tim’s point (quoting Ian) that it is not productive simply to slam the work of others, it is a little difficult for me to find substantive positive comments to make here. The pictures are pretty, though.

In fact, much of my reaction to the article was conditioned by the fact that I read it immediately after reading “Pathways to Complexity”, which, though not without problems, admirably raised the point that we need to expect different types of complexity, different strategies of political and social relationships within and amongst groups, and different means of understanding and marking value and status in ancient and modern societies. It forced us to be complex in our understanding of complexity. I appreciated that, though I did find it a bit troubling that she relied so heavily on ethnographic data (though I’m not sure what else she could do) right after noting that ethnographies have all been done after massive shifts that came with contact between cultures. Still, both in its general point and in many of its specifics I found the article very thought provoking and helpful. It was difficult to follow that with Hafsaas-Tsakos.

The most notable feature of the Hafsas-Tsakos article is a reliance on a single overarching theory approach to not just one culture but to the interactions between all cultures on a world level. I think that world systems theory and center-periphery studies can be productive, but only when used with proper caution. I saw no proper caution here, only fairly gross simplicity. I am also deeply troubled by the undercurrent of Marxist understanding of all relationships in terms of capital and exchange, with value being very narrowly understood. But I get ahead of myself.

Hafsaas-Tsakos begins with a very short definition and overview of the use for world system theory. She laments that discussions of a Bronze Age world system have not included sub-Saharan Africa, and proposes that it would be productive to examine the cultures of Nubia. She gets a little muddy in seeing Nubia as both a center and a periphery (this is accurate, I think, but also requires more discussion and then examination of how it affects the model). But there is nothing inherently wrong in testing a model by asking it to stretch. The problem comes in assuming the model is correct and then seeing how we can stick some Nubian evidence onto it. Early on H-T points out a couple of divisions in scholarship rather generally, including a divde between “formalists” who ‘argue that ancient and non-Western economies differ from capitalism only in scale, while substantavists claim that these economies are fundamentally different from Western capitalist economies’ (p 51) I would certainly want to back up myself and ask if the word “economy” is even an appropriate way to characterize pre-modern behavior in societies that had no expectation that all “economic” behavior was linked in some highly theorized system. This is absolutely a construct of modern times. If you don’t believe there is “an economy” – and I don’t know of any ancient society that had any comparable word – then is there one? Shouldn’t we tackle this before we ask how such an economy functioned?

For me this gets even more troubling as we go on. H-T falls firmly with the “formalists”. On p. 53 she says she can see the seeds of capitalism even in the Neolithic, with the beginning of food production implying ownership; in this construction, ownership = capital = capitalism. On p. 65 we get a litany of economic terms I find deeply anachronistic, from distribution to exchange, from market to manufactured commodity. I’m skeptical. What of human capital or social capital? (I don’t even love the word there, but within our system we’re not going to get away from it.) Wealth in non-material forms? All of the complexity introduced in “Pathways” is gone here.

This discomfort with a simplistic model and a simplistic understanding of capital and social mechnaisms and reasons for exchange underlies my dissatisfaction with the actual discussion of the C-Group, Medjay and Kerman cultures. In fact H-T is very brief in presenting evidence of all these groups and discussing how it supports or challenges her model. She buys the notion of a devastated Egypt in the First Intermediate Period with zero question; this keeps her from asking if the absence of prestige goods, known from the OK in the far south, could be due to an absence of reciprocol prestige trade rather than an economically motivated trade.

The basic premise of H-T’s look at the Middle Nile is that the C-Group were manipulated by the Egyptians, who more or less built the forts only to keep the C-Group from talking to Kerma. Basically she thinks Kerma and Egypt flip-flopped in terms of power, with Kerma only powerful when Egypt was weak (just for fairness, why wouldn’t it be the other way around? If it is even true that power in these cases is a zero sum, which I don’t buy). The C-Group got stuck in the middle. In this reconstruction trade is the only conceivable motivation for foreign relations, or even the reunification of Egypt after intermediate periods. Am I alone in being skeptical here?

I agree wholeheartedly that future research on the regional role of Kush, particularly looking south, east and west, would be well directed.

In general the articles from this week give us good reason to go back and reconsider some of our discussion from last week. I think I’m still OK with saying the model we built for Egypt stands – perhaps, in fact, one of the reasons simplicity has so often been on the table for Africa is precisely because Egypt does seem to have a very close relationship between complexity, vertical hierarchy, coercion, control of material wealth, ideology, and kingship. It distorts the picture. But now let’s apply these questions to Nubia, and Kerma in particular. When and on what grounds can we really see and understand kingship in Kerma? Is an Egyptian text that discusses a Kerman king a good indicator that kingship existed? Or are the Egyptians casting Kerma in the mold they know best from home, rather than responding to what they actually find? What *types* of complexity can we see in Kerma, in the C-Group, in the Pan Grave? And is this rigid divide between cultures even appropriate given the issues raised by Fischer? What does an Egyptian mean when he says “Nubian”? What does a Nubian living in Egypt mean when he calls himself “Nubian”?