Wegner Areika, Bestock response

11 March 2012

Wegner’s article on the combined Egyptian and C-Group evidence from Areika, and his subsequent interpretation of that evidence, is in many ways a very welcome addition to any discussion on the 12th Dynasty fortresses. Not a fortress proper, Areika doesn’t usually figure in the more synthetic treatments of Egyptian occupation of Lower Nubia. Perhaps this is because of the very oddities of the site, though in fact I think Wegner does a great service in showing ways in which the Egyptian occupation might not have been as monolithic as we sometimes think.

Wegner begins by discussing the ground plan of Areika and comparing it with other sites of similar date in Lower Nubia. He acknowledges from the start that there are problems in phasing aspects of the site given the generally poor excavation and publication. However, he feels confident in saying most critically that the rectilinear parts of the site antedate the curvilenear bits. I wish we had more of the information he was working off of to support this argument, since it directly contradicts the opinion of those who excavated the site (and Bietak who has done a ton of work on this material). I take Wegner’s point that the excavators etc were biased by their expectations of increasing linearity in C-Group settlement sites, but I am always somewhat hesitant to disregard phasing suggested by an excavator without some pretty solid proof. It may be there, I just wish it had been given. However, if we accept Wegner’s phasing then in fact his subsequent conclusions seem quite valid and certainly important: here is a planned and restricted but not quite fortified Egyptian site in an area of fairly large C-Group population; it was also itself subsequently (with or without overlap?) occupied by a C-Group population.

On the basis of this architectural comparison, Wegner argues that Areika was a sort of simpliefied fortress. He then turns to ceramic analysis. His most important points here are that the C-Group ceramics are entirely typical of C-Group setlement sites, and that the Egyptian ceramics are all relatively early in the 12th Dynasty. (I do worry that he falls into the same trap as Smith does in this case, of using hemispherical bowls from Dahshur as a dating index for Lower Nubia. Borriau did a good job of problematizing this by showing the degree to which regional ceramic traditions in the Middle Kingdom create dating nightmares – we should be more cautious in Nubia with Egyptian pots.) On the whole, I am inclined to accept Wegner’s contention that the C-Group ceramic assemblage continues beyond the Egyptian assemblage, but I would really want to talk to someone who has better control of regional differences before I got too comfy with that.

After pots, Wegner turns to seals. What he doesn’t mention here is how very different the seals of Areika are from the large and well known fortresses. He notes that the scarab use is identical to the 2nd cataract forts, but we don’t appear to have departments or institutions in the sealing corpus here. I would have appreciated more discussion of differences in here. The smiting scene “military” stamp seals that do not appear to have been from sealed objects or doors are certainly noteworthy, and here I find Wegner’s interpretation of them as representing specific military units compelling. But he correctly states that this doesn’t actually move us ahead very far in understanding how either the units or the seals functioned in the administration of Nubia.

Next (it’s a long article, with lots of different types of evidence considered) we move to graffiti in the area. These are in fact quite neat, particularly that which references patrolling with bowmen (should we assume those are Nubians of some stripe?) on a punitive mission against (presumed) C-Group local populations. A handful of cartouches are very helpful for dating these.

In conclusion, Wegner suggests with some merit that Areika was a sort of sub-fortress (possibly a khenret fortress for forced laborers) that was concerned primarily with subduing a restive local C-Group population. This function was only necessary during the early 12th Dynasty before the reorganizations of Senwosret III, at which point the buildings were taken over by the presumably more thoroughly pacified C-Group. Much about this scenario is attractive, and even if it doesn’t always seem to be super strongly supported by the evidence (I’m not totally comfortable with some of the chronological issues) the argument is extremely important for general reasons. Far too often we take the fortress system as having a single purpose (economic or threatening to Kerma or whatever, take your pick). We see Senworet I as establishing a border south of Buhen, and S III as extending that to Semna. We lose all subtelty of how Egyptians and Lower Nubians interacted. I have always been deeply troubled in particular about how much we take Senwosret III at his word, and Wegner’s portrait of an expansion that happened quite quickly but left some unsolved problems in the rear is attractive. For me the main worth of the article lies precisely in something we began to discuss last week: borders are seldom absolute lines in the sand Mixes of populations and strategies of dealing with one another must have been more flexible and multi-faceted than a simplistic view of the forts would allow, and Wegner’s interpretation of Areika suggests one place and one way in which this might have been the case.