

Nubia Is Not Empty: Morkot, Török, and Kendell

Timothy Sandiford

This reading can basically be split into three parts, however, they are all related in that they deal with the 'lost' centuries between the withdrawal of Egyptian rule from Nubia and the rise and eventual dominance of Napatan State. So, generally, Morkot's chapter sets the background for the big showdown in the Török and Kendell articles, which concerns the El-Kurru cemetery.

In many ways Morkot's article can be strongly contrasted against chapter we read from Redford. More specifically, Morkot's chapter is a more nuanced, detailed, cohesive, and subsequently more persuasive version of New Kingdom and later Nubian history. Morkot seeks to balance his analysis of New Kingdom Nubia by getting away from the "Egyptological view of history" (Pg. 139). Whereas Redford sees New Kingdom Nubia as a completely dominated in every facet (trade, administration, military, economic) by Egypt whereas Morkot states that "It is now widely acknowledged that the bureaucracy was run mostly by members of the indigenous elite" (Pg. 141). Morkot then goes on to ask a series of questions of which I would like to pick-out one I feel is particularly vital. He poses the question "The world of the eastern Mediterranean was changing, what were the effects on Nubia?" While he does not really provide an answer the question alone is very interesting and something that will become increasingly important as we move into the Persian and then the Ptolemaic periods.

Morkot then turns his attention to, and to a certain extent sets-up, the discussion of the El-Kurru cemetery. In the argument to follow Morkot takes a sort of 'third way' approach by suggesting that in fact what we have is not a continuously used cemetery, exhibiting gradual change through time (either long or short), but rather a mixed cemetery of two distinct phases; New Kingdom and an early Kushite phase.

Finally, Morkot turns his attention to the origins of the Kushite state where he sees “at least two significant families in Nubia, probably more.” (Pg. 144) Interestingly, he doesn’t theorize a mass exodus of the indigenous elite to Egypt at the end of the reign of Ramesses XI, but rather believes that they stay in place and become the new power holders, in the newly ‘freed’ area between the 2nd and 3rd cataracts.

Now after Morkot we move on to the main event, a clash of the ‘titans’ as it were, between Török and Kendall. Now it would appear from reading these two chapters that basically they had a testy encounter at a conference, at which Kendall may have said some things that apparently later regretted, he blames jet-lag (in his chapter!). Basically, the dispute revolves around the chronology for the El-Kurra cemetery. Török favors what he calls the ‘long chronology’ for the graves, where each grave represents an individual male ruler, taking this approach the cemetery time-frame expands out to cover the vital ‘lost’ three hundred years between the New Kingdom contraction and the rise of the Nubian state. Kendall on the other hand supports the ‘short’ chronology, which agrees with the original investigators of the site, Reisner. He suggests that these burials represent a shorter chronology because, actually the cemetery contains both men and women (Pg. 168) who rule as king and queen, thus accounting for a shorter period of time, with the start of the cemetery being about 100 years before the Napatan state gets going. However, Kendall thinks that they both think that “the evidence can be frustratingly ambiguous or even contradictory and can be used to generate widely divergent interpretations.” (Pg. 165)

The problem we have is that it would seem that the skeletons in the graves were disturbed and badly preserved. The sexing of the skeletons has proved a major bone of contention. With Kendall stating that;

“Contrary to the presumption implied in my original paper (1992:14) that the sex of these skeletons can be indisputably determined. I now admit that the sex analysis of the highly fragmentary and disturbed skeletons from Kurru may be only 70 to 90% accurate.” (pg. 171)

Now this statement is somewhat incredible, I am not sure how you can have an accuracy that varies by 20%? However, it would appear that the skeletons sex and therefore the presence of a secondary cemetery for the queens is present, Kendall states that Reisner looked for one and didn't find it as supporting evidence for a mixed royal cemetery. The second area of major disagreement is over the faience and ceramic vessels found in the grave. Both authors support the idea of heirlooms for their similarity to New Kingdom forms, but again Kendall supports a much longer time-frame for the curation of these objects.

Finally, I would just like to point to another area of Kendall's argument which caught my eye. In the final page he states that, not only is the 'short chronology' correct, but actually he has come to the conclusion that it is shorter than even he has been suggesting based on the 'fact' that the Kushite throne is passed to individuals of the same generation rather than being passed down to the next generation, thus giving shorter reigns for the kings. The problem for this argument is that he gives us no evidence on which this major assertion is based. I believe that his approach to this one assertion can be applied to his approach to this material as a whole, which can be summed-up in one word, sloppy.