Dorginarti

This article presents an overview of excavations undertaken at Dorginarti island, located in the northern part of the 2nd cataract, in the 1960s; the excavations were abandoned when incomplete due to rising waters of Lake Nasser. Dorginarti was originally thought to be a Middle Kingdom or New Kingdom fortress because such buildings are common in this area and because inscribed door jambs with the names of Ramesses I and IV were found here. One major point of this article is to refute such a date, suggesting instead that the fortress’s originally construction dates to the 7th century BC (with a possibility of 8th century foundation).

Establishing a date for Dorginarti was done on the basis of architecture and finds. Heidorn begins by examining the architecture, noting the brick size (which I can attest is larger than Middle Kingdom fortress bricks). The mudbrick walls had been built atop a stone glacis (this is *not* dissimilar to Middle Kingdom forts). They had several building phases, their final width including three or four “relinings”. This was apparently due to flood erosion and was especially visible in the northwest. Some interior buildings were also destroyed by floods, and Heidorn argues that the high floods must have been contemporary with the original construction phases. The major building is the “official residence” which had two early building phases, was then leveled off to provide a platform, and then another major building phase. It is in this latter phase that the Ramesside blocks were found, but Heidorn argues (sensibly) that they cannot have come from earlier phases of the same building, whose doorways were finished in brick. She argues they more likely came from Buhen, which is just across the river and where there is attested construction of both these kings. Heidorn does not get into differences between the construction and Middle Kingdom forts, but some of them are readily apparent. In addition to the larger brick size, the inclusion of service areas within the fortification walls is different, as is the haphazard nature of most internal construction. Buildings are built directly against the fortress walls, and there are no clear streets. I do not know New Kingdom fortresses well enough to compare.

Objects recovered from the fort include ceramics and small finds of Egyptian, Levantine and east Greek manufacture. Nubian finds included ceramics and stone arrow heads. Of note are remains of industrial pyrotechnical processes. Heidorn notes the great similarity of the material culture to Saite Egyptian (and even Levantine) sites (New Year’s bottles!) Lots and lots of imported pottery.

The redating of Dorginarti to the 7th-5th centuries puts it in a very interesting historical period and makes it a perfect example of one of the things I find most compelling about all of our reading this week: the status of Lower Nubia during the Napatan and Meroitic periods (or should that be the Kushite period? – let’s get into the Welsby/Edwards disagreement about how to characterize this or these civilization(s)/polity(ies)). This place at this period seems to do more to complicate our notion of borders than virtually anything else we have looked at so far. Heidorn notes that the precise intentions and outcomes of Psamtik II’s campaign to Nubia are not clear. However, she suggests (in a kind of roundabout way), Dorginarti may be part of the southern Persian period frontier. It was probably not playing that role any longer by the late 5th century, at which time Harsiyotef’s inscription suggests Egypt was not in control of this region. In sum, Heidorn notes that Dorginarti itself and finds from other sites are now showing that Lower Nubia was not quite a wasteland in the Napatan and Meroitic periods, and that it was far more tied into a broader Near Eastern world than has previously been recognized. These are important conclusions, but I worry (as so often) that we’re being too northern in our perspective. If Dorginarti was a Persian fort, it still does not make Lower Nubia much like other areas controlled by Darius. And can we do anything more with the Nubian material at the fortress? Is it chronologically post-Persian – are we looking simply at the replacement of an Egyptian/Persian garrison with a Kushite one? Or are there mixed populations here at any point? Against whom is this fortress guarding? Knowing of Psamtik’s campaign (and even the possible Cambyses campaign) is insufficient: the fort was maintained and used for centuries.

Heidorn notes in passing the fairly frequent mention of trouble with nomadic groups on the part of both Egyptians and Kushites in this area. I think this is a major point worthy of more consideration: viewing Lower Nubia as a zone of contest between two states risks ignoring that those states had legitimate interests in one another (trade) and quite serious concerns about other peoples. While Dorginarti may look in inception like an Egyptian outpost during an episode of war against Kush, I do wonder if its maintenance and in fact so much of the oddity of Egypt and Kush building in overlapping territory may be due to a sort of alliance. Is it possible that they maintained this area largely together in order to benefit from the trade, neither considering it really an integral part of their own territory? On the other hand, as much of the building in this region seems to have been temple-related, perhaps this is not a good solution.

This article is important for redating Dorginarti and suggesting that we have been simplistic in our view of Lower Nubia during much of the 1st millennium. However, I don’t think she pushes her own ideas far enough, she is rather astonishingly brief in some of her comparisons, and there is too much good stuff buried in footnotes that belongs better in the text. The opportunity to use Dorginarti to make much bigger points is largely not taken. There is nothing about her conclusions that strikes me as problematic; I only wish she had gone much farther.