**Trigger, B. (1969) ‘The Myth of Meroe and the African Iron Age’ In *African Historical Studies* 2:1 pp. 23-50**

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The first thing I think that comes to mind with this article is its publication date, it is now 42 years old and as such could be seen as a little dated in terms of the evidence. However, in some ways this makes it all the more interesting, given Trigger’s discussion points, especially in the first half of the paper. As always with Trigger’s work the title makes it seem like a ‘single issue’ paper, in this case the African Iron Age, but in fact he touches on a wide range of larger issues.

Trigger really sets his stall out in the first paragraph, in a comment that is still as valid now, as it was in 1969;

“During the same period the development of iron-working has received relatively little attention in North Africa, a region long dominated by an archaeology that eschews the study of technology for that of epigraphy.” (Pg. 23)

The implications of this statement run like a rich ore vane through this paper, and Trigger mines it extensively. He goes on to relate that the problem with archaeology which relies on epigraphy and art history is that it seeks to pin events within set, and somewhat inflexible historical framework, archaeology as the hand-maiden of text. An example of this unthinking attitude can be found in Welsby’s, *The Kingdom of Kush,* “Archaeology graphically confirms some of Herodotus’ observations.” (Pg.40) Welsby does not seem to equate archaeology and text as two independent, yet related, strands of evidence. Rather, archaeology becomes a way of confirming, thus texts become primary and archaeology is relegated to ‘fact-checking’.

Trigger also includes a very elegant quote from Lord Kaimsthorn (Colin Renfrew), originally about Prehistory, but applicable to many areas of ancient study;

“ideas and theories in prehistory often seem to have a life of their own, surviving and flourishing quite independent of the evidence upon which they might be supposed to rest.” (Pg. 24)

Trigger uses the example of the ‘diffusion’ model (Trigger ‘pseudohistorical’), whereby ironworking, brick architecture, and divine kingship move from the Meroitic civilization across the sub-Saharan plains and into West Africa. Thus, the Meroitic civilization becomes the central distribution node, for ‘ideas’ which were invented in Egypt. Trigger points out that this is an attractive suggestion geographically, it has a certain ‘truthiness’[[1]](#footnote--1) to it, the only problem being that there is no evidence to suggest this ever took place (or there wasn’t in 1969). Again, Trigger also makes a very interesting observation concerning the study of ‘traits’, bearing in mind that this was written at least 15 years before ‘post-processionalism’ would gain common currency;

“Finally, we must reject the simplistic assumption that the study of diffusion merely involves tracing the geographical spread of traits through time. Traits do not exist independently of one another, but are parts of cultural systems. While there must be connections between cultures if a trait is to dif-fuse, the mere existence of these connections does not insure that diffusion will occur. To understand why a trait diffuses, it is necessary to analyze the recipient culture and to determine the factors that have led to that trait being accepted. It is also necessary to examine the role that the trait defines for itself within the recipient culture and thus how it becomes reinterpreted in the course of its diffusion.” (Pg. 27)

In terms of iron-working specifically Trigger first reviews the evidence for iron-working in Egypt, finding no real evidence of the refining of iron oxides (as opposed to using meteoritic iron) before at least the seventh centaury BCE. Interestingly, for a scholar who wants to reject Egypto-centric notions of an African past, he starts his study of iron-working in Sudan with the domination of Nubia in the New Kingdom. Clearly, the evidence for Nubian-Egyptian interactions in this section of the paper is now very much out of date. Trigger now focuses down onto the various Napatan royal tombs, including el-Kurru, where iron arrow heads were found in one tomb, he then moves on to Nuri and examines those finds.

Again, Trigger seems to take a curious line in terms of his own project of removing Egypt centered notions of cultural exchange “Because the Napatan culture was strongly influenced by that of Egypt, it is often difficult to distinguish objects made in the two countries at this time from one another.” (Pg. 42) Now as we have discussed in previous classes this statement is true to a certain extent. However, the phrasing seems to suggest that the Napatan culture is the passive recipient in this cultural exchange, rather than an active agent; able to select and reject different aspects of Egyptian culture based on perceived cultural needs. He states that there is no evidence to suggest Sudanese iron-working prior to the sixth century BCE and that any early examples are imports in finished form (rather than imports of refined metal ingots, which were then worked). Trigger states that iron objects become increasingly common in the royal tombs at Gebel Barkal and Begrawiyeh North (and West) after 116-99 BCE, where the slag heaps around Meroe come into play and iron-working is certainly going on.

Trigger also points out the relative lack of any iron working debris from small regional and sub-regional sites in Lower Nubia might be suggestive of a royal monopoly on iron working, based at Meroe. However, he also points out the level of evidence in not really sufficient to properly assess this assertion.

1. Interestingly, ‘truthiness’ was already in the *Oxford English Dictionary* before Colbert popularized it. http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/207038?redirectedFrom=truthiness#eid17402001 [↑](#footnote-ref--1)