JTroche. Reading Response Week 11

Lenobe and Sharif. Barbarians at the Gates?

The Royal Mounds of el-Hobagi and the end of Meroe.

The article states its objective in the form of two questions: “Did [Meroe] collapse to Barbarians? Or did it take its own course?” By the end of the article, I realized that Lenobe and Sharif were approaching this article (and I am having a hard time figuring out the right word), but with a sort of light hearted –ness; perhaps, trying to be clever at times. Not knowing Lenobe nor Sharif’s other work, I was not entirely sure what the angle was – their use of the term ‘barbarian’ for example. Additionally, I was unclear what exactly would entail a collapse by ‘their own course.’ My slight hesitation (after a long ARCE weekend, I am having trouble with words, I don’t know if ‘hesitation’ is quite what I am meaning, but moving along…) this hesitation continued with their introductory section, discussing the ‘gamble’ of excavations. The excavation they are talking about in particular is one at el Hobagi, attempting to uncover the imperial tomb of the post-Meroites in order to approximate this transition. Their goal – although they did not address this explicitly until the end of the page 629 – was to excavate a royal tumulus at el-Hobagi in order to illustrate that there was, or was not, cultural continuity between the Meroitic pyramids and the tumuli.

The authors of the article seem to already be convinced. On page 629, they write that they are searching for a “historical explanation for the end of Meroe.” They then follow this comment by explaining that the Meroities and post-Meroites are comprised of the same cultural population. They assert that it is not likely that the end of Meroe was brought on by a military event like an invasion or due to barbaric influence. Lenobe and Sharif criticize traditional scholarship that creates dichotomies: pyramid/tumulus, literate/unsettled, civilized/barbarian. Notably, they refer to an earlier study that suggested different funerary rituals associated with the pyramids and tumuli.

This funerary ritual was a mélange of Egyptian and Meroitic traditions. The dead King of Meroe was seen as becoming Osiris upon his death, while Isis watched over his funerary rites. Beginning in the second century, what the authors refer to as the ‘Isis entourage’ of Anubis and Nephthys also began to play a significant role in the funerary rites as depicted in tomb scens and artifacts – like offering slabs (Who else saw the ARCE talk on the Meroitic offering slabs? Some overlap here!). Tombs of lower rank individuals, though, also shared similar depictions of ritual and objects – although the lesser elite versions tend to be ceramic in placed of bronze (631).

Excavations eventually discovered an elite burial chamber within the tumulus. Elite status of the tomb owner was evidenced by the number and quality of artifacts within the funerary assemblage. The 60 + ceramic vessels date to the fourth century CE. The elite tomb held numerous objects, including many Isis cult objects. The Isis cult, the authors present, developed into a cult of salvation. The tumulus then “allows us to see the funerary Isis cult as the religion of the great royal tumuli of Nubia with inexplicit cult material and too often imported Roman Egypt” (632).

Additionally, iconography of Meroitic royal power was discovered within the tomb. These motifs include: whip, hook, crown, sash, cords, sandals, robes, and certain jewelry. Now, I may not fully understand the nuances of Meroitic funerary culture, but I have a little concern considering all of the above motifs as exclusively royal! Also, these attributes could be associated with the divine (that’s okay by me still), but how are these attributes different, or unique from private funerary imagery? Or do we simply not understand private funerary imagery at this time well enough to make these distinctions?

Some general thoughts – I found the role of Roman influence very interesting throughout this article (clearly after my marathon presentation last week, this may not be surprising). I am also very intrigued to whether or not you all are convinced by the authors’ conclusion that the tumuli express “probable signs of allegiance to Rome” (634). Also generally, I also was not entire sure how I felt about how the article ended. “There is great scientific promise when Africa is decolonizing its history, to assert its cultural continuity!” (635). Is this what we are going for? Cultural continuity? I understand they are trying to confront racist tendencies in earlier scholarship to see this cultural decline and distinction between the ‘great’ pyramids and the ‘barbaric African other.’ However, I don’t necessarily see cultural continuity as the fix for this? Thoughts?