Problematizing the end of Meroe

Most of the articles this week dealt with the ‘End of Meroe’ debates that have occurred over the nature of the fall of the Meroitic Kingdom (which in and of itself is problematic terminology). Lenoble adds to this conversation in “The Division of the Meroitic Empire and the End of Pyramid Building in the 4th Century AD: An Introduction to Further Excavations of Imperial Mounds in the Sudan”. He begins by outlining past theories which have constructed the present day misconceptions surrounding the differences between Late Meroitic and Post-Meroitic culture, political structure, and the transitions between the two periods.

Lanoble uses the metaphor of pyramid vs. tumulus continually throughout the article to critique the past ignorance in scholarship surrounding the transition between these two periods. The postulate surrounding grave type, and the shift from pyramids to tumuli, has historically (thanks to Reisner) been seen as the marker for the ‘End of Meroe’. Lanoble, in this work and others, tries to argue against this simple narrative, even equating it to Gibbon’s *Fall and Decline of the Roman Empire*. Lanoble tackles mutiple pieces of evidence in this article to support her claim for a more nuanced view and also one that takes *transitions* between these periods more seriously into consideration. While he treats the evidence thoroughly I found it very difficult to follow times. The synthesis seemed to be relegated to odd parts of his paper and I often found myself having to read passages multiple times to try and place them into context. Ironically, it was only after I read Torok, and his criticism of some of Lenoble’s evidence that I was able to fully grasp some of what he was saying.

One part of the article I found intriguing, in light of the debate with Torok, was the use of libation vessels or “symbolic cultic receptacles” (Lenoble 162). Lenoble critiques Emery’s original assumptions that these vessels were solely used to furnish the afterlife by typologically relating them to similar vessels found under the pyramids at Meroe. This furthers his hypothesis that the tumuli at El-Hobagi are the successors of the kings buried at Meroe. Torok critiques this view of these vessels as primarily mortuary offerings and funerary banquets (Torok 137). He cites Lenoble’s exclusion of the discussion of ‘daily use’ objects in reinforcing his flawed argument. In this sense, it is ironic that Lenoble is a culprit of what he criticizes Emery for doing.

The above example, one of many in the conversation between these two pieces, nicely presents a theme which I thought was discussed nicely in the discussion of Lenoble’s article. Lanoble says:

“I feel reluctant to join any 'End of Meroe' debate as this discussion seems to me rather more philosophical than historical. It is what I try to suggest in some sections of my main paper. You both provide a cultural history, I mean you project slides, you do not project a movie, you do not suggest the way of the evolution and there is nevertheless a constant evolution. For instance when you say ‘The Meroitic Dynasty', we all know that there were more probably several dynasties if not many more during the so called Meroitic millennium. You give a slide, you give a static picture of what should be Meroitic culture which hides its development. You then miss the possibility to explain an important move from the 4th century AD on, which leads to the christianization of the Upper Nile valley.” (Lenoble 184)

I found this passage particularly interesting in light of the frustration we have had the past couple of weeks in working with limited evidence and what scholars have posited and done with it. Many scholars have presented these slides, as Lenoble calls it, because of the lack of evidence. Yet, Lenoble is calling for evolutionary models to be presented. Is this reasonable? Torok’s critique showed the limitations of Lenoble’s work and his agency to force evidence into his evolutionary model. While ‘slides’ are often used to speak for larger cultural/political areas, if we take them only within their appropriate context are they more accurate?