Dongola Reach: A Historical, Geographical and Economic Overview

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1 El-Zuma and Early Makuria in the Dongola Reach—General Information

Ancient Nubia [Fig. 1.1], in contrast to ancient Egypt, does not boast a wealth of documentary evidence to tell us about its history, nor has its archaeological record been as extensively investigated. The earliest information concerning Ancient Nubia is derived from a Pharaonic rock inscription relating to King Djer (according to Walter B. Emery, the name of this king was Jer, whilst William Adams cites two versions of the king's name: Zer or Jer.) of the First Dynasty, found at Jebel El-Sheikh north of Buhen (now exhibited in the Garden of the Sudan National Museum, Khartoum) (Adams 1977, 66–67; Emery 1965, 125).

Interest in Nubian history began to grow at the onset of the 20th century, among archaeologists working in Egypt and Sudan, when George A. Reisner took to the field to conduct the first archaeological survey in southern Lower Nubia prior to the construction of the Aswan Dam. Reisner (1910) designated the unfamiliar archaeological material culture he discovered there as X-Group culture. In the first decade of the 20th century, Leonard Woolley and David Randall-MacIver (1910) inaugurated Meroitic studies in Nubia with their excavation at Karanog. Other excavations at sites of the same culture were also undertaken at Karanog and Gemmai (Bates and Dunham 1927). Further upstream, in the heart of the Meroitic kingdom, John Garstang (1911) started excavating the Royal City and the West Cemetery.

The following decades witnessed a great decline in interest, especially in the so-called post-Meroitic studies. Emery wrote:

Before the building of the original Aswan Dam in 1898 Nubia had received scant attention from the archaeologist. This was because, only a short time before, large parts of the country had been the battleground of the Mahdi's army and the British and Egyptian forces, and because then, as now, Egypt offered to the excavator the possibility of more spectacular discoveries and far richer rewards in objects for private collections and museums. In those days the antiquarian and not the archaeological viewpoint

was still paramount, and it must be admitted that many excavations were conducted with the primary objective of the discovery of *objets d'art*. Therefore Nubia, with its unknown history, held little attraction for the explorer, and although its great temples were visited and admired, its poverty-stricken cemeteries and ruined town sites, so rich in the secrets of the past, were ignored.

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In fact it was not only the ruined town sites that were ignored, as the same fate befell almost all the necropolises of the Meroitic kingdom, including the royal ones (Bonnet and Mahmoud El-Tayeb 1991; Mahmoud El-Tayeb 1994; Garstang 1911; Shinnie 1954).

The aforementioned growing interest in archaeological sites upstream of the Third Nile Cataract is attested by several projects undertaken by various missions during the last decades of the 20th century. In Northern Sudan these included, for instance, Vila's excavations at Aksha (1967) and his survey at the Dal Cataract, as well as Jacquet-Gordon's and Bonnet's work at Tabo (1971), the significant work done by a Swiss mission from Geneva University at Kerma Ancient town (Bonnet and Vallbelle 2014), and the salvage excavation conducted by the French Unit in Khartoum at El-Kadada in the Shendi Reach north of Khartoum (Geus 1982). Accordingly, research on the last chapters of Meroitic culture slowly began to develop, though it was limited to casual finds or salvage interventions, without any specific excavation programmes or planned studies (Emery 1932). To the best of our knowledge, the only exception was the major research programme set up by the French Archaeological Unit attached to the Sudan Antiquities Service, led by Patrice Lenoble, to study the so-called post-Meroitic remains at El-Kadada and other sites of the Shendi Reach on both sides of the Nile (Lenoble 1987).

Since the 1980s numerous salvage interventions have been carried out in Sudan, especially in the central and northern parts of the country, necessitated by dam and road construction projects as well as agricultural and housing schemes. For instance, major surveys were undertaken by Krzysztof A. Grzymski (1987), of the Royal Ontario Museum, in 1986 between El-Debba and

El-Khandag; by Bogdan Żurawski (2003), of the Polish Academy of Sciences and the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology of the University of Warsaw, in the Southern Dongola Reach in 1998; and by an expedition from the Gdańsk Archaeological Museum in 1995 between Shendi and Begrawiya (Paner 1997) and surveys and excavations in the Fourth Cataract region in 1996–2010 (Paner and Borcowski 2005). Also in 1995 a mission from the Sudan Archaeological Research Society conducted excavations at a Meroitic and post-Meroitic cemetery at Gabati in the Shendi Reach (Edwards 1998, 69–82). The Fourth Cataract salvage campaign, conducted by several missions from the international community between 1996 and 2010, yielded some important results despite the campaign's limited timespan.

The results of these excavations, especially the ones at Meroitic and post-Meroitic sites, revealed the archaeological potential of the Dongola Reach in the area between the Third and the Fourth Nile Cataracts. Among the main issues are the question of the continuity and discontinuity of Meroitic culture, the unconvincing use of the term post-Meroitic and the conventional theories on the demise of Meroitic central power. In consequence, more attention was drawn to the Dongola Reach and the heart of the Makurian kingdom. The results of this work, although quite limited, were the first steps towards the launching of the Early Makuria Research Project. This is a comprehensive research programme realized jointly by the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology of the University of Warsaw and the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums in Khartoum, created to study the burial evidence of the period between the 3rd and 7th centuries AD. The main aim of the study is to resolve many ambiguous issues concerning a period of political decline that was followed by economic deterioration and social unrest, which in turn led to the disintegration of the kingdom into a number of independent political entities that became known after their conversion to Christianity.

Inspired by the earlier excavations at Tanqasi (Shinnie 1954), Tabo (Jacquet-Gordon and Bonnet 1971), El-Ghaddar (Mahmoud El-Tayeb 1994), Hammur-Abbassiya (Mahmoud El-Tayeb 2003) and El-Hobagi (Lenoble 2004; Lenoble et al. 1994), the project chose to start in the tumulus field at El-Zuma. The village and the cemetery lie on the right bank of the Nile, about 20 km downstream from Karima and Jebel Barkal (the Holy Mountain and cradle of the Kushite Napatan kingdom) [see Fig. 1.1]. This cemetery had been mistakenly referred to as the “El-Zuma Pyramids” since at least the 19th century, when it was visited and recorded by Karl R. Lepsius (1852). Later investigations at this site were conducted by E.A. Wallis Budge

in 1907 (Budge 1907), then Reisner in 1919 (Reisner 1919a, 1919b) and finally Żurawski in 2003 (Żurawski 2003). None of these were major archaeological missions, and their work was restricted to compiling basic records and writing descriptive accounts. The first season of the planned comprehensive study programme at the El-Zuma cemetery was carried out by a mission from the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw. A thorough reconnaissance revealed an accurate picture of the state of the tumuli. As a result of this survey the tumuli, which are still visible on the ground surface, were divided into three categories. The largest eight mounds, characterized by a conical shape, were classified as type I, while the eleven medium-size, flat-topped mounds were designated as type II, and the nine smallest, flat-topped mounds were classified as type III. Excavation revealed that each of these types has a different substructure. Although since then only two type I tumuli (T.2 and T.5) have been fully excavated, most probably all of them conceal a U-shaped shaft provided with a minimum of two side chambers and an underground tunnel aligned north–south, while type II tumuli have a similar shaft, but without the underground tunnel. The smallest, type III tumuli have a rectangular, vertical shaft provided with a single burial chamber cut into the west wall of the shaft. The burial construction of the three types is quite homogenous, except in three cases: T.11, T.13 and T.16, which are classified as a subtype of type II burials.

Excavation of the 28 tumuli at this cemetery started in 2004/2005 and lasted till 2017 [Fig. 1.2]. However, the end of excavation work did not mark the end of on-site activity. A number of the tombs have been provided with temporary protective covers, since the mission is committed to protect the cemetery field and turning it into an archaeological park. The idea behind the creation of such a park was born during early discussions with members of the local community eager to keep the excavated tombs open to visitors. Thereafter, two designs for the reconstruction of type I and type II burials were prepared. The next consideration was how to raise awareness of cultural heritage in the local community and work on some kind of integration of the ethnic groups inhabiting the wider area. It was the architect Prof. Abdalla Sabbar, who came up with the ready project of building a cultural centre; the plan awaits realization in the near future (see Chapters 9–10 in this volume).

The scarceness of documentary evidence relating to Ancient Nubia has already been stated and its archaeological record has not been examined to the extent it deserves. To better understand the cultural changes and customs pivotal to this study of the El-Zuma necropolis, one should look at a chronological outline and a brief his-

FIGURE 1.2 Topographic plan of the cemetery in El-Zuma
DRAWN BY J. JUCHNIEWICZ, Z. KOWARSKA, S. LENARCZYK

torical overview of Ancient Nubia (see Chapter 1.2 below). The chronology [Fig. 1.3] primarily concerns the territory of the Dongola Reach, in particular the period that followed the demise of the central royal authority of the Meroitic kingdom. Historical records show that during the period between the fall of the kingdom in about AD 350 and the conversion to Christianity during AD 550–600, Meroe was forgotten by the outside world. The end of the 2nd / beginning of the 3rd century AD was a twilight of the days of glory and the Kingdom of Meroe slowly slipped into a dark age culminating in the final demise of central royal authority (Adams 1977: 382–330). The kingdom at its peak of power and prosperity controlled the Nile Valley from Qasr Ibrim in the north as far south as Senar on the Blue Nile and Kosti on the White Nile. Yet, the definite collapse of the once-united state occurred in the mid-4th century AD. Thereafter, the famous kingdom disappeared from the collective memory of the classical world. The disintegration of the Meroitic kingdom coincided with a period of social change and political instability. All this led to the rise of three political entities: Nobadia in the north, occupying Lower Nubia; Makuria, in the Dongola Reach between the Third and Fourth Nile Cataracts; and Alodia, extending from the Fifth Cataract region to the territory of the Blue Nile with its capital at Soba, some 30 km south of Khartoum. The interest of the Mediterranean world in these entities began only when they converted to Christianity in the mid-6th century AD, almost two hundred years after their rise as independent states (Török 1988; Edwards 2004, 182–195; Mahmoud El-Tayeb 2012, 9, 27–40).

Unfortunately, Meroitic culture left no written sources or other documents explaining what happened after the final collapse of central power in Meroe. All that is known is that the once-unified kingdom passed from glory to disintegration. Although research into the ancient past of Lower and Upper Nubia has been ongoing since the early days of the 20th century, little attention has been paid to this later phase of Meroitic culture, particularly in the territory of the Dongola Reach. The first investigations into the last chapter of Meroitic culture came with Shinnie's excavation of the tumuli at Tanqasi in 1953 (Shinnie 1954), which was followed by some more limited fieldwork. By the end of the 20th century far more archaeological projects were underway, specifically at major sites in the region between the Third and Fourth Nile Cataracts. Among these sites, cemetery fields excavated in the Letti Basin, such as El-Ghaddar (Mahmoud El-Tayeb 1994), Hammur-Abbassiya (Mahmoud El-Tayeb 2003), El-Zuma, and Tanqasi (Shinnie 1954), appeared to be the main source of information, further evidence also being dis-

covered at burial grounds in the Fourth Cataract region, best represented by the cemetery of El-Kassinger Bahry (Kołosowska and Mahmoud El-Tayeb 2007). These later excavations shed more light on the period in question, which led to a better understanding of the events that had taken place. One of the most significant results of this work was that it demonstrated a continuity of Meroitic culture at these sites shown to be a process of continuous evolution. This cultural evolution is quite evident in grave construction and mortuary traditions, as well as in pottery and other burial goods. The same phenomenon can be seen at other cemetery sites in Lower Nubia, for instance, Ballaña and Qustul (Emery and Kirwan 1938), or El-Hobagi (Lenoble 2004) in the Shendi Reach, upstream of the Fifth Cataract: nothing new occurred to replace Meroitic culture after the fall of the Kingdom of Meroe. Therefore, the term 'post-Meroitic,' which has been used in relation to this period for over a hundred years, seems to be far less appropriate than 'Terminal Meroitic.'

This study is mainly concerned with the last chapter of Meroitic culture in the Dongola Reach. To date, little is known about the transitional period (in this region) which is designated 'Early Makuria.' The term is considered as more appropriate than 'post-Meroitic' and enables in the meantime a differentiation between it and the later Christian kingdoms of Makuria (Mahmoud El-Tayeb 2012, 12). There has not been much research into this period, and there are few cultural relics and written sources relating to it. The only reliable source of evidence comes from cemetery sites. For about 200 years nothing was known about what had happened after the collapse of the Meroitic kingdom. Yet, sometime around the 6th century AD, historical sources record three political entities in Nubia that had converted to Christianity, mentioning them by name, which means that these states had been formed before the adoption of the Christian faith. One of these states, which occupied the Dongola Reach, was Makuria. Hence, to avoid any confusion in the study of the pre-Christian state it is necessary to introduce a new term—Early Makuria, used in reference to the political state rather than just the historical period.

The Dongola Reach contains several cemeteries of various size: Tabo near Kerma (Jacquet-Gordon and Bonnet 1971), El-Ghaddar north and south (Mahmoud El-Tayeb 1994), El-Kassinger Bahry in the Fourth Cataract region (Kołosowska and El-Tayeb 2007) and Tanqasi (Shinnie 1954) on the left side of the Nile, but so far little comprehensive research has been undertaken on these cemeteries. Close scrutiny of the material culture recovered from excavations conducted in the Dongola Reach revealed that the Terminal Meroitic (or so-called

FIGURE 1.3 General chronological table based on the chronology of Mesolithic and Neolithic Sudan (David and Salvatori 2019, Fig. 2) and the timeline of Kush and Christian Nubia (Emberling and Davis 2019, x–xi; Obłuski 2014, 9). * The inset with the periodization of changes in the burial tradition according to Mahmoud El-Tayeb's (2012, 41–75) periodization

post-Meroitic) period has two phases (see Fig. 1.3). This has been confirmed by the study and analysis of finds from various cemeteries in the Reach and by ^{14}C dates obtained from samples taken by the Gdańsk Archaeological Museum mission from sites in the Fourth Cataract region. The cemetery of El-Kassinger Bahry has provided the best dates. For instance, burial HP45/1 was dated to AD 480–540 (at 95.4 % probability) and burial HP47/3 to AD 130–340 (at 95.4 % probability). The results of radiocarbon dating of material from a long list of sites excavated by the Gdańsk mission within their concession on the Fourth Cataract have not been published as a whole in one place, but are available to researchers.

In this context, the extensively excavated cemetery at El-Zuma has provided significant insight into this controversial period, particularly regarding the evolution of Meroitic culture. There are strong arguments, based on analysis of the material culture, in favour of dating it to the second phase of Early Makuria (AD 450–650).

2 Geography and Economy

The main subject of this study are the results from the excavation of elite tumuli at El-Zuma village, which lies almost in the middle zone of the Dongola Reach. To begin with, it is necessary to throw some light on this important territory and its rich history as a cradle of ancient Nubian civilization. The significant role of this Reach in the Nubian past stems mainly from its geographical location between the Third and Fourth Nile Cataracts. Accordingly, a brief review of the Dongola Reach, its geography and economy is fundamental in understanding the bases on which the potentiality of the region was built (Adams 1981; Barbour 1961; Edwards 1989; Whiteman 1971).

The Dongola Reach is a strategic section of the Sudanese Nile Valley, where important ancient waterways and desert roads leading from north to south and east to west converged. The river here is wide, tranquil, and relatively easily navigable. The Reach was connected with lands to the south-east, south, and west by routes that followed the course of major wadis, providing safe passage for trade caravans through the Bayuda semi-desert to the Shendi Reach (via Wadi Abu Dom), to the south-west steppes of Kordofan (via Wadi Muqaddam and Wadi El-Malik) and to Darfur (via Wadi El-Howar) in the far west (Adams 1981, 7–8; Shinnie 1991). Covering a distance of some 500 km, the Dongola Reach extends from the Third to the Fourth Nile Cataract [see Fig. 1.1]. The Fourth Cataract region is one of the most inhospitable and inaccessible parts of the Nile Valley, where the river has to force its way through

the solid geology of the Basement Complex (Barbour 1961; Whiteman 1971). There are practically no cultivable lands in this area, and so most of its sparse population lives in small villages located on the islands of the Nile and along both banks of the river. However, in the rest of the Dongola Reach downstream from the Fourth Cataract, the river winds its way through the soft rocks of the Nubian Series (Whiteman 1971), forming a broad alluvial valley providing fertile soils ideal for cultivation. As a result, the lands around Karima, Letti, and Kerma have always been far more densely populated.

Up until the 1950s, traditional agriculture in the Dongola Reach involved cultivating the Nile floodplain, both on islands and along the riverbanks within narrow strips of land known locally as *guruf* (sing. *gerif*), and mistakenly referred to as *seluka* land in various publications. In fact, the use of the *seluka* (a digging tool) has never been limited solely to riverbanks, and is seen in areas that rely on natural irrigation provided by sources other than rivers. Similar cultivation methods that did not need any special irrigation system were used in dried-out basins and channels after the annual floodwaters had receded.

An ancient means of mechanically irrigating the lands along the Nile was to use a simple, manually operated water-lifting device known as a *shadoof* or counterpoise lift. Innovation came during the Meroitic period with the introduction of the *saqiya*—a waterwheel that was installed on the river bank and made it possible to irrigate higher grounds located further away from the river, thus enabling wider-scale cultivation.

Although there has been some discussion about past land use in Nubia (Bradley 1992; Edwards 1989; Ahmed 1984), it is undoubtedly a topic that requires further research, particularly in relation to the Meroitic period. It appears that only certain parts of the inundated basins and small islands were cultivated, a technique still employed to this day in some parts of the Letti Basin, whenever floodwaters are sufficiently high. This type of floodwater farming may have been practised in the region prior to the advent of the *saqiya*, and could have been what Adams (1981, 3) had in mind when referring to limited-scale agriculture in the Kerma and Letti Basin. It is widely acknowledged that the *saqiya* played a vital role in the Nubian economy. Its use in the Dongola Reach meant that lands much further away from the river could be made arable, but also that cultivation was no longer restricted exclusively to the winter period. However, exactly when the *saqiya* first appeared in Nubia is unclear. Adams (1977, 346–348) contends that its introduction coincided with the resettlement in the north which began in the 2nd cen-

tury AD, whereas Edwards (1989, 144) believes that the *saqiya* was not introduced until sometime in the 4th century.

The *saqiya* was generally used in conjunction with rivers, but in Nubia a method was devised for using it to raise water from wells (known locally as *matara*), so that not only riverside sites could be irrigated. We know that this combination of *saqiya* and *matara* was common in the Dongola Reach thanks to the 19th-century travel journal written by George Waddington and Barnard Hanbury (1822, 43), who reported that one example still survived in the Kerma Basin: "... three hundred years ago, all the land was cultivated by sakies erected over wells of water found in the ground ... and one such sokie is now in existence at more than half a mile from the river". Arkell (1948, 16) also noted that the *saqiya* was used to draw water from wells during the Meroitic period in the Letti Basin and parts of Wadi El-Khowi. A team from the Polish Academy of Sciences, led by Bogdan Żurawski, recorded a *matara* with very well preserved red brickwork at Selib (near Old Dongola), close to a church site not far from a newly discovered Meroitic settlement that now lies almost a kilometre away from the riverbank (Żurawski et al. 2013). The *matara*-and-*saqiya* system may well have been developed during the Meroitic period in the Dongola Reach, particularly given how suitable the natural environment was, boasting both fertile land and a relatively shallow water table, and the fact that manpower was readily available.

The mention of manpower prompts an issue raised by Adams (1981, 3), who suggested that there was a dearth of Meroitic settlements in the Kerma and Letti Basins. However, new evidence of a significant Meroitic presence in the northern Dongola Reach has come to light at numerous sites. The work of the Swiss mission at Kerma, directed by Charles Bonnet, the Royal Ontario Museum's archaeological reconnaissance project in the Letti Basin, led by Krzysztof Grzymski, and the ongoing Polish excavations at Selib, directed by Żurawski, have all shown that this area was settled during the Meroitic period, and had been continuously occupied since at least the times of Ancient Kerma (Bonnet and Mahmoud El-Tayeb 1991; Bonnet and Valbelle 2004, 2005; Grzymski 1987; Salah Eldin Mohammed Ahmed 1999). Evidence of Meroitic communities was also discovered for the first time at the opposite end of the Reach, in the area around the Fourth Cataract, where a number of cemetery sites were recorded as part of the Hamdab Dam Archaeological Survey Project conducted by the Gdańsk Archaeological Museum mission led by Henryk Paner (Paner and Borowski 2005; Welsby et al. 2005).

Although the scale of traditional agriculture based on the type of floodwater and irrigation farming outlined above must have been quite limited, it was nonetheless sufficient to meet household needs for food and to satisfy local market trade. This is borne out by the economic history of the Reach, which shows that agricultural products were never the mainstay of the region's economy. The wealth amassed by local rulers that enabled them to remain independent of the central authority in Meroe throughout the 3rd and 4th centuries AD was probably based on their control of certain local resources, as well as transit trade—a privilege they enjoyed because of the strategic location of the Dongola Reach. We do not know whether the Early Makurians traded directly with Pharaonic Egypt and beyond, or simply served as intermediaries, and there is very little to indicate the scale of this trade. The few pottery imports from Upper Egypt and Lower Nubia noted in the Reach have been found at burial sites in its central part, such as El-Ghaddar Northern cemetery, Hammur-Abbassiya, El-Zuma and El-Kassinger Bahry (Mahmoud El-Tayeb 1994; Mahmoud El-Tayeb and Kołosowska 2007; Phillips and Mahmoud El-Tayeb 2003). However, the archaeology of this region remains largely uncharted, particularly in terms of the Terminal Meroitic (AD 450–600), making it difficult to draw any conclusions about the extent of trade with other parts of the Nile Valley during this period.

The absence of pasture lands in the Dongola Reach suggests that cattle were not critical to the economy of the region, though limited numbers may have been kept to power the waterwheels and plough the fields associated with them. The most popular sources of meat were small animals such as sheep and goat, but these were not the only food species. It is possible that cattle may have been reared in the neighbouring Bayuda semi-desert, where conditions were more favourable for this type of animal husbandry and better suited to a semi-nomadic lifestyle. This theory is supported by the recent discovery of several Terminal Meroitic (post-Meroitic) settlements located relatively far away from the left bank of the Nile, heading towards the Bayuda. The archaeologists who excavated these sites identified their inhabitants as pastoralists (Wolf and Nowotnick 2005). The ancient subsistence strategy of pastoralism is still pursued by members of the Busharyia tribe around the village of El-Widay in the heart of the Fourth Cataract region, and by the Hawawir and Hassanyia nomads who live near El-Kassinger Bahry, some 20km upstream of Karima. The Bayuda Desert has witnessed considerable human activity throughout Nubian history, and evidence of cattle husbandry having been practised there is provided by the abundant cattle

depictions found on rock outcrops dotted along various routes leading to the Nile.

The continuous exploitation of this desert region from prehistoric times to the present day is further attested by the culturally diverse sites discovered as part of Gdańsk Archaeological Museum's ongoing Bayuda Project. Cemeteries attributable to the Old Kush culture (Kerma culture, 2500–1500 BC) [see Fig. 1.3] are particularly well represented, even though none had previously been noted in this region. Survey work has also led to the identification of Meroitic, Terminal Meroitic (post-Meroitic) and Christian period burial sites in the Bayuda (Paner and Pudło 2010).

3 Historical Overview

Ancient Nubia experienced numerous ups and downs in its long history, not least during the Kushite era, and for three successive periods (Old Kush Phase I, Kerma, 2500–1500 BC / Phase II, Napata, 900–500 BC / Phase III, Meroe, 350 BC–AD 550) the details of this history remain hazy. After Egypt had been unified by King Ahmose of the Eighteenth Dynasty, his successors began to extend the borders of Egypt further southwards, bringing an end to the old Kingdom of Kush (2500–1500 BC), and seizing its capital. Following the Egyptian New Kingdom occupation of Nubia [see Fig. 1.3], local native chieftains laid the foundations for the rise of the Napatan kingdom (900–500 BC) and the might of the Twenty-fifth Dynasty (Morkot 2000, 293–304).

The capital of this new, Middle Kushite, kingdom was Napata, nestling at the foot of the Holy Mountain, Jebel Barkal, in the heart of the Dongola Reach. Gradually, the golden age of the Twenty-fifth Dynasty came to an end, and in the early 6th century BC, Napata fell to the forces of King Psammetik II of the Twenty-sixth Dynasty, after which the Kushite capital was relocated further south to Meroe, in the rainy savannah zone (Morkot 2000, 293–304), and the Kushites were forced to withdraw from Egypt. There has been some debate as to why they chose Meroe as their new political and administrative centre. The Egyptian military campaign against Napata, probably launched in response to an attempted Kushite invasion during the reign of Analamani (623–593 BC), has been put forward as one of the possible reasons why the Kushites moved their capital further south. The accession stele of Aspelta (593–568 BC) tells us that an attack on Egypt was carried out by Analamani (Arkell 1961, 144–145; Macadam 1955, 238–240), but rebuffed by the armies of Psammetik II. Some archaeologists, including Arkell (1961, 144–

146) and Shinnie (1967, 32–33), regard the destruction of royal statues of the Kushite kings Taharqo (690–664 BC), Tanwetamani (664–653 BC), Senkamanisken (643–623 BC), Analamani (623–593 BC) and Aspelta (593–568 BC) as further evidence of a foreign invasion that prompted the relocation of the capital to the relative safety of Meroe.

Reisner believed that Kushite interest in Meroe dated as far back as the reign of Piankhy (Piye 747–716 BC), when a branch of the royal family had been installed there to claim the lands in the south for the king. According to Reisner it was internal family rivalry that led to the destruction of the aforementioned royal statues (Reisner 1919a). Excavations at Dokki Gel, Kerma, and Dangeil [see Fig. 1.1] revealed evidence of similar incidents involving the smashing of statues portraying some of the same kings (Anderson and Salah eldin Mohamed Ahmed 2009; Bonnet and Valbelle 2004, 109–113). The discoveries at Dangeil are somewhat surprising given that there are no records of Egyptian incursion into Nubia beyond Kurgus in the Abu-Hamed Reach, where kings Thutmose I and Thutmose III of the Eighteenth Dynasty left rock inscriptions at Hagar El-Merwa. The fact that two deliberately broken statues of Late Meroitic date were found in the same context as the earlier sculptures at Dangeil (Anderson and Salah eldin Mohamed Ahmed 2009, 83–84, Pls. 9, 10) suggests that it may not have been royal family enmity but internal conflict between the eastern desert tribes that led to their destruction. This theory brings us back to the subject of other possible reasons for the relocation of the Kushite capital to Meroe.

A great deal of what we know about the events of this period comes from historical inscriptions. They attest to the fact that hostilities existed between the Kushite kings and the tribes of the eastern and western deserts for some 300 years. The earliest recorded mention of this turbulent relationship is provided by an inscription of King Analamani (623–593 BC), discovered in Taharqo's temple at Kawa. Analamani's stele (Kawa VIII) includes a passage that tells of the king's coronation journey along the Nile from Meroe to Napata and thence on to Kawa (Eide et al. 1994, 216–224). It also recounts that Analamani mounted an armed expedition against the western desert tribes in retaliation for raids on Kawa and other neighbouring settlements (Eide et al. 1994, 216–228; Nachtigal 1889, 141, 161). Another inscription from Kawa records that King Amaninete-yerike (431–405 BC) quashed several tribes inhabiting the northern lands of the 'island of Meroe' (Eide et al. 1996, 400–420), and information along the same lines appears in an inscription of Harsiotef (404–369 BC) found at Jebel Barkal (Eide et al. 1996, 457–464). The long-lasting conflict between the Kushites and vari-

ous desert tribes is also attested by the latest inscription from Jebel Barkal, which records that King Nastasen (335–315 BC) (Eide et al. 1996, 467–500) waged war against these nomadic groups as well as other invaders from the north (Eide et al. 1994, 1996). Was it perhaps the threat posed by these tribal hostilities that led to the capital being transferred to Meroe? In all likelihood, they were probably not the principal reason, although the disruption they caused to the caravan trade doubtless had a damaging effect on the Kushite economy. Arkell (1961, 148) and Tylecote (1982, 29) suggested that radical climate change may also have undermined the kingdom's economic stability. The aforementioned inscription (No. IX) of King Amaninete-*yerike*, in which we learn that as part of the restoration work he initiated at Kawa, windblown sand was cleared away from the approach to the temple, hints at the fact that the climate was changing in the Dongola Reach. Evidence recorded during the Fourth Cataract salvage campaign also supports the idea of regional climate change, given that nearly all of the Napatan to Islamic period burial sites recorded in the region were found in low-lying areas and in the dried-up beds of ancient branches of the Nile, in stark contrast to the locations used for earlier cemeteries of the Old Kush culture (Kerma period). These changes in climate probably led to desert encroachment and consequent loss of grazing land across the whole of the Dongola Reach. It is probable that all of the issues outlined above (Egyptian aggression, tribal raids, economic instability and climate change) were contributory factors in deciding to relocate the capital to Meroe.

When exactly this relocation took place remains a mystery. It is widely agreed that the Meroitic period, which was the final phase of Kushite rule, lasted from the 4th century BC to the 6th century AD. Thus, when King Nastasen died in around 308 BC (by Reisner's calculations), Napata was no longer the political capital of the kingdom, though this does not clarify when the move to Meroe was made. Nastasen had resided at Meroe despite being the last of the Kushite kings to be buried at Nuri (Eide et al. 1996, 471–501). Three of Nastasen's successors were buried at Jebel Barkal, whilst the final resting place of a further two is unknown. There is also no information about whether their royal courts had been at Napata or Meroe. Arkamani (Ergamenes) (295–275 BC) (Shinnie 1996, 118), whose tomb was found at the Begrawiya South Cemetery (Shinnie 1996, 104), was the first king to be buried at Meroe. Reisner believed that the capital had been transferred to the south in 453 BC, during the reign of Malowiebamani (463–435 BC), and that all subsequent Kushite kings had resided at Meroe (Reisner 1919b). In contrast, Dunham initially estimated that the relocation had taken place in the

mid-6th century BC, following the death of King Malo-*naqen*, though he later revised this date based on evidence from excavations at the royal cemeteries of El-Kurru and Nuri, ultimately concluding that the move had been made around 538 BC (Dunham 1947; Smith 1955, 21–22). The earliest written evidence of the capital having been moved is provided by the coronation stele of King Amaninete-*yerike* (Kawa IX), which tells us that the king made a journey from his residence in Meroe to Napata, before proceeding further downstream to Kawa and Pnubs in the northern Dongola Reach (Eide et al. 1996, 400–428).

The city of Meroe stood on the right bank of the Nile, in a strategic location between the Fifth and Sixth Cataracts. The terrain surrounding the new capital was quite unlike that around Napata, for Meroe lay in the lush savannah lands at the western end of the Butana steppe [see Fig. 1.1]. The conditions provided by this fertile landscape, fed by three major wadis (El-Hawad, El-Awlib and Wadi El-Awateb), were excellent both for raising livestock and growing crops, thus ensuring a reliable supply of food for the local population. Standing at the crossroads of numerous important caravan trails, the city was able to control several key trade routes: leading from south to north, bringing exotic goods from tropical Africa to Egypt; from west to east via the Red Sea Mountains and onward to the gold mines at Wadi El-Allaqi and Wadi Gabgaba; and across the Bayuda semi-desert, passing through Napata and proceeding further north to Kawa and beyond (Shinnie 1991).

Both Reisner and Dunham believed that a branch of the Kushite royal dynasty had been installed at Meroe before it was made the kingdom's new administrative centre (Dunham 1947, 7–8; Reisner 1923a, 34), indicating that the Kushites were conscious of the economic advantages and significance of the southern lands between the Nile and the Atbara. Reisner's work at the Begrawiya South Cemetery provided evidence of the fact that Meroe had been founded long before it became the Kushite capital. The earliest graves excavated at this burial ground were dated to the reign of Piankhy, and Reisner argued that this site had served as a cemetery for the Napatan officials who managed the southern region of the kingdom on behalf of the Napatan kings (1923a, 34–35). The results of Garstang's excavations at Meroe led Dunham (1947) to conclude that Taharqo had erected at least one building there. Even though this theory was rejected by Smith (1955, 21), evidence from a Napatan temple at Dangeil, where a number of broken statues of Kushite kings (including one of Taharqo) were found, suggests that there had been a Kushite presence upstream of the Fifth Cataract (Anderson and Salah eldin Mohamed Ahmed 2009, 79–82).

Napata appears to have ceased functioning as the political centre of Kushite power sometime in the 4th century BC, when its royal cemetery also witnessed the last burial of a Kushite king (Nastasen). However, the temple complex surrounding Jebel Barkal remained the kingdom's principal religious centre. The subsequent centuries saw the Kingdom of Meroe thrive and expand, ultimately gaining control of an area stretching from Qasr Ibrim in the north as far south as Sennar and Kosti on the Blue and White Niles respectively, and probably extending westward into Kordofan (Mahmoud El-Tayeb 2002). The kingdom flourished both culturally and politically, its heyday falling between the 1st century BC and the 1st century AD. The archaeological record of this period shows that there were numerous developments in material culture, most of them rooted in local tradition, though with evident influences from Greco-Roman Egypt.

Iron production was central to the prosperity of the Meroitic kingdom, and the vast mounds of iron slag found at Meroe attest to large-scale iron-smelting operations. It has even been postulated that ironworking know-how spread from Meroe to all parts of sub-Saharan Africa (Humphris, Bussert, et al. 2018; Humphris, Charlton, et al. 2018; Humphris and Scheibner 2017). The subject of the iron industry in Meroe has received considerable attention since the first archaeological evidence of it was discovered in the early 1900s. However, a number of key issues, such as where this metallurgical technology came from and how it reached Meroe, have not yet been resolved.

The emergence of Meroitic writing was a major cultural milestone of this period. There has been much debate about the origins of the Meroitic language, which have variously been linked to Beja, Nubian, and other groups of the Southern Blue Nile (Shinnie 1967, 132), but both this question and that of when Meroitic first appeared in written form remain unanswered (Rilly and de Voogt 2012). An inscription concerning Queen Shanakdakhete, dated to the 2nd century BC (180–170 BC), and found in a temple at Naga, provides the earliest known example of written Meroitic (Eide et al. 1996, 660–662; Harkless 2006, 146). At the other end of the scale, the last inscriptions in Meroitic hieroglyphs include the name of King Tarekeniwal (c. AD 155–170), recorded on the pylon of his pyramid (Beg. 19) (Eide et al. 1998, 939), and one relating to King Yesbokheamani (AD 283–300) (Hollof 2003), inscribed on a lion statue at Qasr Ibrim in Lower Nubia. The only example of Meroitic writing dating from the Terminal Meroitic (post-Meroitic) period was recorded on a bronze bowl (HBG III/1/135) recovered from tumulus III at El-Hobagi, engraved with the Meroitic title *Qore*, meaning 'king' (Lenoble 1999, 179–180, 197, Fig. 29; Len-

oble and Nigm ed Din Mohammed Sharif 1992, 634–635). Commenting on the late date of the bowl from El-Hobagi, Welsby (1996, 191) made the entirely credible observation that "if the bowl was not being reused, and in the light of the associated Kushite funerary practices this seems unlikely, it indicates that this system of writing continued into the post-pyramidal age."

The period between the 3rd century BC and 1st century AD was the high point of a vibrant Meroitic cultural renaissance. Egyptian traditions had taken root in Nubia during the New Kingdom occupation, and by the time of the Twenty-fifth Dynasty, Amon, the chief deity of the Egyptian pantheon, had also become the principal god of the Kushite state, and the funerary cult of Isis, Osiris and Horus had been fully adopted and continued to be practised until the end of the Meroitic period (Shinnie 1967, 141–146; Welsby 1996, 77–79). However, a local religious development occurred in the 3rd century BC, after the capital had been moved to Meroe, with the appearance of a new Meroitic god named Apedemak. Temples dedicated to this new deity were raised at Musawwarat es-Sufra and Naga. The reliefs decorating these buildings often depicted Apedemak as a lion-headed warrior god clutching a bow and quiver in his right hand, on which he wore a thumb-ring. In time, Apedemak supplanted Amon as the most important god of the Meroites (Shinnie 1967, 141–146; Welsby 1996, 77–79).

Egyptian religious and artistic influences are very evident in early Napatan relief and figurative sculpture. Despite the fact that these Egyptian traditions were upheld throughout the Meroitic period, they were enriched by the addition of various indigenous motifs as well as elements of Hellenistic and Roman art. Relief decoration adorning offering tables, pyramid chapels and temples provides a multitude of valuable insights into various aspects of Meroitic society, culture, and religious beliefs (Shinnie 1967, 99–114; Welsby 1996, 177–182).

Welsby has proposed that Meroitic art can be divided into five groups, each of which displays stylistic traits inspired by different cultural influences. The first group exhibits a continuation of earlier Kushite traditions; the second is characterized by a revival of Egyptian forms, the third by the introduction of new traits regarded as Meroitic, the fourth by the appearance of Hellenistic trends, and the fifth by the addition of features inspired by the Roman artistic canon (Welsby 1996, 181). Both Meroitic reliefs and sculptures in the round are marked by a notable degree of realism and creativity that had never been seen during the Napatan period. For example, the Meroitic version of the *Ba* statue, an ancient Egyptian symbolic representation of the human soul (Bun-

son 2002, 62), took on a far more human form than its bird-like Pharaonic counterpart. In another innovative twist, Meroitic portrayals of kings and princes waging war against their enemies sometimes included a lion or a hound at the ruler's side. Various sculpted images of elephants—animals which the Meroites trained and used in battle as well as royal ceremonies—also frequently feature in the Meroitic repertoire. Two particularly interesting reliefs were discovered at the Meroitic temple complex in Awlib. One of them comprises multiple representations of a seated woman, probably the Egyptian goddess Isis, holding a *Was* sceptre (symbol of power and domination), whilst the other depicts the Egyptian god Horus, whose traditional falcon head has been replaced with a solar disc (Pinch 2011, 181, 193, 231). The depiction of folds on the neck of this figure is a Meroitic characteristic that was probably of African origin (Borowski and Paner 2005, 49–51, Fig. 7; Sander 2010, 155, Fig. 5), and inspiration from local African sources is clearly reflected in the new trends evident in Meroitic art.

A comprehensive study of the pottery recovered from El-Zuma, detailing its evolution from the Early Meroitic to the end of Phase II of the Terminal Meroitic period (late post-Meroitic, AD 450–600) is presented in Volume II of this monograph, therefore only a brief synopsis of the most distinctive characteristics of the pottery of this period is given below. The Egyptian conquest of Nubia during the New Kingdom period not only brought about the demise of the first known African kingdom and its capital at Kerma, but also led to the abandonment of indigenous pottery-making practices. Subsequently, early Napatan pottery became so strongly inspired by New Kingdom wares that it is often difficult to tell the two apart. Conversely, it seems that Napatan ceramics had barely any influence on Early Meroitic pottery.

There is just as much mystery about the origins of Meroitic pottery production as there is concerning the origins of Meroe itself and various other aspects of Kushite culture. Early Meroitic handmade black pottery is notable for an original ware inspired by the Neolithic ceramic tradition (David and Salvatori 2019, 4–6). This black ware was decorated using a variety of impressed dot motifs, often forming geometrical patterns. The African savannah also served as a source of inspiration for designs used on these vessels (see also Volume II, Chapter 2).

A wide range of wheel-made painted pottery, varying in size and form from small cups and bowls to large bottles and beer jars, was produced during the Classic Meroitic period (3rd century BC–2nd century AD). These vessels are distinctively decorated with intricate patterns made up of impressed dot motifs, as well as depictions of religious

ceremonies and designs inspired by the natural world. Adams (1977, 368) observed that Classic Meroitic painted pottery “gives the appearance of having sprung up full-blown”; however, the techniques used in its production and the forms of the vessels themselves clearly point to Ptolemaic and Roman influences. Egyptian-inspired decoration on painted pottery is limited primarily to religious motifs of Pharaonic Egypt, such as the uraeus, ankh symbol, and lotus flower design (Adams 1986, 13–14; Edwards 1998, 170–173; Shinnie 1967, 114–122; Welsby 1996, 163–168).

The golden age of Meroe came during the Classic period, when the kingdom stretched from the First Cataract region in the north, down to the areas around Senar on the Blue Nile and Kosti on the White Nile in the south. Evidence from excavations in Hillat Saeed, east of Kawa (Geus 1984, 73), suggests that the western periphery of the Meroitic kingdom was marked by the eastern bank of the White Nile, which divided the Meroitic state from the extensive lands of Kordofan. Archaeological remains, ranging from a handful of artefacts to entire sites, also bear witness to the spread and scale of Meroitic influence in the west (Arkell 1961, 136–137; Newbold 1924, 79; Seligman 1916; Wainwright 1947, 11–18).

The late 2nd and early 3rd centuries AD marked the beginning of the end for the Meroitic kingdom, which gradually spiralled into a decline that culminated in the mid-4th century AD with the collapse of the central royal authority in Meroe. Although many scholars, among them Kirwan (1960b), Hintze (1959, 1967), Arkell (1961) and Shinnie (1955, 1967; Mahmoud El-Tayeb 2002), have argued that the fall of Meroe came as a sudden blow inflicted either by King Ezana of Axum or by the Noba, in reality Meroitic decline was a process that played out over a lengthy period of time, precipitated by economic and political turmoil. Adams highlighted the three major economic factors involved in this process: the rapid depletion in wealth of Egypt, which had been the main consumer of Nubian exports; the threat posed by desert nomads, whose increased mobility and military strength posed a serious threat to trade along the lengthy and exposed caravan route linking Meroe with Egypt; the fact that by the beginning of the Christian era, Kush no longer held a monopoly on civilization and trade in the African interior (Adams 1977, 383–390).

The diverse ethnic composition of Meroitic society also had an impact on the fortunes of the kingdom. As pointed out elsewhere, it is highly unlikely that a state covering an expanse extending from Qasr Ibrim in the north to Roseires in the south, and from the foot of the Abyssinian plateau in the east to the banks of the White Nile in the

west, would have been peopled by a single ethnic group (Mahmoud El-Tayeb 2002, 35). Artefacts found at sites in Sennar District and Hillat Saeed near Kawa (ancient Alis—أليس) demonstrate that Meroitic culture did reach these regions of the Blue and White Niles. However, so far, none of the archaeological evidence tells us whether these sites were inhabited by Meroites or by other groups who were influenced by them.

Although we do not know the details of its societal composition, the population of the Meroitic kingdom was most probably made up of at least two major groups and a number of minor ones. Authority and land was concentrated in the hands of the dominant group, the Meroitic Kushites, who had founded the kingdom and who maintained an iron grip on trade, particularly at the height of Meroe's heyday. The other main group consisted of Noba tribes, though exactly when they first settled within the Meroitic realm is not known. The earliest information about these tribes comes from the Greek historian Eratosthenes (3rd century BC), as quoted by Strabo (1st century BC/1st century AD) in Book XVII, Chapter 1.2 of his *Geography* (Eide et al. 1998, 818–835). According to Eratosthenes, the Noba were a populous tribe who lived on the left side of the Nile, distributed among several kingdoms. In a later source, the Byzantine historian Procopius (AD 490–562) reported that Noba occupation extended as far as the Kharga Oasis (Török 1988), and that the Noba tribes had come to Lower Nubia in the 3rd century AD at the invitation of Diocletian, who hoped that they would protect the Roman Empire's southern frontier from incursions by the Eastern Desert Blemmyes. A quite different picture is presented by an inscription of King Ezana (DAE11), which relates that the Noba invaded the Nile Valley during the 4th century AD (see the revised German translation in Littmann 1950 and the English translation of the same revised German translation in Kirwan 1960a). Yet another theory contends that Noba tribes had already infiltrated parts of the Meroitic Nile Valley at an earlier date. Trimingham (1949, 36) recounts that this premise was based on linguistic analysis carried out by Ernst Zyhlarz, who thought that the Nubian language had been introduced into the Nile Valley from southern Kordofan by the Nuba in the 3rd century BC, and that if this had been the case, then Nubians and Meroites must have co-existed in the island of Meroe.

In addition to these two main groups, the Meroitic kingdom may also have been inhabited by other ethnic minorities, who gradually gained a degree of autonomy, establishing something akin to local chiefdoms by the late 1st century AD. Kirwan offers an example of this having been

the scenario in the northern regions when describing the kingdom's progressive demise: "... the ending of Meroitic sovereignty appears not to have been uniform in either time or place. Archaeological evidence, for example, from such sites as Kawa and Sanam between the Third and Fifth Cataract suggests that Meroe may have lost control over much if not all of the Nile Valley well before the end of Meroe's royal dynasty and the final disintegration of the kingdom in the fourth century AD" (Török 1988, 9). An account in Seneca's *Naturales quaestiones* (VI 8, 3) (Eide et al. 1998, 891–894) suggests that the situation upstream of the Sixth Cataract may have been similar to that encountered in the north. The relevant passage relates that the Roman emperor Nero sent a group of legionnaires to explore the source of the Nile in about AD 65, mentioning that the men were helped in their mission by the Meroitic king, who furnished them with letters of introduction to tribal chieftains south of Meroe, so that they were able to reach as far as the Sudd region, located near the confluence of the White Nile and the Sobat (Barbour 1961). Thus, the Meroitic kingdom was clearly a socially differentiated, multi-ethnic society (Kirwan 1957a).

The final period of Meroitic history is dogged by the contentious issue of King Ezana's campaign against Meroe and its putative role in the fall of the kingdom. The idea that the Axumites had invaded Meroe is based on the interpretation of a mid-4th century AD inscription of King Ezana (DAE11) (Kaplan 1982). This inscription is of considerable significance as there is very little concrete evidence concerning the demise of Meroe, which has been a keenly debated topic ever since Reisner's early 20th-century excavations of the royal cemeteries at Begrawiya, and the publication of his chronology of royal burials (Dunham 1957; Reisner 1923b, 34–79). Reisner believed that the collapse of the Meroitic kingdom had taken place in the mid-4th century AD, an opinion shared by other scholars, such as Haycock (1967) and Hintze (1967). In contrast, Monneret de Villard dated this event to the late 3rd or early 4th century. Given the conflicting views about when and how the Kingdom of Meroe came to an end, it is worth re-examining the potential evidence offered by the aforementioned inscription. The text of DAE11 gives Ezana's reasons for his campaign: "... Through the might of the Lord of All I took the field against the Noba, when the people of the Noba revolted, when they boasted and He will not cross over the Takkaze ...". Thus, the Axumite offensive was launched in response to the rebellion of a Noba tribe who broke their oath to the king and "did violence" on multiple occasions to their neighbours, actions which ultimately resulted in Ezana's forces slaying some

of the Noba and taking others captive, before going on to mete out similar punishment to another enemy “at the junction of the rivers Seda and Takkaze.”

But who were these Noba? And where exactly was the confluence of the Takkaze and the Seda, where the inscription goes on to tell us that Ezana also erected a throne? Was this in fact a reference to the place where the Atbara joins the Nile? The general consensus is that the Noba referred to in this inscription were a barbarian people, identified as the Noba tribe of Kordofan, who it is thought invaded the Nile Valley long before the Axumite campaign, and thus instigated the collapse of the Meroitic kingdom. However, Peter Behrens (1986) has put forward a number of arguments that undermine this long-held belief.

Kirwan (1960a) and Hintze (1967, 2000, 52) were unanimous in identifying Alwa (which, according to the inscription, was captured by the Axumites) as the city of Meroe. Although the general perception of the Noba is that they were poor, primitive nomads, the image that emerges of them from the Ezana inscription is that of a distinctly more sophisticated society. It records that the Noba had temples, and owned gold, iron, copper, and bronze, as well as cattle and stocks of crops including cotton, millet, and corn. It also tells us that they had towns of masonry and of straw (Török 1988). Far from being the hallmarks of barbarian nomads, all of these details point to a wealthy, civilized, and sedentary population. The term “towns of straw” was erroneously regarded as an indication of impoverished communities, when in reality settlements of this type simply reflected local conditions and indigenous building traditions. They were perfectly suited to the climate and natural environment that still prevails in this part of Africa, and were not indicative of their inhabitants’ material or social status.

Behrens attempts to untangle the sometimes contradictory statements made in the inscription. The tribes that had been beleaguered by the Noba, and in whose defence Ezana launched his campaign, were the Mangurto, Khasa, and Barya. To this day, the latter two tribes continue to dwell in the borderlands between Ethiopia, Eritrea, and eastern Sudan (Behrens 1986). Unlike Hintze (1967, 79, 83–84), who believed that the Axumite military action had been centred around the southern Blue Nile and the Butana steppe, Behrens contends that it appears to have been “confined to Ethiopia proper” (Behrens 1986, 123–124). Based on the premise that the campaign had not been directed against Meroe, and that it had taken place within the territory of Ethiopia, he also concludes that Ezana’s throne may well have been located at the confluence of the lower Takkaze (also known as the Settite) and the Atbara, at the foot of the Ethiopian highlands, and not, as has

traditionally been thought, at the point where the Atbara joins the Nile (Behrens 1986, 123).

Another widely accepted interpretation concerning the Ezana stele has been brought into doubt by Marianne Bechhaus-Gerst (1991), who questions the identification of the “Kasu” mentioned in the inscription. Pointing out that Ezana calls himself king of Kasu, but also fights against a people of the same name and takes them prisoner, Bechhaus-Gerst wonders why it has always been assumed that Ezana is referring to the Meroites in this passage, especially given that there is absolutely no allusion to Meroe anywhere in the inscription. She goes on to remark that if the confluence of the Takkaze and the Atbara is treated as a reliable identification of Kasu’s location, then the idea that the Kasu and the Meroites are one and the same becomes all the more improbable. “They might as well be identified with the Kusha/Kersa/Kursa/Kursi (all alternative readings) mentioned by Arab geographers like Ibn Hawqal as living one month’s journey away along the Nile from Dongola” (Bechhaus-Gerst 1991, 20; Vantini 1975, 163). In her discussion, Bechhaus-Gerst also examines various other ethnic, linguistic, and geographical issues raised by the Ezana inscription, including the identity and place of origin of the Noba rebels referred to therein, concluding that they were of Ethiopian origin, which tallies with the inferences made by Behrens (Bechhaus-Gerst 1991, 17–25).

Uncertainty also surrounds the identity of a group of people referred to in the inscription as “the Red Noba,” who were attacked by Ezana’s troops, some being killed and others being taken into captivity. Based on an Old Abyssinian graffito on one of the walls of Temple T at Kawa, and on archaeological evidence indicating that fire had ravaged the Kawa and Sanam temples, Kirwan (1957b, 37–41, 1960b, 169) conjectured that the enigmatic “territory of the Red Noba” was synonymous with the Kawa–Dongola region. However, neither piece of evidence convincingly supports this claim.

As previously mentioned, the Kingdom of Meroe appears to have entered a phase of decline in the late 2nd/early 3rd century AD. The discovery of contemporaneous handmade and wheel-thrown pottery in graves excavated at El-Kadada in the Shendi Reach (Geus and Lenoble 1985), hence at the heart of the Meroitic state, provided the first ever indications that a transitional period had existed between the Late and Terminal Meroitic (post-Meroitic) periods (Edwards 2011, 509–512; Geus and Lenoble 1985).

Further evidence has come to light in the Dongola Reach, due in no small part to the results of the Fourth Cataract salvage campaign, which has contributed sig-

nificantly to our knowledge of the period in question. The archaeology of the Fourth Cataract reveals the process of cultural evolution that took place throughout the course of Meroitic history, as reflected in the changing burial customs and grave types from the Early Meroitic through the late and transitional phases, culminating in the Terminal Meroitic (post-Meroitic) period. The theory that the appearance of handmade pottery in non-elite graves points to ethnic change seems entirely unfounded. Regionalism appears to have been a major factor in the emergence of a diverse range of Early Meroitic burial traditions, in which the deposition of grave goods did not follow a uniform pattern. Several undisturbed Meroitic burials of the 3rd century BC excavated in the Fourth Cataract area contained no burial goods at all; however, surface pottery scatters around these graves suggest that this is where the offerings had been deposited, though their highly fragmented nature made it difficult to say what vessels they represented (Mahmoud El-Tayeb and Kołosowska 2005, 62–66). In contrast, the excavation of Early Meroitic burials at two cemeteries in Central Sudan—at El-Ahamda (Mahmoud El-Tayeb and Gar El-Nabi 1998) north of Khartoum, and Gabati north of Meroe in the Shendi region (Edwards 1998)—revealed that they not only contained grave goods, but that these included both wheel- and handmade pottery, large handmade beer jars among them (Edwards 1998, 142–177; Mahmoud El-Tayeb and Gar El-Nabi 1998). Notably, large beer jars were also recovered from the store-rooms of the Meroitic royal residence at Wad Ban Naga, located at the mouth of the Wadi El-Awateb (Vercoutter 1962, 291, Pl. xxc). What we can conclude from these discoveries is that, contrary to long-held archaeological opinion, the production of handmade vessels, specifically large beer jars, began in the Meroitic period. This production process continued to develop until the late phase of the Terminal Meroitic period (450–550 AD) due to cultural rather than ethnic changes (see Volume II, Chapters 2 and 6).

The decline and ultimate disintegration of the Meroitic state was brought about by the economic and political problems that engulfed the kingdom in its latter stages. The collapse of central power triggered the breakdown of all other institutions and industries connected to it; therefore, the disappearance of wheel-made pottery production in the Meroitic heartland should be linked to the upheavals affecting the royal court, rather than surmising that the appearance of handmade pottery marked the arrival of a new ethnic group to the Nile Valley. Archaeological evidence demonstrates that the turmoil in the south of the kingdom did not affect its northern territories, as

both regions had already embarked on a process of transformation that would lead to them becoming independent political entities.

Unlike the southern and central parts of the Meroitic realm in the Dongola Reach and Lower Nubia (see Meroitic sites in Lower Nubia; Adams 1977, Fig. xx), there does not appear to have been a royal monopoly on the manufacture of wheel-thrown pottery in the north. This prompts a number of questions concerning the end of the Kingdom of Meroe and the issue of cultural continuity and discontinuity. It seems that previous attempts at analysing the demise of Meroitic civilization, which dominated the culture of the Middle Nile Valley for over a thousand years (450 BC–AD 600), relied on a very limited pool of evidence. The reconstruction of events set out by Reisner, and subsequently by Kirwan, Arkell, Hintze, Shinnie, and others, was in each case centred around two perceived facts: King Ezana's military campaign and the acts of aggression perpetrated by people of an inferior culture from the south-west. Given how much more we now know about the Terminal Meroitic (post-Meroitic) period, it is high time to revise and reject these earlier theories. Most of the archaeological evidence analysed to date has come from cemetery sites, presenting an opportunity to seek out valuable insights into the origins of numerous cultural features relating to burials and their attendant rites and rituals. It is the quest for information about these origins that has given rise to several decades' worth of discussions on continuity and discontinuity between the Meroitic and so-called post-Meroitic periods. If we give credence to the idea that Meroe was invaded by a foreign ethnic group, or groups, who proceeded to overrun the entire kingdom, becoming the dominant cultural presence in the Nile Valley for around 200 years, we must ask ourselves what culture these people brought with them, and what impact did it have. Examining the available archaeological evidence shows that all of the burial practices witnessed in 'post-Meroitic' (i.e. Terminal Meroitic) graves are rooted in traditions dating from the Meroitic and Late Meroitic or even earlier periods (see Chapter 4, this volume, and Volume II, Chapters 2 and 6). In terms of grave types, we know that tumulus burials had been used in Nubia since the early days of Kushite culture (Welsby 1996). Pyramid chapels and temples, which had been a feature of earlier Meroitic periods, were also noted in the Terminal Meroitic, as was the custom of depositing weapons in graves, illustrated by discoveries of swords, spears, bows, metal arrows, and stone archers's thumb rings, variously interpreted as symbols of military power or the insignia of elite or royal individuals (Mahmoud El-Tayeb 2012, 76–84). Some religious practices appear to have endured up to

the end of the Meroitic period, among them the libation rite associated with the veneration of the Pharaonic goddess Isis (Hart 2005, 79–83). A particularly interesting example of a bronze libation bowl (HBG III/1/135) engraved with the word *Qore* (i.e. 'king') in Meroitic hieroglyphs was discovered at El-Hobagi. This word survived into the early 20th century in an Arabic term used by certain Butana tribes (e.g. the Shukriya). It took the Arabic form *كبر* (*Keyr*), meaning chief or *Mekk* (Lenoble 2018, 85–86).

Analysing archaeological assemblages from sites in the Shendi region—El-Kadada (Lenoble 1987; Lenoble and Nigm ed Din Mohammed Sharif 1992), Jebel Makbour, El-Sheiteb (Lenoble 1999) and El-Hobagi (Lenoble 2004)—and comparing them with finds from various other Meroitic sites, Patrice Lenoble concluded that in all probability there had been “continuous evolution over the 4th and 5th centuries AD, leading the same Nilotic people from one political system to another, from the single Meroitic Empire to the three Christian kingdoms of the 6th century” (see also Shinnie and Robertson 1993; Török 1999).

4 El-Zuma Today

A few words about the modern village of El-Zuma might be of interest to the general reader. The site comprises three parts: El-Zuma Gubli (قبلي South), El-Zuma Wasat (وسط Centre), and El-Zuma Bähry (بحري North). Notably, the inhabitants of this region between Abu-Hamad and El-Debba perceive the River Nile as running due north, while its geographic orientation is from north-east to south-west. Thus, the names of the three parts of the village mentioned above are based on the local understanding of the river's direction and not on true geographic directions. El-Zuma Gubli seems to be the oldest part, mentioned by Lepsius in the mid-19th century. “Kalat An Negil” (Castle of Negil) is the name of the castle ruins which were recorded by Lepsius, who associated the castle with an old king called Negil (Lepsius 1852, 248). Nowadays the name is pronounced Karat-Negil or Karadegil. Lepsius, cited by Budge, states that the front walls were “only destroyed and thrown down about fifty or sixty years ago, i.e. about 1780, when the inhabitants of Zûma settled there” (Budge 1907, 129). Today El-Zuma Gubli has one primary school for girls and boys, one cultural club and two kindergartens. The south-west side of El-Zuma Gubli is occupied by the ancient cemetery which constitutes the subject of this study. To safeguard the cemetery, a tourist police station has been located nearby.

The part of the village known as El-Zuma Bahry actually lies downstream, due south-west of the other two parts. Here also there is one primary school for both girls and boys, as well as three kindergartens and one Quran school for children. It also has its own cultural and social club. The north-east side of the village is occupied by the main police station and a central market that serves all three parts of El-Zuma two days a week.

The local authorities estimate that since the 1960s the population of El-Zuma has risen to about 1,200 (there are no accurate census records), so the need for various social and administrative services in addition to educational institutions has grown, leading to the development of the central part of the village, El-Zuma Wasat, to meet these needs. Two primary schools, one for girls and the other for boys, were opened, as well as two co-educational secondary schools. In the last three decades two universities have opened branches at El-Zuma Wasat. These are Omdurman Islamic University and Sudan Open University. Apart from these educational institutions, one central hospital is based here. Sports events and both cultural and social activities are organized by members of the El-Zuma Sport, Cultural and Social Club.

At present all three parts of El-Zuma village are growing rapidly. El-Zuma is inhabited mainly by members of the Shaiggyia tribe, with some Hassanyia and Hawawir newcomers (both originally nomadic tribes), who settled there in the mid-20th century, thus turning it into a multi-ethnic village.

Historically, the inhabitants of El-Zuma have depended on traditional agriculture as their main source of economy, as they have extensive fertile lands and suitable conditions for cultivation on some islands in the Nile.