CHAPTER TWO

MEROË AS A PROBLEM OF TWENTY-FIFTH DYNASTY HISTORY

In popular usage, an origin is a beginning which explains—worse still, a beginning which is a complete explanation; there lies the ambiguity, and there the danger!

Marc Bloch, *The Historian’s Craft*

The recent publication of the excavation records of both John Garstang and the late Peter Shinnie, as well as the ongoing horizontal clearance of Temple M 260 by the Khartoum-Toronto mission, have clarified greatly the role which Meroë played in antiquity as a cultic site of the god Amun. Yet for historians and archaeologists of the past two centuries, Meroë has also served as a locus for veneration of a rather different kind—devoted to what the *Annales* historian Marc Bloch once termed “the Idol of Origins.” More than any other Sudanese site, Meroë has been uniquely associated with questions of cultural and dynastic origin. This has proven particularly true for the history of Meroë during the Twenty-Fifth Dynasty and the reign of Taharqo specifically, for the paucity of empirical evidence datable to this period at Meroë has necessitated a greater reliance upon logical inference and thereby allowed a wider field of play for inherited theories of origin. The excavation of historiographic practice is therefore of the greatest relevance to the physical excavation of the site itself, because the search for origins at Meroë has influenced the questions traditionally asked and the explanations currently proposed for evidence unearthed by the trowel.

II.1. *Historia Quaestionis: Meroë and Origins*

The special association between the site of Meroë and the problem of origins predates the academic discipline of archaeology, and its subsequent trajectory in the face of an accumulating material record has been one of mutation rather than extinction. For early nineteenth-century authors George Alexander Hoskins, the Reverend Michael Russell, and François Chrétien Gau, Meroë was a utopia of the Diodoran and hyper-diffusionist imagination: “that cradle of the arts which distinguish a civilised from a barbarous society . . . [and] whence the arts and learning of Egypt, and ultimately of Greece and Rome, derived their origin.” In the middle of the nineteenth century, Lepsius’s Prussian expedition effectively put paid to this notion, demonstrating the comparatively late construction of those monuments visible at Meroë and in the broader Butana Steppe. Rather than questioning the model of singular origins and unilateral influence, Lepsius reversed its direction, maintaining that “von einer äthiopischen Urbildung oder überhaupt von einer alten äthiopischen Nationalbildung, von der die neuere Gelehrsamkeit so viel zu rühmen weiß, nichts zu entdecken war . . . Was von den Nachrichten der Alten nicht auf gänzlichem Mißverstande beruht, bezieht sich nur auf die ägyptische Civilisation und Kunst.” Meroë was thus transformed from the

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3 By contrast, el-Kurru has become a topic of fervent debate only since the 1980s, and even those attributing to el-Kurru the greatest significance for dynastic history have not necessarily posited it as a site of cultural origin for the individuals interred there. For recent historiographic discussion and references, see Morkot, “On the Priestly Origin of the Napatan Kings.”
4 Hoskins, *Travels in Ethiopia*, v, 84. See also: Russell, *Nubia and Abyssinia*; Gau, *Antiquités de la Nubie*. For Diodorus’s view of Meroë, see e.g. Florence Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana 70.1 folio 158. For an English translation during the early nineteenth century, see Booth, *Historical Library of Diodorus the Sicilian I*, 153-158.