

influence of what Yellin called the ‘Abaton-style milk libation’ (Yellin 1982) resonates with a practice later widespread among provincial elites of Meroitic Nubia. On the political side, the author demonstrates that playing a key role in Nubian sanctuaries was also a way for the Meroitic king to assume some royal duties in the tradition of Egyptian pharaohs, at a time when Roman rulers turned their back on temples throughout the country.

Following the collapse of the Meroitic central state and royal administration, the third chapter examines the last Nubian inscriptions written in the first half of the 5th century AD. In a context where priests were secluded in a few sanctuaries supported by the Blemmyes, the story of the Esmet family serves as a final endnote for a religion born a thousand years earlier in Egypt. More than just having access to a centre of worship, taking control of a temple represented an important symbol in the territorial conquest of the valley. Soon, however, the growing power of the Nobades, who had already distanced themselves from the religious traditions of ancient Egypt, would pave the way for the adoption of Christianity and the disappearance of the cult of Isis in Nubia, her main sanctuaries being turned into churches.

To conclude, the large collection of Nubian inscriptions presented in this book and studied as a whole for the first time, no matter what writing system or language was used, creates a useful synthesis to understand the complexity of the religious life in Lower Nubia at the beginning of our era. Despite a few editing issues, such as the illustrations too often being illegible, it represents an important contribution to our knowledge of the cult of Isis in Nubia. It will also serve as a well-documented example for the larger debate regarding the Roman Empire interactions with the external world.

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Book Review

Elena A. A. Garcea. *The Prehistory of the Sudan*. New York, Springer, 2020. xvii + 196 pp. ISBN 978-3-030-17187-3 (paperback) and ISBN 978-3-030-47185-9 (e-book).

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This book, which presents a synthesis of the prehistory of the Sudan, is part of a series entitled *Springer Briefs in Archaeology*, which aims to publish concise summaries of cutting-edge research in compact volumes of 75-125 pages. This volume is the fifth in this series dedicated to African archaeology. It is part of the growing international interest in the archaeology of Sudan and Nubia, which has resulted in the publication of several volumes of syntheses in recent years (e.g. Cabon *et al.* 2017; Edwards 2004; Emberling and Williams 2020; Raue 2019). However, this is the only volume that focuses exclusively on prehistory, from the Early Stone Age to the 3rd millennium BC, when the first state societies emerged. The other publications have also included a significant place for prehistory, but primarily from the perspective of defining the substrate from which the Nubian kingdoms developed, which remain their main subject.

The author is well known for her archaeological experience in Sudan, where she has been working for 35 years. She is also very familiar with relations with other neighbouring countries, as she had the opportunity to work in Acacus (Libya) and also at the famous Gobero site (Niger). She thus has a global vision of the prehistory of North-east Africa, an indispensable skill when we know to what extent the societies of the Nile basin were connected to each other, as well as to those of the Sahara.

The book perfectly achieves its objective. It is concise, clearly structured, and presents very synthetic

and accessible information, based on the results of the most recent research. It is therefore an excellent reference-book for researchers, students, and those wishing to learn about the subject. It consists of seven chapters, each of 15-25 pages, followed by a short conclusion. The first chapter deals with the geographical space and its environment, which evolved according to the climatic variations and the hydrological regime of the Nile. It provides a useful overview of this complex subject, on which current work sheds a nuanced light, tending to show that situations vary quite considerably according to the characteristics of each region, which contrasts with more general theories aimed at detecting strong climatic signals with a large-scale impact. The author rightly highlights the debate on the extent to which these environmental variations might have had an impact on human societies. Some researchers insist that these variations were a driving force in the movement of populations and the density of occupation of different areas, while others emphasise the resilience of populations and the fact that they can find innovative adaptive solutions. The next four chapters follow a chronological framework and highlight the main issues regarding each period. The chapter on the Stone Age not only presents the techno-complexes in Sudan during the Early, Middle and Late Stone Ages - a presentation that is necessarily rather descriptive - but it also gives the author the opportunity to insist on the problematic of the Out-of-Africa dispersals of Anatomically Modern Humans in the Levant and the Arabian Peninsula during the Middle Stone Age. Today, this scenario must be seen as a succession of exits from the continent that occurred during the most favourable climatic episodes, between 240,000 and 30,000 BP. Due to its geographical position, Sudan occupies a predominant place in the reconstruction of the North-South routes, and although recent discoveries allow us to appreciate the country's potential in this respect, it is primarily future research that will make it possible to answer questions about possible contacts between this part of the Nile Basin and the surrounding regions, such as the Levant and the Arabian Peninsula. Following the Palaeolithic, two chapters are devoted to the rich Sudanese Mesolithic period, characterised by the presence of numerous sites along the Nile. These consist of the remains of semi-sedentary settlements often accompanied by tombs and even cemeteries. In view of the scarcity of known sites along the Egyptian Nile during this period, Sudan offers exceptional evidence, which covers the first half of the Holocene and concerns populations practising hunting, fishing and gathering, while also producing ceramics. The discussion regarding settlement strategy and sedentism is perhaps the most interesting, while the long list of sites and the presentation of the material culture are part of a more traditional cultural-historical approach. This is followed by the Neolithic period with particular emphasis on the process of Neolithisation, which has been the subject of much debate over the past 20 years. The author devotes two chapters to these subjects: she lists the known sites, describes the cultural complexes, and traces the scenario regarding the adoption of livestock and agriculture, while reconstructing the subsistence strategies developed. Although cereals appear to have circulated rapidly along the valley, Neolithic societies continued to present the image of relatively mobile groups heavily involved in pastoralism. The richness of their funerary traditions is underlined and witnessed by the abundance of ornaments found in the burials, as well as the highly elaborate ceramics, weapons and tools. The distribution of goods in tombs is an opportunity to question the social distinctions and the beginning of the hierarchisation of society. The chapter that closes this chronological panorama is devoted to the 4th millennium and to cultural groups such as A-Group and Pre-Kerma, which herald the rise of state formations such as the Kingdom of Kerma, and illustrate the complex relations with the Egyptian neighbour that progressively established its hold over Lower Nubia and its C-Group occupants. Further south, the Butana and the Gash groups in particular also show signs of greater complexity and long-distance contacts. Finally, the concluding chapter takes up the salient points of the prehistoric panorama presented in this book, to conclude with a discussion of the most important issues.

Reading of this book gives the immense satisfaction of providing an overall panorama of the prehistory of the Sudan, which is concise and intelligently synthesised. At times, it can also give a feeling of frustration, given the desire to see the main issues dealt with in greater depth, to the detriment of a more historical-cultural presentation of the classification of the material culture and the definition of cultural groups; which last, involving their description and enumeration, could have been presented in a different manner. Possible improvements include the iconography, the quality of which is not always optimal, as well as the lists of sites presented for each period. These lists are very useful, except that there is no indication about the treatment of the C¹⁴ dates associated with each site – are they a selection? how reliable are they? and finally, what are their reference numbers? In the absence of a more critical debate on the question, we will continue to see dates of variable quality and, as a result, chronological intervals that are sometimes surprising for certain sites.

This synthesis inevitably encounters the geographical limits dictated by national borders. The author is well aware of this, since she states in her conclusion that one of the objectives of this work is to show to what extent the prehistory of the Sudan is associable with that of the surrounding countries of North-east Africa, since the connections are so strong and the issues similar. We can see here the interest of a larger future synthesis, covering the whole Nile basin and its fringes, taking better account of geographical and cultural realities. However, this will not resolve the spatial disparity of research, as the maps illustrating the book clearly show, such as the fact that most of the information is confined to the territories close to the Nile and that the more distant regions are only poorly covered. Those in charge of Sudanese archaeology are well aware of these disparities, which are dictated by research traditions and politico-economic difficulties that may have hindered the deployment of research programmes in regions considered peripheral. In recent years, and particularly since the country opened up to a democratic process, the importance of developing archaeological programmes in areas whose heritage is largely unknown and understudied has been emphasised. It is thus to be hoped that the relationship between the Nilotic societies and those occupying the vast plains on either side of them will be better understood.

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