

CHAPTER 1

NUBIA IN THE MEROITIC AND POST-MEROITIC PERIODS

Nubia is a geographic region located in the northeast corner of Africa [Figs 1-1, 3-1, 4-1, 7-1]. It encompasses the southern end of Egypt and northern Sudan, where it is divided into Lower Nubia in the north and Upper Nubia in the south. Different regions within Nubia are separated by a series of cataracts, with the First Cataract being south of Aswan and the Sixth Cataract north of modern Khartoum. The Classical historians often called the area south of Egypt 'Ethiopia', incorporating not only the modern country of Ethiopia, but Lower and Upper Nubia and the lands beyond. The ancient Egyptian word for gold, *nub*, might be the origin for the name since Nubia had the ancient world's richest supply of gold (Fisher 2012).

From the 3rd century BC until the 3rd century AD, Meroë with its great stone pyramid tombs and their chapels became a center of the royal and elite mortuary cult and a centre of the Nubian Kingdom of Meroë (Dunham 1957; 1963). The Kingdom of Meroë probably extended as far south as the confluence of the Blue and White Nile and beyond, and in the north, Lower Nubia became the intermediary with Egypt. The location of Meroë also made it the nodal point for travels east to the Red Sea, south to Ethiopia, and farther into sub-Saharan Africa (Fisher 2012: 37-40). While the Ptolemies and Kushites interacted in Lower Nubia, trade was renewed in the Ptolemaic Red Sea ports of Berenike Troglodytica and Ptolemais Theron. The Meroitic people from the south eventually settled along the Nile in Lower Nubia. Different tribal groups lived in the area west and east of the Nile, and near the Red Sea. Lower Nubia, for a time ruled by Rome in the north and Meroë in the south, became very prosperous in the 1st to 4th centuries AD. Despite heavy plun-

dering, the finds in the cemeteries show that the populations outside the centers were not without certain means and that some luxury objects and other revenue from this trade benefited these groups (Säve-Söderbergh 1981: 3). The pyramids at Meroë, and some of the largest sites to the north, like Faras (Griffith 1924: 1925), Karanog (Woolley and Randall McIver 1910), Qustul and Ballaṅa (Williams 1991ab), and Abri (Vila 1982) demonstrate the common practice of extended burials in chambers accessed by sloping steps or ramps, or in vertical shafts. The graves were marked by brick structures, mastabas or small pyramids with 'chapels' or offering niches, and were accompanied by inscribed or painted stele, offering-tables and distinctive sculptures referred to as 'ba-bird statues'. In the Meroitic heartlands, at sites like Kadada and Gabati, grave superstructures were rare and there were no offering tables or inscriptions (Edwards 2004: 175). Meroitic graves in Upper Nubia were covered with tumuli or not marked in any particular way (El Tayeb 2012). In general, the deceased were accompanied by grave goods ranging from richly furnished royal burials to the simplest forms, accompanied only by pottery jars and cups (Adams 1977: 374-375; Edwards 2004: 174). The Kingdom of Aksum conquered the Meroitic kingdom in the early 4th century AD. Pyramid and mastaba superstructures then disappeared, to be replaced by the widespread use of tumuli. Further changes have been noted in material culture (Edwards 2004).

Three entities emerged between the 4th and 6th centuries AD after the fall of Meroë: Nobadia in Lower Nubia, Early Makuria in Upper Nubia, and Alwa (Alodia) in the region up from the Fifth Cataract. Once the Romans had withdrawn from Lower Nubia around AD 298, the Nobadians,

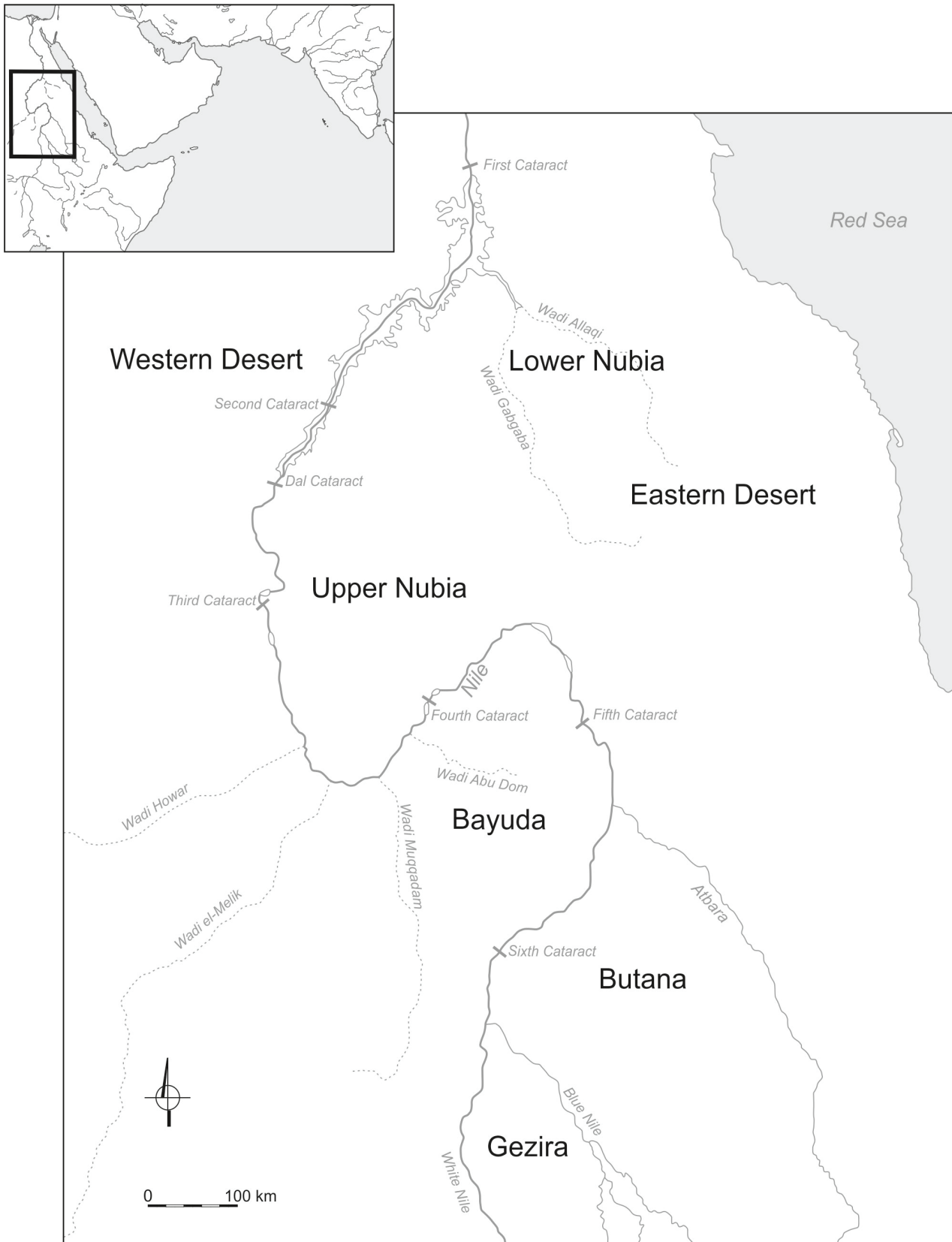


Fig. 1-1. Map of Nubia

possibly from the Western Desert, and the Blemmyes from the Eastern Desert encroached on the area (Strouhal 1984; Ricke 1967). The Blemmyes are well attested in the written sources, and they and other groups occupied the region of the emerald and beryl mines at *Mons Smaragdus* in the Eastern Desert (e.g., Dijkstra 2012). However, the ethnic term “Blemmye” needs to be used with care since it probably included a wide variety of people living between the Red Sea and the Nile Valley (Dijkstra 2012). The presence of these Eastern Desert dwellers in the Nile Valley is marked by Eastern Desert Ware, which is found in the Eastern Desert as far as the Egyptian Red Sea ports of Berenike, Marsa Nakari, and Quseir to the northeast, and the Fifth Cataract region in Sudan to the south (Barnard 2006; 2008; Barnard and Magid 2006). Additionally, their tumulus graves are found on the west and east banks of the Lower Nubian Nile Valley at Kalabsha and Wadi Qitna, where they date to the mid-4th century AD, i.e., about AD 330/340–370/380 (Ricke 1967; Strouhal 1984; Williams 1991b:12).

The Nobadian king Silko conquered the Blemmyes in the mid-5th century AD and the early

Nobadian royal and elite cemetery at Qustul is dated to around AD 370–380, while that at Ballaña dates to around AD 420 (Emery and Kirwan 1938; Farid 1963). The largest of the great tumuli was nearly 80 m in diameter and 12 m high. Several had multi-chambered substructures to contain the burial and its abundant grave goods. The kings were buried with their regalia, including silver crowns, and spears and other military equipment. Imported materials including metal vessels, items of furniture, horse harnesses, wooden boxes with ivory inlays, game boards and gaming pieces, toilet articles, and a large quantity of pottery, not the least Mediterranean amphorae, were probably used in the funerary rituals. A great deal of beadwork and jewellery was also buried with them.

Following excavations in the south, at Tanqasi, Hammur, and El-Hobagi (e.g., Shinnie 1954; Żurawski 2000; Lenoble et al. 1994; Lenoble 2004b), it was assumed that these tumulus cemeteries were counterparts to the Nobadian cemeteries at Qustul and Ballaña. Royal burials in the Early Makurian region have not been identified until recently. Nevertheless, the recent finds of ornaments and

Table 1–1. *General chronology of Egypt, Lower Nubia, Upper Nubia and Central Sudan (after Fisher et al. 2012; El-Tayeb 2013; Williams 1991; Welsby and Anderson 2004)*

Egypt	Lower Nubia	Upper Nubia	Abbreviation	Central Sudan	
Late Period (Dynasties 25–30)	Napatan	Napatan	N	Napatan	~722–332 BC
Ptolemaic Period	Early Meroitic	Early Meroitic	EM	Meroitic	~400–200 BC
Early Roman	Classic Meroitic	Classic Meroitic	M	Classic Meroitic	~100 BC–AD 200
		Late Meroitic	LM	Late Meroitic	~AD 200–300
Late Roman	Late Meroitic	Transitional Late Meroitic to Early Makuria	LM/PM		~AD 250–350
		Early Makuria Phase I (Early Post-Meroitic)	EPM	Post Meroitic	~AD 350–450
Byzantine (AD 395–640)	Early Nobadian/ Post-Meroitic	Early Makuria Phase II (Late Post-Meroitic)	LPM		~AD 450–550
		Early Makuria (Terminal Phase)	TPM	Alwa	~AD 550–600
Islamic Period	Christian Nobadia	Christian Makuria	Ch	Christian Alwa	AD 641–1400

adornments at el-Zuma has now provided evidence of the royal character of the decorated objects found in these tombs (Then-Obluska 2017c). The post-Meroitic period in Lower Nubia was previously called the X-Group (4th–6th centuries AD). But due to the state formation process occurring at that time, it is now called Early Noba-

dian in Lower Nubia (e.g., Obluski 2014), and Early Makurian in Upper Nubia (El-Tayeb 2012). Christianized Nobadia and Makuria were united under a Makurian king by the early 7th century AD (Fisher 2012: 39). *Table 1-1* presents the general chronology of Egypt, Lower Nubia, Upper Nubia, and Central Sudan during the periods discussed here.