

# Exhibiting Ancient Africa at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston: “Ancient Nubia Now” and Its Audiences

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Museum exhibits provide some of the most significant opportunities for archaeology to reach broad audiences. A major exhibition at a large museum can draw 100,000 visitors or more, yet this outreach potential is often overlooked in the field as a whole. As an example, museums were not even mentioned in two recent plenary addresses at the annual meeting of the American Schools of Oriental Research (ASOR) that focused on archaeology and its public audiences.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the kinds of engagement that museum visitors have with ancient objects are qualitatively different from experiences in classrooms, reading books, or watching documentaries. Learning in museums is directed by visitors themselves, is often done in small groups of friends or family, and provides firsthand experiences with ancient objects in a way that other media cannot.<sup>2</sup>

It is thus a pleasure to review an important and visually spectacular exhibition on the relatively little-known cultures of ancient Nubia at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (MFA).<sup>3</sup> “Ancient Nubia Now” was on view at the MFA from 13 August 2019 through 20 January 2020. Presenting some 400 works of ancient Nubian art, it was curated by Denise Doxey, Rita Freed, and Lawrence Berman (respectively: curator, chair, and senior curator of Ancient Egyptian, Nubian, and Near Eastern Art).

The MFA holds the finest collection of antiquities from ancient Nubia outside Egypt and Sudan. The collection largely derives from a remarkable series of excavations conducted under the supervision of the American

<sup>1</sup> One by Susan Alcock in 2015 (see Alcock 2016) and one by Eric Cline in 2019 (the latter not yet published).

<sup>2</sup> Falk and Dierking 2000.

<sup>3</sup> Thanks to colleagues for discussion and helpful comments on this review: Caitlin Clerkin, Denise Doxey, Tim Kendall, Peter Lacovara, Jo Shaya, and Bruce Williams. I have benefited from their perspectives but have not taken all their suggestions; remaining errors are my own. Full disclosure: this reviewer has excavated at El-Kurru since 2013 and has benefited abundantly from the research and the generosity of the curatorial staff in the Department of Ancient Art at the MFA; I discussed the exhibition with two of the curators during a visit to the museum in December 2019. Figures herein are mine unless otherwise noted. Additional figures can be found with this review on AJA Online ([www.ajaonline.org](http://www.ajaonline.org)).

archaeologist George Reisner from 1913 to 1932. He excavated all the royal cemeteries of Kush—Kerma, El-Kurru, Nuri, Gebel Barkal, and Meroe—as well as five Egyptian fortresses of the Middle Kingdom (Semna, Kumma, Uronarti, Shalfak, and Mirgissa). Reisner himself published very little of what he found, but his excavation techniques and records were exemplary. The excavations were eventually published in outline form between 1950 and 1982 by one of Reisner’s field assistants, Dows Dunham, while he was curator at the MFA. The MFA’s collections of objects and field records have increasingly been published by the museum itself as well as by numerous scholars in the field.<sup>4</sup>

The museum, however, has rarely displayed this material.<sup>5</sup> Some of the collection was on view in a Nubian gallery from 1992 to 2006,<sup>6</sup> but renovations to the museum space resulted in the closure of that gallery. Some of the objects have otherwise been loaned to special exhibitions through the years, including shows organized by the MFA.<sup>7</sup> The display of these remarkable objects therefore represents a significant event for a number of audiences: the Nubian diaspora, both Egyptian and Sudanese; the African-American community, for whom Nubia is a cultural symbol of African roots; a broader public, for whom the cultures of Nubia remain little known; and scholars working in related fields. “Ancient Nubia Now” displayed these objects in ways that were both traditional and innovative—traditional in terms of the historical narrative that framed them, but innovative in the choice to include a wide range of community perspectives in the exhibition itself.

<sup>4</sup>Markowitz and Doxey 2014; Berman 2018; Doxey et al. 2018; Lacovara and Markowitz 2019. The MFA’s collections website (<https://collections.mfa.org/collections>) is also a rich source of information about ancient Nubia, with stunning photographs of many Nubian objects.

<sup>5</sup>Nearly all the objects on display come from Reisner’s excavations. A few were acquired early in the 20th century. Only two objects exhibited, a pair of clappers, were acquired after 30 December 1973: MFA 2017.75.1–2 (acq. 2017 [unprov.]; not discussed in this review); they were acquired without documentation predating 1973 or evidence of legal exportation and have not had initial scholarly publication. The MFA’s acquisitions policy can be found online at [www.mfa.org/collections/provenance/acquisitions-and-provenance-policy](http://www.mfa.org/collections/provenance/acquisitions-and-provenance-policy).

<sup>6</sup>Haynes 1992.

<sup>7</sup>E.g., Kendall 1982, 1997; Emberling 2011.

## WALK-THROUGH

Since museum learning is experiential and directed by visitors, this review is structured in the form of a walk-through with commentary, followed by a discussion of issues raised by the show.

“Ancient Nubia Now” was a major event at the museum and was featured on a large banner outside the main entrance (fig. 1). To reach the exhibition, visitors descended a staircase from a spacious interior courtyard and were welcomed by a massive video screen showing a montage of both archival (online fig. 1<sup>8</sup>) and modern photographs of objects, monuments, and landscapes accompanied by traditional Nubian music performed by the Aswan Troupe. A map and a timeline completed the introductory area. The map indicated Nubia’s position along the Nile between Egypt and sub-Saharan Africa. The timeline outlined the four historical phases that comprised the show: the kingdom of Kerma (2400–1550 BCE); the conquest and occupation of Nubia by the Egyptian empire of the New Kingdom (1550–1070 BCE); and the resurgence of Kush during the Napatan (750–332 BCE) and Meroitic (332 BCE–364 CE) periods. The text in the first introductory area, by Edmund Barry Gaither, Director and Curator of the Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists in Boston, emphasized Africa as the birthplace of civilization.

Through doors into the exhibition space, visitors stepped into a second introductory area—a dark gallery with deep purple walls, lights spotlighting text panels, and a single object: a bronze statuette of the Nubian king Taharqa (online fig. 2). Wall panels in this space made some introductory statements that were remarkable for criticizing the MFA itself. One, titled “Nubia, History, and the MFA,” acknowledged the colonial history through which most of the objects on display came to the MFA—under permits from the British colonial government rather than an independent Sudanese authority. It recognized the “inconsistent” history of display of these objects while at the same time acknowledging “the privilege and the obligation that comes with being stewards of these masterpieces.” This panel concluded by saying that the exhibition “represents one step in a larger commitment to preserve, document, and share these works,” and

<sup>8</sup>See AJA Online for additional, online-only figures.



FIG. 1. “Ancient Nubia Now” exhibition banner displayed at the Huntington Avenue entrance to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (December 2019).

“we also commit to interpret this collection together with the communities we serve.”

Abdel-Rahman Mohamed, a member of the Nubian community in Boston, authored a second panel that emphasized the suffering of the Nubian community in Egypt and Sudan caused by construction of dams along the Nile over the last 100 years. He highlighted ways that Nubian civilization is relevant to the West and to world history—among other reasons through the relatively high status of women in Nubia—and called for a permanent gallery space dedicated to display of these objects. It is a matter of responsibility to the Nubian community, and indeed to the international community, that a collection of this historical and artistic importance be permanently displayed.

#### *Kerma (2400–1550 BCE)*

After walking down a dark hallway and turning a corner, the visitor was confronted with the first of the four chronological phases—the kingdom of Kerma (2400–1550 BCE). Kerma’s beautiful handmade ceramics were displayed in the center of the room. To

the left, inlays of animals and deities that once adorned funerary beds, along with two ancient wooden bed legs in the form of bulls’ legs, stood next to a reconstruction of one of these beds made for the MFA in 1940. To the right, visitors could see the brilliant blue of large-scale faience inlays and glazed quartz objects. Farther into this gallery were beads and pendants from the cemetery. At the rear of the gallery, brilliantly lit against a lighter purple background, was the famous Middle Kingdom Egyptian statue of Lady Sennuwy (fig. 2), which was found broken in one of the royal tumulus burials at Kerma.

When Reisner excavated Kerma, his worldview excluded the possibility that the site and its massive cemetery could have been the work of a black African culture. Rather, he considered the settlement to have been ruled by an Egyptian governor “gone native.” Not only did this interpretation deny Nubians credit for the city and its art, it also denied the possibility that Kerma soldiers could have raided Egypt and brought back statues (such as the image of Lady Sennuwy) as spoils of war. Soon after his publication of his work at



FIG. 2. Statue of the Egyptian noblewoman Sennuwy as displayed in “Ancient Nubia Now,” Middle Kingdom, 1971–1926 BCE, excavated at Kerma, Harvard University—Boston Museum of Fine Arts Expedition. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts 14.720.

Kerma,<sup>9</sup> Reisner’s interpretations were challenged, and the MFA has been in the unenviable position of having to live with this clearly racist legacy of interpretation. A panel titled “Kerma: Correcting the Story” discussed Reisner’s prejudice, but also (rightly) emphasized that he was otherwise an outstanding archaeologist for his time. It made the point that Reisner’s careful documentation allowed for a corrected interpretation of Kerma.

Juxtaposed with the discussion of Reisner’s interpretation of Kerma was the first of five video presentations of contemporary perspectives on ancient Nubia by scholars, artists, and community members. These videos support the multivocal perspective of the museum by providing a range of views from members of different communities and audiences. The video presentations, which ran on a continuous loop, are available on the MFA exhibition website ([www.mfa.org/exhibitions/nubia](http://www.mfa.org/exhibitions/nubia)). The first, titled “Nubia, Egypt, and

the Concept of Race,” shows Shomarka Keita, a biological anthropologist at the Smithsonian, discussing anthropological perspectives on race in Egypt, Nubia, and Africa. He disavows the notion of race, preferring to talk in terms of biological populations, and states that Nubians and Egyptians are African—as he says, “they didn’t come from any place else.”<sup>10</sup> Keita makes the important point that ancient Egyptians did not themselves interpret physical difference through a notion of race.

Reisner’s excavation defined the Kerma culture and would eventually lead to the current recognition that this was a powerful independent empire with its own religious traditions and craft practices. The display of Kerma in “Ancient Nubia Now,” however, stayed close to Reisner’s finds, which meant that some important elements of the site were not presented. We learned nothing about the physical city itself, which Reisner documented but did not excavate extensively. There was likewise little about the royal burials at Kerma—massive tumuli up to 90 m in diameter with as many as 400 sacrificial burials that Reisner described in extraordinarily vivid terms in his 1923 report. Nor did we learn about the cemetery as a whole, now estimated to have contained some 30,000 burials spanning nearly 1,500 years. The curators’ decision to exclude these important windows on the Kerma culture from the narrative was likely due to limitations of space and to the MFA’s role as an art museum, with a concomitant focus on objects rather than historical narratives.

#### *Egyptian Occupation (2040–1070 BCE)*

The next gallery focused on the relationship between Egypt and Nubia. Early evidence for migration and intermarriage of Nubians and Egyptians is found in the burial stele of the Nubian bowman Nenu, acquired by the MFA in Upper Egypt in the early 20th century (fig. 3).<sup>11</sup> The stele depicts Nenu with his Egyptian wife, children, bow, and hunting dogs.

The first Egyptian occupation of Nubia took place during the Middle Kingdom (2040–1640 BCE) when Egyptians built fortresses in Lower Nubia to protect against the growing power of Kerma and to control ac-

<sup>10</sup> This latter statement is debatable; throughout Egyptian history, at least some Egyptians living in the Nile Delta would have come from the southern Levant, as is shown by imported goods, stylistic similarities, and recent DNA studies; on this last, see Schuenemann et al. 2017.

<sup>11</sup> One of a group published by Fischer (1961).

<sup>9</sup> Reisner 1923.



FIG. 3. Burial stele of the Nubian bowman Nenu, First Intermediate period, 2100–2040 BCE (acq. 1903, purchased in Egypt). Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, Emily Esther Sears Fund, 03.1848 (© Museum of Fine Arts, Boston).

cess to the rich gold deposits in the Wadi Allaqi to the east of the Nile. Reisner excavated five of these forts, and a few small objects and an inscribed doorframe from the forts were on display.

The major Egyptian conquest of Nubia took place during the New Kingdom (1550–1070 BCE). The Egyptian Occupation gallery centered on a statue of the Egyptian pharaoh Amenhotep III found in Reisner’s excavation at Gebel Barkal, the southernmost outpost of Egyptian control over Nubia. The statue resonated visually and conceptually with the large statue of Sennuwy in the previous gallery. Unlike Sennuwy, however, the statue of Amenhotep III was not taken on a raid but was installed at Barkal as part of the occupation of the site. The statue also formed a link to the next gallery, on the Napata period, where the central piece was a statue of the later Nubian king Senkamanisken—a statue made in archaic Egyptian style to depict Nubians as rightful rulers over Egypt. The Egyptian Occupation gallery also displayed a few smaller statues of Egyptian officials found at Barkal, along with a remarkably well preserved gazelle-skin loincloth (MFA 03.1035) for a Nubian prince named Maiherpra, who was buried in the Valley of the Kings in obscure circumstances. Objects representing Egyptian attitudes to Nubians included a beautiful glazed tile (MFA 03.1570) depicting a Nubian ruler that would have been part of a set showing the traditional enemies of Egypt. These objects would have been

placed and used in ways that would have physically (and magically) denigrated Nubians.

In a video presentation in this gallery titled “How Egyptologists Removed Ancient Egypt from Africa,” Egyptologist Vanessa Davies discusses how previous generations of scholars claimed Egypt as a part of biblical scholarship, carving it away from Africa. This view was the background for Reisner’s dismissal of Kerma as the capital of a local (African) empire. She also discusses ancient Egyptian views of Nubia and distinguishes official ideology from the range of daily interactions, some of which were illustrated in the gallery.

In terms of the visual impact of objects, this section of the exhibition was the weakest. The imposing dominance of Egyptian colonial control over Nubia was barely represented, whether in photographs of the Egyptian fortresses of the Middle Kingdom or of the monumental stone Amun Temple at Gebel Barkal. While this curatorial decision was also consistent with the art museum display, the objects themselves were not adequate for telling the historical story.

#### *Napata (750–332 BCE)*

After the collapse of the Egyptian empire, we know relatively little about settlement and economy in Nubia for several centuries. Beginning around 750 BCE, however, a new dynasty emerged in Kush and boldly began to conquer Egypt, ruling as its 25th Dynasty from its capital at Napata, modern Gebel Barkal. During this period, scribes in Nubia wrote inscriptions in hieroglyphic Egyptian text for the first time. Reisner’s excavations at three sites in the area of Barkal—El-Kurru, Nuri, and Barkal itself—established the chronology of kings and queens through their pyramid burials and uncovered a massive temple complex at Barkal.

The next three galleries were devoted to the reign of this dynasty of Napata. The first presented objects from an early phase of the dynasty, primarily from El-Kurru (online fig. 3). As noted above, the gallery centered on a statue of King Senkamanisken in archaizing Egyptian style (fig. 4). This statue illustrates the iconography of kings of Kush taken on after their conquest of Egypt—a tight-fitting cap-crown, double uraeus serpents indicating rule over both Nubia and Egypt, and faint traces of a necklace ending in ram’s head amulets symbolizing the Nubian form of the god Amun. Statues of this type, this one included, were



FIG. 4. Statue of Senkamanisken, king of Kush, center, as displayed in “Ancient Nubia Now,” Napatan period, 643–623 BCE, Harvard University—Boston Museum of Fine Arts Expedition. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts 23.731 (© Museum of Fine Arts, Boston).

carved for more than 50 years after the Nubian kings were driven out of Egypt.<sup>12</sup>

Some cases in this gallery held groupings of objects from single contexts, while others were grouped by type. Cases were devoted to faience plaques and amulets from the royal tombs at El-Kurru; to faience ornaments from teams of horses buried with the last four kings at El-Kurru; and to both jewelry and vessels made of stone, faience, and metal, along with other objects left by ancient looters of the royal tombs. One group of beautifully made quartz arrowheads from the earliest tombs at El-Kurru was displayed, as was a group of objects found in the tomb of Queen Khensa at El-Kurru.

In a video in this gallery titled “A Young Sudanese American Connects the Past to the Present,” Lana

<sup>12</sup>It is noteworthy that a number of more monumental pieces in the MFA’s collection were not displayed, surely due to constraints of space. These include two royal statues found along with the Senkamanisken statue at Gebel Barkal and a massive stone sarcophagus of King Aspelta found at Nuri.

Bashir, a Sudanese-American college student, talks about her family’s background and interest in the ancient history of Nubia and what learning about this history meant to her. The video is a useful reminder that heritage connections to this material are a matter not simply of historical significance but also of personal and family connections to the ancient past.

An eye-catching interlude followed in a small gallery containing a dramatic display of funerary figurines known as *shawabties* from the kings’ tombs at Nuri (online fig. 4), the site of royal burials in Nubia following the use of the cemetery at El-Kurru. Reisner recovered huge numbers of these figurines at Nuri, with some kings’ burials containing 1,000 *shawabties* of stone and faience. Some are nearly a foot high, and they were displayed here in rows, lit from below, as if to highlight their magical function of serving the kings and queens in the afterlife.

The next gallery continued the theme of Nubian royal power, centering on material found at Nuri dated to the Middle and Late Napatan period (ca. 700–332 BCE). It included a group of objects made of gold,

silver, and alabaster from the tomb of King Aspelta—these objects escaped the attention of ancient looters because a collapse from the ceiling of the tomb’s burial chambers had covered them. This section of the gallery contained amulets and ornaments of precious materials, including the gold pectoral of a winged Isis that served as the iconic image of the exhibition (see fig. 1), and gold ram’s head pendants that symbolized the Nubian ram-headed Amun.

The video in this gallery, titled “A Photographer’s Passion for Ancient Nubia,” presents perspectives from Chester Higgins, who has traveled extensively in Sudan photographing landscapes and monuments of ancient Nubia. His work was featured in “Ancient Nubia Now” as well as in a 2012 publication.<sup>13</sup>

The next gallery turned to Reisner’s archaeological fieldwork, with a display of archival records and photographs. All the photographs in the exhibition were appropriately credited, whether taken by Reisner or his Egyptian staff; Reisner apparently always credited his Egyptian photographers, which was unusual in his time. Large video screens updated Reisner’s work with drone footage and photographs from current archaeological projects investigating sites where Reisner had worked, including Uronarti, Kerma, El-Kurru, Gebel Barkal, and Meroe. A panel also discussed two early travelers in Sudan from New England, George Bethune English and John Lowell, to establish another local connection between Sudan and New England.

#### *Meroe (332 BCE–364 CE)*

The final displayed objects were from Reisner’s excavations at Meroe, the last capital of ancient Nubia. For reasons that are not fully understood, the location of royal burials in Nubia moved from Nuri to Meroe around 300 BCE (the absolute chronology is not well defined, nor is the MFA’s choice of date) and remained there until the end of the empire in the fourth century CE. Rather than focusing on the settlement area termed the “Royal City” (which had been excavated, extensively but poorly, by John Garstang before World War I<sup>14</sup>), Reisner’s work at Meroe concentrated on the three pyramid cemeteries several kilometers to the east.

The Meroitic period in Nubia saw a wide range of innovations in religion, writing, material culture, and

economy, in some ways becoming even more distinctive from Egyptian forms. Many of these innovations were represented in the final gallery. Creatively painted pottery (online fig. 5) was a revival after the drab, mass-produced pottery that dominates the Napatan assemblage. The wealth of Meroitic royal burials was represented by spectacular gold jewelry, again missed by ancient looters, including a particularly beautiful gold and enamel bracelet with a depiction of the goddess Hathor (fig. 5) and a number of ornamented gold ear studs. These finds are similar to the famous discovery of Meroitic jewelry in the pyramid of Queen Amanishakheto at Meroe by looters in the 19th century,<sup>15</sup> now in museums in Berlin (Ägyptisches Museum) and Munich (Staatliches Museum Ägyptischer Kunst). A display case was also devoted to Nubian archery—a long-lasting cultural symbol and important part of Nubian military force. Reisner had excavated thumb rings, arrows, quivers, and iron arrow points, all of which were represented here.

During this period, Meroitic scribes developed a new form of writing, known as Meroitic script, to represent their own language for the first time (earlier hieroglyphic inscriptions had been written in ancient Egyptian). Although the sound values of signs in this script are known, because they derive from Egyptian cursive signs, the meanings of most words remain unclear today (despite recent progress). The gallery displayed the longest known Meroitic inscription, which appears on a stele of King Tanyidamani (second century BCE) found in the great Amun Temple at Gebel Barkal.

In the final video presentation, titled “Meroe and the Black Literary Imagination,” Professor Nicole Aljoe of Northeastern University explains African-American perspectives on Meroe from the early 20th century. Specifically, she discusses Pauline Hopkins, an editor and author who imagined an entire black civilization living under the pyramids at Meroe in her 1903 book *Of One Blood; Or, The Hidden Self*. The video is an excellent illustration of one of the ways that African-American communities in the United States have looked to Nubia as a symbol of the achievements of African cultures.

During the Meroitic period, Nubia was increasingly in contact with the Greek and Roman world, first through trade and diplomatic gifts, then through

<sup>13</sup> Fisher et al. 2012.

<sup>14</sup> See Török 1997.

<sup>15</sup> Markowitz and Lacovara 1996.



FIG. 5. Gold and enamel bracelet depicting the goddess Hathor, Meroitic period, 250–100 BCE, excavated at Meroe, Harvard University—Boston Museum of Fine Arts Expedition. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts 20.333 (© Museum of Fine Arts, Boston).

conflict and truce after the Roman conquest of Egypt. Cases in the exhibition displayed Greek and Roman imports, including Roman and Roman-style bronzes and two reed flutes (*auloi*) recently and painstakingly restored by MFA conservators. These final cases highlighted connections with the Mediterranean world during the last centuries of the empire of Kush.

As in the earlier galleries, the Nubian landscape and monuments were not pictured or discussed in connection with the objects. They had of course been shown to dramatic effect in modern videos taken from drones playing in the preceding gallery, but there was a lack of connection between the objects and the physical context of their production and use. Perhaps more significant was the absence of any mention of the massive iron industry at Meroe, which was the basis of the city's wealth.<sup>16</sup>

No exhibition can cover all aspects of a subject, and the curators' decision to present objects and tell stories that derive from them is good museum practice. At the same time, it is worth noting that there are other narratives surrounding these objects. Overall, however, this show highlighted the distinctive cultures and histories of ancient Nubia and very successfully showed how these connect to different audiences and communities.

#### ISSUES RAISED

"Ancient Nubia Now" was an important show. Its undoubted stars were the objects themselves, beautifully and often dramatically lit and installed. The nar-

ative woven around these objects was rich, complex, and multistranded. The most immediately apparent strand is a straightforward narrative of the history of Nubia, which is clear, well-written, and authoritative. Prioritizing this story makes sense given the lack of public knowledge about ancient Nubia.<sup>17</sup>

Why is Nubia relatively little known to American and European scholars and public audiences? The area has been perceived as peripheral in several senses. First, its cultures developed on the southern border of Egypt, and it exists in a kind of intellectual and historical peripheral zone—not really a part of the greater Mediterranean, or the Middle East, but also not really part of Africa. Textbooks of African archaeology often exclude Nubia as having more to do with Egyptian history and thus as less relevant to archaeological research in the rest of Africa.

Second, Nubia has been considered peripheral even to Egypt. While the historical reality was that Egypt and Nubia were trading partners and adversaries, each raiding and eventually conquering the other, the perception by scholars in particular has been that Nubia was less wealthy and powerful than Egypt.

Third, Nubian cultures have not generally been seen as a part of Western heritage, with the exception of African-American heritage narratives. The Egyptologist James Henry Breasted and others working during Reisner's time developed a notion of Western heritage that was rooted in the cultures of the ancient Middle East,<sup>18</sup> but excluded Nubia. This heritage claim is highly problematic, and it continues in many ways, particularly insofar as it attempts to exclude people living in the region from an attachment to the ancient culture. Since Nubian heritage has generally not been included in the history of Western cultures, it is challenging for Western audiences to connect to the area's story. Nubia thus remains peripheral in Western cultural imagination.

Finally, there has historically been a legacy of institutionalized racism in scholarly work on Nubia. Earlier

<sup>17</sup> There are, as noted above, more nuanced stories revealed, too—about racism and bias in the history of the MFA's display and interpretation of its Nubian collection, about the significance of the collection for the Nubian diaspora and African-American communities, and about the importance of including the voices of many stakeholders in the interpretation of a collection and its history. These stories give the exhibition depth and resonance.

<sup>18</sup> Emberling 2010.

<sup>16</sup> Most recently, Carey et al. 2019.



generations of scholars tended to see Nubians as poor cousins of Egyptians, culturally dependent on Egyptian technology and religion, rather than as people who had agency in their own right. And it must be said that covertly racist views are still present in the field.

The general lack of public knowledge about ancient Nubia is further exemplified by the curators' understandable decision to use the term “Nubia” to describe these ancient cultures. “Nubia” is a Greek term first attested in the third century BCE and most likely means “land of the Noba,” groups that were in fact enemies of the Meroitic kings.<sup>19</sup> “Kush” was the native term for the kingdoms presented in this exhibition, but that term is significantly less well known to the public than “Nubia.” We can hope that expanded public exposure to and knowledge about ancient Nubia will gradually contribute to increasing public connections to these important ancient cultures.

It remains to applaud the extent to which the curators sought out and successfully integrated a wide range of voices into the exhibition in videos and panels, even where some of those voices are critical of the museum itself. This is a departure from previous generations of museum practice. In the resonant words of Stephen Weil, museums should move “from being about something to being for somebody,”<sup>20</sup> and this exhibit represents a significant step in that direction.

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<sup>19</sup> See Rilly 2008; Edwards 2011. “Aithopia” was another ancient Greek term used to describe Kush.

<sup>20</sup> Weil 1999.