

Book Review: The Black Kingdom of the Nile by Charles Bonnet

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Bonnet, Charles. *The Black Kingdom of the Nile*. Forward by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019. xi +209 pages. Hardcover, \$42.00.

Charles Bonnet explained the purpose of *The Black Kingdom of the Nile* quite simply: “After fifty long years of excavation lasting three months per season, it is time for a report.”(p. 4) And, indeed, the book is a detailed, well-illustrated report of his and his teams’ excavations of the city of Kerma, in present-day Sudan, evidence of a black African civilization that developed alongside and often in competition with ancient Egypt. However, with a forward by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., a hard cover, large-format, on glossy stock, with nearly every page featuring a color photograph or figures and plans illustrating the subjects of Bonnet’s excavations, it has the luxurious feel of a coffee-table book and would be a welcome complement to most parlors. The audience for this beautiful and important publication is not likely made up of Egyptologists or scholars of early Africa, who will likely already be familiar with Bonnet’s research and the implications of his scholarship as well as that of his collaborators and graduate students. Instead, *The Black Kingdom of the Nile* makes available for a wider audience Bonnet’s presentations at the Harvard University Center for African Studies given in October 2016 as a part of the Nathan I. Huggins Lecture Series. Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s forward perhaps best describes the significance of Bonnet’s work in demonstrating that “sub-Saharan and Nilotic cultures existed in tandem, in mutual dependence, and with complex interactions of power,” from the earliest period of the region’s history.(p. xi)

Bonnet’s archaeological findings thoroughly detail the existence in Kerma of fortifications, palaces, temples, bakeries, workshops, ceremonial gates and residences, and burial sites of a significant African political and cultural center. The excavations follow a chronology dating early Kerma culture to ca. 2500 to 2050 BCE, a period corresponding to the construction of significant fortifications, the development of centralized royal authority supported by a strong army, and the presence of a program of urbanization. In this early period of Kerma’s development, the city was,

according to Bonnet, “the capital of a kingdom at its peak” (p. 55) and a clearly African kingdom. Bonnet then describes in increasing detail the excavations of Kerma and the neighboring city of Dukki Gel through Kerma’s Middle (2050-1750 BCE) and Classic Periods (1750-1500 BCE) before further examinations of upper Nubian ruins dating to the New Kingdom (1500-1080 BCE) and finally Kushite, Napatan, and Meroitic periods (750 BCE-400 CE). Throughout this history, though the Nubian kingdom was conquered and colonized by Egypt during the New Kingdom period, the evidence from Kerma, and from its sister-city to its north, Dukki Gel, indicates both the persistence and influence of black African cultural traditions as well as a fluid relationship and important economic and cultural ties between pharaonic Egypt and the rival black kingdom on its southern frontiers.

This relationship is perhaps most evident in Bonnet’s excavations of Dukki Gel. Bonnet’s excavations at this site, however, revealed that Dukki Gel was not the successor to Kerma, but a second Nubian city, an “immense indigenous site” that predated the arrival of Egyptian-style structures and ceremonial centers. Characterized by oval architectural plans and curvilinear walls, some of these structures appear closer in function and style to structures “well known in central Africa” (p. 86) Conversely, Egyptian colonization was evidenced in the archaeological record most notably by the construction of hypostyle halls and quadrangular plans that differed notably from the local preference for a round plan in both ceremonial and defensive structures. Additionally, according to Bonnet’s excavations, initial Egyptian occupation and architectural influence was followed by a “native revival during the Twenty-Fifth Dynasty, when the Nubian kings gained control of their northern neighbors.”(p. 72) The excavations at Dukki Gel, illustrate a sequence of systematic destruction of important African structures by Egyptian conquerors and the construction of Egyptian-style palaces, ceremonial centers, and fortifications followed by the subsequent dismantling

of those structures by a revived Nubian power, which then encouraged a return of African-style construction. Even with brief restoration of Egyptian control over the region in the New Kingdom during the reigns of Thutmose II and Hatshepsut, Bonnet identifies the importance of Egyptizing adaptation of forms that were the work of peoples from central Sudanese kingdoms. Bonnet's excavations at Dukki Gel have forced scholars to recognize that "the Nubian and African cities that dominated the region menaced the southern flank of the Egyptian Empire" while at the same time represented a "regional force that also had an impact on Central Africa." (p. 140)

The Black Kingdom of the Nile, in its final chapters, surveys excavations of evidence from Dukki Gel that date from the New Kingdom to the Meroitic period. Here Bonnet identifies both the efforts of New Kingdom pharaohs to stamp an Egyptian ceremonial and administrative character on the important structures of the city, but also demonstrates many places, for example in the defensive bastions and fortified gates, where non-Egyptian traditions persisted. Bonnet also quickly surveys the Amarna reforms' architectural impact on Nubia, a subject of considerable study in Egypt, and returns to the subject of his and Dominique Valbelle's earlier work which centered on the discovery of a remarkable cache of statues of African kings and rulers of Egypt. As Bonnet notes in his conclusion, "Given the extent of our knowledge about the land of the Pharaohs, it was long since past time for us to focus on the roots of Nubian and Central Sudanese populations." (p. 166) It is only to be hoped that with the forward to attract a wider readership, and the luxurious format of the publication itself, a wider audience than scholars will become familiar with the region, where, if Bonnet is correct, can be found the historical origins of the African continent.

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