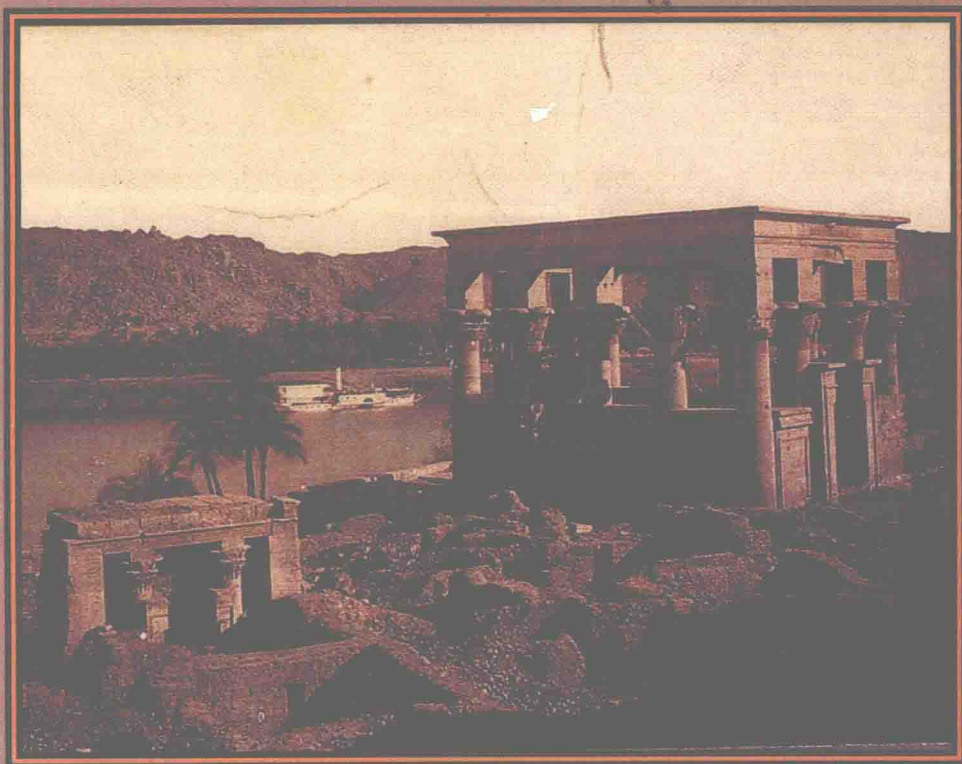


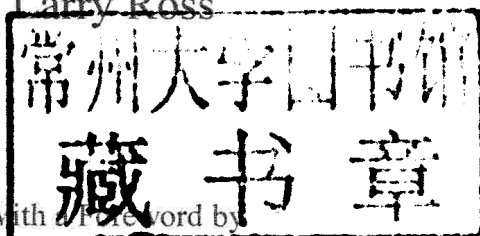
NUBIA AND EGYPT
10,000 B.C. TO 400 A.D.



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From Prehistory to the Meroitic Period

Larry Ross



With a Foreword by

Gregory Kirk Anderson

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to Dr. Ralph M. Rowlett (Harvard 1968),
who inspired and supported my interest in Nubia at
the University of Missouri-Columbia.

Preface

Nubia. The name conjures the mystery and myth of a forgotten culture rendered mute by time. But the pyramids and sphinxes of its northern neighbor, Egypt, have commanded the attention of men for millennia. Since inspiring the rise of modern archeology in the late eighteenth century, the land has been scoured for its secrets.

Massive temples with imposing columns have emerged from its sands, and dark burial chambers have come to light. Their vivid murals, treasure troves, and decoded hieroglyphics proclaim Egypt's history, customs, religion, and might. In contrast, Nubia appears a nation of country cousins whose rustic culture became assimilated in the sophisticated civilization of its northern masters.

Dr. Larry Ross challenges this conventional view with a comprehensive scholarly work that synthesizes and scrupulously documents the latest archeological research. Nubia, it appears, was not all that rustic, nor were Nubia and Egypt all that distinct. Indeed, "Egyptian culture" is now known to have sprung from a Nubian root. Nubian gold made Nubia the first trading hub along the Nile, and trade made the early Nubians more sophisticated and cosmopolitan than their neighbors to the north. The first pottery in Africa arose in Nubia, and the Pharonic tradition with its cult symbols began with Nubian rulers. The first pharaohs were of Nubian ancestry as surely as Nubian gold flowed through Pharonic coffers. The traditional distinction between Egypt and Nubia oversimplifies the complex relationship of two neighbors intertwined in one cultural area.

If Nubians were the founding aristocracy of Nile Valley Civilization, why this caricature of them as rustics? Two answers can be given, one from the distant past, the other from the recent past. Though the first Pharaoh of the Middle Kingdom came from a Nubian mother, the rise of the Nubian nation-state Kerma came to pose a distinct threat to his successors. Kerma allied with the Hyskos in their subjugation of Egypt that ended the Middle Kingdom, and after Egypt threw off the Hyskos yoke, it exacted revenge on Kerma by conquering it. Hence followed the Egyptian propaganda of "wretched Kush," a political lie that justified the exploitation of Nubian gold from a vassal state.

But why has this Pharonic propaganda of the New Kingdom been so thoughtlessly accepted the last two centuries? The answer lies in the mindset of the pioneering European archeologists. Steeped in constructs of "race" that sharply differentiated "civilization" from "darkest Africa," they could not imagine Egyptian splendors rising from dark-skinned "negroids" of the Nile. Therefore, they arbitrarily hypothesized light-skinned Asiatics or a mysterious "dynastic race" as the forebears of pharonic greatness.

As Foucault pointed out, historical method can not yield a progressive understanding that rises in a steady, unbroken line, but must invite continual re-evaluation in the light of new evidence and a new cultural contextualization of old evidence. Dr. Ross invokes Foucault as he parallels the methodology of history with the paradigm shifts that Thomas Kuhn emphasized in the development of scientific models. *Nubia and Egypt 10,000 B. C. to 400 A.D.* proposes a paradigm shift in our understanding of Nubian and Egyptian

history: whether one agrees with Dr. Ross or not, his argument is one that must be addressed.

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Introduction

Although a number of exceptional books have been written about Nubia and Egypt, characterizations of the *relationship* between the two are often somewhat confusing, or even an outright misrepresentation of this culture area. Recent archaeological data, and reinterpretations of previously collected material, provide us with the opportunity to take a fresh look at the impact that Nubia had on Egypt, and *vice versa*. Dr. Christopher Ehret raised some important questions regarding interpretation, and the use of the terms "tribe," "primitive," and "race" that permeate the literature, in *The Civilizations of Africa*:

"Historians of ancient times fall into a related interpretive trap. They classify certain societies as civilizations and the rest as something other than civilizations. So general and uncritical is the acceptance of this practice by both the readers and writers of history that it may astonish the reader to learn just how insubstantial and inadequately grounded such a conceptualization is. Why are Africans in 'traditional' dress said to be engaging in 'tribal' dancing, when Europeans garbed similarly in the clothes of an earlier time are said to be performing 'folk' dances? Why is the work of African artists, done in the styles of previous centuries, called 'tribal' art? Is it not simply an art fashioned by Africans? Why is the rural African man of today, who is more attuned to rural culture and less caught up in the modern-

day African urban milieu called the ‘tribesman’?
Isn’t he just a man, the same as any other?”¹

Westernization and the Study of Africa

Thus, the study of Africa embodies a subsumed *Westernization* that even goes so far as to classify African cultural products as “Art,” in the Western sense, which is again a pejorative misrepresentation, because there is no word in West African languages for “Art” according to Ousmane Sembene the Senegalese novelist. In 2002 I took my *Black Aesthetics* class to the Joslyn Art Museum, which is the main museum for the city of Omaha, Nebraska. It is a large, fabulous facility that even has a number of grand pianos where concerts are performed in an atrium. The museum has a full-fledged dining area, and an immaculate gift shop as well: just what you would expect to see in a major museum, in one of America’s major cities. We toured the entire facility, and it had an exceptional collection; however I found that something appeared to be missing. Nowhere in the museum was there an African artifact. Not one. I asked one of the staff members at the museum, “Do you have any African artifacts in the collection?” He remarked, “We had a Nubian exhibit, however it was a traveling exhibit and it is gone.”

“Ousmane Sembene, the great Senegalese novelist and film director, asserts that there is no word for ‘art’ in any West African languages. Such important signals against the

¹ Christopher Ehret, *The Civilizations of Africa* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002)

universalization of Western perspectives are not always respected. In some cultures, no distinction is made between music and medicine, and neophytes are trained in both. We may have to speak of the two functions separately in order to make sense to ourselves, but how can we remember that by doing so we are committing a violence to the worldview of others? If we could imagine some intellectual system that could mediate the radical contextual differences among the values and emphases reflected in the world's different cultural hierarchies, could we imagine that system emerging from the Euro-humanist tradition of the aesthetic, or with more difficulty, imagine it being established and scrutinized in a way that did not support the interests of the endorsers at the expense of the analyzed?"²

If we are to 'accurately understand' Nubia, Egypt, and their interaction in antiquity, these narcissistic difficulties must be overcome: granted, it will not be easy... Dr. Clyde R. Taylor also points out the fact that a "Black Aesthetic" is actually an oxymoron, and his study of *the Aesthetic* (i.e. the Art-Culture System upon which museums are based) explains why the collection, at the Joslyn Museum of Art, is devoid of African representation: other museum collections may follow suit, and on the surface this may seem like 'a good thing', in that they are not classifying African cultural products as 'Art'. However, there is a more disturbing reason that this may be the case, in view of Ehret

² Clyde R. Taylor, *The Mask of Art: Breaking the Aesthetic Contract – Film and Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998) 54.

and Taylor's perspectives. Ehret challenges the generally accepted designation of "Civilization" that is irrationally determined, in many instances. The designation of ancient Egyptian language as "Afro-Asiatic" or "Afrasian" adds fuel to the ambiguous representation of Nubia-Egypt's interaction sphere: it suggests that Egypt was 'somehow' related to Asia, and therefore its civilization had some sort of presumed 'outside influence'. This is a veiled suggestion that Africans were not capable of developing an advanced civilization that built the pyramids, without 'Asian' help; by attaching an 'Asian' origin, early Egyptologists eventually took the ancient Egyptians out of Africa, and *immigration theories* abounded (currently, the U.S. Department of State has Egypt listed in the *Middle East*, not Africa):

"At each stage in the northward spread of these ideas, Afrasan-speaking communities, we suspect, were the prime movers in the resulting subsistence transformations. As we have seen, the Afrasan language family, contrary to widely held presumptions, originated not in Asia but in Africa, in the regions between the Nubian Nile and the northern Ethiopian Highlands. From there the early Afrasan societies expanded both southeastward into the Horn of Africa and northward up the Nile and the Red Sea hills. The arrival along the lower Nile of the ancient Egyptian language, a member of the Afrasan family, ultimately traces back to these northward movements. The earliest ancestral form of the Semitic languages, another subgroup of the Afrasan family, may have been brought into Palestine-Syria by the Mushabian communities;

alternatively, some later, as yet archaeologically unidentified movement of people may have taken Semitic from Africa into far southwestern Asia.”³

So, if the so-called *Afro-Asiatic* or *Afrasan* language originated in Africa, what does it have to do with Asia? An adjunct to this is the claim that some people migrated from Asia, into Egypt, and they are responsible for the emergence of Egyptian civilization... Archaeologists Drs. Bruce Trigger, B.J. Kemp, D. O'Connor and A.B. Lloyd addressed this claim in *Ancient Egypt: A Social History*, which was published in 1983 by the Cambridge University Press. Assumptions that were made in the past by the leading Archaeologists, like Sir Flinders Petrie, have been remarkably resilient:

“Those once fashionable interpretations that automatically assumed that in antiquity all cultural changes resulted from the intrusion of new groups of settlers into an area have been eschewed. Petrie argued that the Fayum A culture represented a ‘Solutrean migration from the Caucasus’, which he stated was also the homeland of the Badarian people. The Amratian white-lined pottery was introduced into Egypt by ‘Libyan invasions’, while the Gerzean culture was brought there by ‘the Eastern Desert Folk’, who overran and dominated Egypt. Finally, Egypt was unified by the ‘Falcon Tribe’ or ‘Dynastic Race’, that ‘certainly had originated in

³ Christopher Ehret, *The Civilizations of Africa* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002) 38-39.

Elam' and came to Egypt by way of Ethiopia and the Red Sea. Vandier has suggested that an invasion is necessary to account for the development of the Gerzean culture [and] has recently maintained that the Early Dynastic culture was introduced by a 'master race' coming from the east. Each of these suggestions has been specifically denied by other Egyptologists."⁴

The irrational beliefs that Dr. Trigger describes remain in peoples' minds today, however there is incontrovertible evidence that the emergence of a sedentary techno-complex in Nubia, which led to civilization along the Nile River, can be seen as the culmination of cultural changes that many indigenous human populations initiated about 12,000 – 10,000 years ago, when global temperatures began to rise, even predating such practices in Egypt. (The issues that have been discussed above should be kept in mind, at all times, when scholars read materials regarding Nubia and Egypt.)

This book will discuss human origins in Africa, and the major changes that came about as a result of the shift from gathering and hunting, to intensive agriculture and pastoralism. Importantly, not *all* human populations made this shift during the *Holocene*, however population dynamics have displaced such populations to peripheral zones, which is a pattern that generally accompanies agricultural praxis. In conjunction, the reexamination of the connections between Nubia and Egypt, often portrayed as separate "races" of people even though they remained in constant contact, (as Dr. Ernst Mayr once stated,

⁴ B.G. Trigger, B.J. Kemp, D. O'Connor and A.B. Lloyd, *Ancient Egypt: A Social History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983) 2-3.