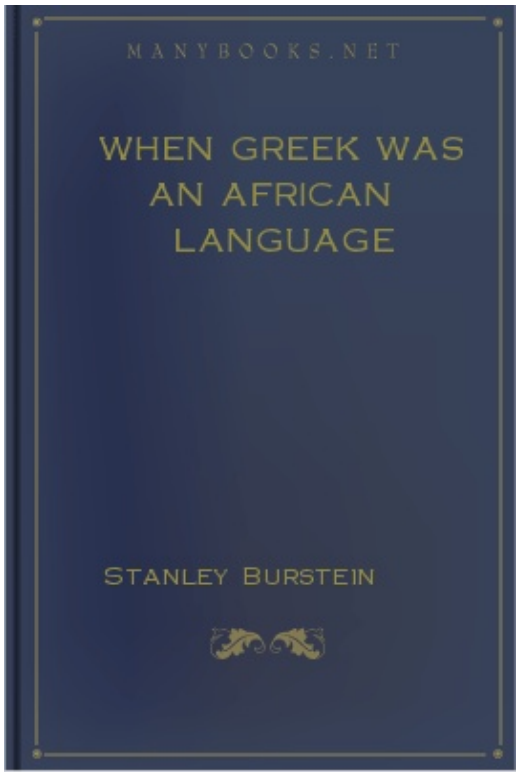

Frank M. Snowden, Jr. Annual Lectures

Stanley Burstein, *Frank M. Snowden, Jr. Lectures, Howard University*, When Greek was an African Language, http://chs.harvard.edu/publications.sec/online-print-books.ssp/frank-m.-snowden-jr.. Center for Hellenic Studies, Washington, DC. August, 2006

When Greek was an African Language

Stanley Burstein

Introduction

I would like to thank the department of Classics and Eta Sigma Phi for the invitation to deliver the third annual Snowden Lecture and making possible my visit to Howard University and especially for the opportunity to honor Frank. It seems that I have known Frank for my whole career. I first met him through his books at the beginning of my career in the early 1970s and in person something over a decade later. Since then we have done the usual things scholars do: corresponded, met at conferences, and been on programs together. Throughout those many years I have enjoyed and profited immensely from his work.

When Frank published *Blacks in Antiquity* in 1970 there was no name for the field of scholarship to which it belonged. It was a pioneering work in a field that didn't yet exist, the ancient history of the African Diaspora. *Blacks in Antiquity* is a masterful work. After more than three decades it remains unchallenged and Frank in Dante's words is still "the master of those who know." In the time that I have today I could only hope to add a few footnotes to his account of the place of Africans in Mediterranean society. Instead, I will try to tell a different but related story, that of the role of Greek and Greek culture in ancient and medieval Nubia. [1] I hope Frank finds it interesting. A point on terminology first, however. I will use Nubia and Nubians in this paper to refer to the Nile valley south of Egypt and its inhabitants, and Kush, Makuria, Alwah, etc. for the various states in the region. Now for my story.

It is a huge story, literally. Spatially it covers southern Egypt and the northern and central Sudan from the first cataract at modern Aswan to south of Khartoum. Chronologically it spans almost a millennium and a half from the Hellenistic period to the end of the middle ages. It is also a story that could not even begin to be told until recently. In part, this was because of the lack of sources that is the bane of all ancient historians. Until recently, native Nubian sources were almost entirely lacking, and only fragments remain of the once extensive Classical and Arabic accounts of the region and its peoples. Lack of sources was not, however, the only problem. The historiography of Nubia is the oldest body of western historical scholarship dealing with the African interior. [2] Like any historiography, however, it reflects the biases of the various periods in which historians of Nubia wrote.

Put simply, the surviving ancient and medieval accounts of Nubia are profoundly Egyptocentric. [3] Nubia and its peoples and cultures were mentioned only when they were relevant to Egypt; and when they were mentioned, they were discussed from the perspective of Egypt. Not surprisingly, when modern histories of Nubia first began to be written in the 19 &supth; th century, they were largely based on the classical and Arabic sources, supplemented by Egyptian texts; and they, therefore, reflected the biases of their sources. [4] The problem was compounded, moreover, by the fact that their authors wrote during the heyday of European imperialism in Africa and, not surprisingly, they shared the then current popular view of Africans as inferior peoples, capable, at best, only of receiving and imitating influences from superior foreign cultures.

As a result of these factors, when the presence of the Greek language and Greek influence in Nubia was recognized, no effort was made to understand how they functioned within ancient and medieval Nubian culture. Greek objects found in Nubia were treated instead as indices of Hellenization, which was conceived as a one-sided process of acculturation involving the deliberate decision by non-Greek individuals—usually elites—to transform themselves and their society by abandoning their own culture in favor of Greek culture. [5] The equation was simple. The greater the number of Greek objects and other examples of Greek influence, the greater the degree of Hellenization. One example will have to stand for many. After reviewing the evidence for Greek imports into Nubia, the great Hellenistic and Roman historian M. I. Rostovtzeff concluded that Hellenistic Meroe "with its Hellenistic palaces, its Hellenistic bath, its Ethiopian-Hellenistic statues and decorative frescoes, became a little Nubian Alexandria." [6]

This situation has changed dramatically during the last half century. A new historiography of Nubia has emerged that treats Nubian culture as a distinct entity created by the inhabitants of the upper Nile valley and not as a remote outpost of Egyptian civilization doomed to ultimate decline and extinction because of its location in the interior of Africa. The catalysts for this change were two of the major developments of the Cold War period: the construction of the huge Aswan High Dam and the end of Europe's African empires.

This is not the place to tell either the story of how the Soviet Union came to construct the Aswan High Dam or the end of Europe's imperial dreams in Africa. What does concern us, however, is the fact that construction of the dam was preceded by the largest and most complex archaeological salvage campaign in world history—the UNESCO sponsored international effort to excavate and record every significant archaeological site in the 200 mile stretch of the Upper Nile valley that would be flood by Lake Nasser, the lake created by the dam. [7] The result was the discovery and ongoing publication of a mass of new native Nubian sources--both textual and material--for the history of just about every aspect of ancient and medieval Nubian life..

Decolonization, on the other hand, transformed the writing of African history, encouraging the emergence of a new historiography of Africa that placed Africans at the center of their history. The Sudan was no exception. As a result, it is possible for the first time to discuss the place of Greek and Greek culture in Nubia in a new way, one that focuses on its function as one element in the long history of a culture that was created by Nubians. In the rest of this paper I will try to give you a progress report on the current state of that story.

THE HELLENISTIC PERIOD [8]

When does the history of Greek and Greek culture in Nubia begin? At first glance we seem to have a firm date. According to the second century BC historian Agatharchides of Cnidus, the author of the standard classical account of the region, Greeks first entered Nubia, when Ptolemy II campaigned there in the 270s BC. Precise dates for the beginnings of complex historical processes are rarely what they seem, and, unfortunately, that is true in the case.

While people from ancient Nubia are attested in the Aegean as early as the second millennium BC, [9] direct Greek contact with the region began in 593 BC, when the army of the 26 &supth; th dynasty Egyptian king Psamtek II campaigned in Nubia. Greek mercenaries were part of Ptamtek's army, and they commemorated their role in his expedition in graffiti scratched on the colossi of Ramses II at Abu Simbel. [10] Four centuries later Greeks again entered Nubia. In the late 330s BC Alexander dispatched a small reconnaissance expedition into the region, allegedly to find the sources of the Nile, and a decade or two later Ptolemy I raided northern Nubia. [11] Greek objects also occasionally reached Nubia before the 270s like a spectacular vase by the 5 &supth; th century BC Athenian potter Sotades, now in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, that was the prized possession of a Nubian aristocrat buried in the west cemetery at Meroe.

Ptolemy II's campaign, therefore, was not the first but at least the fourth time Greek soldiers operated in Nubia. Why Ptolemy II invaded Nubia is not clear, but Agatharchides suggests that he hoped to put an end to attempts by the kingdom of Kush in the central Sudan to expand its influence north toward the Egyptian border. The details of the campaign are lost, but the poet Theocritus (*Idyll* 16, lines 86-87) claimed that he "cut off a part of Black Aithiopia." presumably the so-called Dodecaschoenus--the roughly seventy-five mile stretch of the Nile immediately south of the first cataract--together with the important gold mining region east of the Nile in the Wadi Allaqi. Inscriptions and coins fill out the picture, indicating that Ptolemy II also garrisoned some of the old Middle Kingdom forts in the second cataract area, and suggesting that his authority temporarily, at least, reached the modern border between Egypt and the Sudan at Wadi Halfa. What set Ptolemy II's Nubian campaign apart from previous Greek incursions south of Egypt, however, was that it opened a period of sustained contact between Kush and Ptolemaic Egypt, and the reason for that was something new: Ptolemy's need to find a secure source of war elephants.

The military use of elephants was millennia old in Asia. The Greeks and Macedonians first encountered them in battle, however, during Alexander's campaigns. Although the Ptolemies like other Hellenistic kings considered these living "tanks" an essential component of their armies, acquiring them was a problem because of their Seleucid rivals' monopoly of Indian elephants and mahouts. They had no choice except to find an African source for elephants and that led to the establishment of close relations between Ptolemaic Egypt and Kush that lasted for the remainder of the third century BC. Armed elephant hunting expeditions, sometimes numbering hundreds of men as well as explorers and diplomats—one named Simonides the Younger even lived at Meroe for seven years and wrote an unfortunately now lost book about his experiences-- freely circulated throughout Kushite territory.

On the Greek side the results of Ptolemy II and his successors' initiative are clear and uncontroversial. Besides gaining access to a ready supply of African products including hardwoods, incense, gold, slaves, ivory, and even animals for Egyptian temples and Ptolemy's zoo including a rhinoceros, the reports Ptolemaic explorers and hunters prepared revolutionized Greek knowledge of the African interior. [12] They recorded the Nile valley between the Egyptian border and Meroe in detail. They correctly identified the Nile's three principal tributaries—the Atbara, Blue and White Niles— together with their native names and meanings. Rumors may even have reached them of the Nile's ultimate source in Lake Victoria in modern Uganda. [13]

The ethnographic map of Nubia also snapped into clear focus. As might be expected, the bulk of the information concerned the kingdom of Kush and its capital, Meroe, the Ptolemies chief rival for influence in Nubia. The reports detailed its relations with other ethnic groups in the region and described the principal features of Kushite culture, especially the public aspects of Kushite kingship including details of the coronation ritual and the succession rules of the Kushite kings, descriptions of Kushite royal regalia and the

practice of human sacrifice at the death of a king.

While the high quality of the Ptolemaic accounts of Nubia and its peoples are clear, so also are their limitations. Ptolemaic diplomats and military officers were good observers; they even recorded a dangerous form of elephant hunting that was still in use in the 19 &supth; th century. [14] They were not, however, anthropologists. They could, and sometimes did, misunderstand what they saw or were told, once mistaking a troop of chimpanzees for a tribe of tree-living natives. Still, with all their flaws the Hellenistic accounts of Nubia were not equaled until the high Middle Ages. On the Greek side, therefore, the results of Ptolemy II's and his successors' activities in Nubia are clear: Greeks acquired access to elephants and other sub-Saharan African products and relatively accurate information of contemporary Kush and its culture that contemporary historians of the Sudan still find useful. But what about the impact on Kushites and their culture?

Military defeat, loss of territory, and foreign penetration of their territory on a scale unparalleled since the conquest of Nubia a millennium earlier by New Kingdom Egypt characterize the initial Kushite encounter with Ptolemaic Egypt. This would hardly seem at first glance a promising foundation for cultural exchange. Nevertheless, as I mentioned earlier, scholars have long maintained that, despite all these negatives, contact with Ptolemaic Egypt inspired the kings of Kush to pursue a policy of deliberate policy of Hellenization that ultimately transformed their capital Meroe into a "little Nubian Alexandria." The principal evidence for this thesis is a passage from the first century BC historian Diodorus [15] describing a bloody confrontation in the 3 &suprd; rd century BC between a Greek educated king, Ergamenes—Arqamani--and the priesthood of Amon at Meroe. Specifically, according to Diodorus, study of Greek philosophy enabled Ergamenes to brush aside the priests' demand that he commit suicide and to enter "with his soldiers into the unapproachable place where stood, as it turned out, the golden shrine of the Ethiopians, put the priests to the sword, and after abolishing this custom thereafter ordered affairs after his own will."

The Greek bias of Diodorus' account is obvious, but archaeological evidence also leaves no doubt of the far-reaching impact of Ergamenes' revolution. Henceforth Kushite political and religious life was centralized at Meroe. The old royal cemetery at Napata near the fourth cataract of the Nile was replaced by a new burial ground east of Meroe. Kushite royal iconography reveals that the kings of Kush also adopted a new, less Egyptianizing style of regalia. The evidence, moreover, indicates that in the third century BC Kushite kings transferred their patronage from Egyptian gods like Amon to local deities connected with the office of the king but lacking identifiable Egyptian backgrounds such as the lion headed war-god Apedemak. These deities were also worshipped in temples that creatively combined Egyptian and Nubian traditions such as the so-called Lion Temples and the huge pilgrimage site of Musawarrat es Sufra. Finally, a new quasi-alphabetic script for Meroitic was developed to replace Egyptian hieroglyphs, making possible the replacement of Egyptian by Meroitic as the language of government and religion.

While we lack a clear statement of the rationale for these changes, they clearly amounted to a partial declaration of independence from the Egyptian traditions that had been central to Kushite elite culture since the glorious days of the late 8 &supth; th and early 7 &supth; th centuries BC when the Nubian Pharaohs of the 25 &supth; th dynasty had united Kush and Egypt in a vast empire that stretched from the Mediterranean to the central Sudan. But were they also a vote for Hellenization? Such evidence as we have suggests, not surprisingly, that the answer is more complex than a simple yes or no. The Egyptian aspects of traditional Kushite culture were reinterpreted in accordance with local values, but they were not repudiated.

Although they themselves were not Egyptian, the rulers of Kush, like the Pharaohs, had claimed to be sons of the sun god Re and kings of Upper and Lower Egypt. They traditionally had conducted their government in Egyptian; celebrated their exploits in hieroglyphic inscriptions; and were buried with Egyptian rites in pyramids decorated with excerpts from the Book of the Dead and other traditional funerary texts. Even the reform by Ergamenes and his successors of the Kushite monarchy was expressed in forms that were derived ultimately from Egypt. Not surprisingly, therefore, it was the Egyptian side of Ptolemaic civilization that attracted the Kushites in the decades following Ptolemy II's Nubian campaign. Thus, the royal titularies of the

third century Kushite kings and their regalia echo those of the contemporary Ptolemies. Even when they borrowed an office from the Ptolemaic government, they used the Egyptian designation for it, not the Greek. [16]

Similarly, when Kushite kings used Greek architects and masons to build temples, as they did at the pilgrimage center of Musawwarrat es-Sufra, south of Meroë, the temples they built were adaptations of Egyptian, not Greek temples. A good example is the so-called Lion temple, excavated and partially restored by the East Germans in the 1960's. Here in an impressive series of reliefs accompanied by texts-- based on Egyptian originals that from Philae and inscribed in hieroglyphs typical of the early Ptolemaic period--the Kushite king Arnekhamani, is depicted wearing a Ptolemaic style crown and receiving pledges of victory from the Kushite pantheon. Only now, however, the pantheon is headed now not by Amon but by the native war god Apedemak, who also wears a similar crown. By contrast, the evidence for Greek influence in Hellenistic Kush is easy to find but limited in scale and scope.

The most dramatic examples are the possible adoption of the use of war elephants and the construction in the so-called royal enclosure at Meroe of a small water sanctuary decorated with statuary modeled on Greek originals. The discovery of a set of Greek flutes—one of the few ever discovered—in a tomb at Meroe suggests that Greek musicians may have performed for elite audiences at there. Otherwise, however, the evidence consists of a limited range of luxury goods such as metal vessels of various types--goose head wine strainers, drinking cups, buckets and basins--and fragments of wine amphorae, which are found in palace complexes and royal or noble tombs at Meroe and Napata.

Clearly, the development of a taste for Greek wine by the Kushite aristocracy and possibly also the use of war elephants, were the most notable results of the exposure to Greek culture in Hellenistic Kush. As for knowledge and use of the Greek language, however we explain Ergamenes' Greek education—a "wandering scholar" has actually been suggested [17] —the evidence is scant. An inscription from Philae [18] and the historian Diodorus' (3.11) claim to have spoken with Aithiopian ambassadors at Alexandria, however, suggest that knowledge of Greek was limited and that its primary use was communication with Ptolemaic diplomats and officials. In the Roman period, however, the scope of Greek influence and the use of Greek both increased and began to affect core areas of Kushite culture, particularly religion.

ROME AND KUSH [19]

As was true in the case of the Ptolemies, the first encounter between Rome and Kush was hostile. Following the collapse of Ptolemaic power in northern Nubia after the Roman conquest of Egypt in 30 BC, both Kush and Rome rushed to fill the vacuum with predictable results. Fresh from the suppression of a revolt in southern Egypt, C. Cornelius Gallus, the new Roman Prefect of Egypt, crossed into Nubia in force, appointed a Roman client ruler for Lower Nubia, and forced local Kushite officials to recognize Roman suzerainty and to agree to pay tribute to Rome. Roman suzerainty over Kush proved ephemeral, however. A decade of raids and counter-raids by Kushite and Roman forces convinced the emperor Augustus to withdraw Roman forces from all Nubian territory but the Dodecaschoenus. A long period of what probably should be called cold peace followed that lasted until the mid-3 &suprd; rd century AD.

However we characterize relations between Kush and Rome, the fact is that almost two and half centuries of relative peace led to unprecedented prosperity in Kush. Trade with Roman Egypt expanded in tandem with growing Roman demand for the traditional products of Africa—gold, ivory, hard woods, slaves, and exotic animals, now desired both for Egyptian temples and the Roman arena. The archaeological evidence for this prosperity is still evident today in evidence for greatly expanded temple construction and renovation—most Kushite temples date in their present form from this period—and increasingly wealthy royal and noble graves. Not surprisingly, Kushite exposure to Greek and Greek culture also increased greatly beginning in the late first century BC.

The evidence of that exposure is abundant, but how Nubians responded to it differed depending on the nature of their relationship to Rome. In northern Nubia the Roman presence was direct and intense. Northern Nubia was treated as an extension of Roman Egypt and the Roman footprint on the land was heavy. They laid out roads, built temples and forts, and installed garrisons at strategic points. They also replaced Egyptian with Greek as the language of administration and law, introduced new taxes. Roman officials "rode circuit" in the region, thereby reducing the authority of local judicial officials. Imported trade goods, pottery and particularly wine circulated freely.

For most of the local population this was the extent of their contact with Greco-Roman culture. As elsewhere in the Roman Empire, however, the Romans encouraged the assimilation of members of the local elite, and some took advantage of the opportunity, becoming part of the local Roman establishment, joining Roman auxiliary units, and even identifying with Rome. Most such individuals are invisible to us, but we have evidence for one, a Nubian named Paccius Maximus, who received a Greek education, became an auxiliary cavalry officer, composed complex avant-garde Greek poetry, examples of which he had inscribed on the walls of local temples at Kalabsha and Hiera Sycaminos, and even referred to his own native Nubian language as a "barbarian" language. [20]

Further south in independent Kush, however, the situation was different. The physical evidence is abundant, but its significance is ambiguous. Despite extensive looting of graves, temples, and other sites since antiquity, numerous objects imported from Roman Egypt during the Principate have been discovered on Kushite sites. As was true in the Hellenistic Period, the bulk of this substantial corpus of imported classical objects consists of a wide variety of small but high quality domestic goods: metal, glass, and ceramic objects including lamps, drinking vessels, dishes and other eating utensils; items related to personal adornment such as rings, jewelry, beads, and mirrors; and household furnishings including the remains of furniture and decorative objects, and, of course, large numbers of wine amphorae. [21]

Nevertheless, despite the generally peaceful relations between Kush and Rome and growing trade, Kushite attitudes toward Rome seem to have been ambivalent at best when not openly hostile. Particularly revealing is how the Kushites commemorated their escape from Roman domination in the 20s BC. We may even possess the Kushite account of that event on an inscription that is now in the British Museum, but our inability to understand Meroitic forbids certainty. [22] Fortunately, a photographic record still survives of the now lost decoration of a memorial temple the Kushites built in the Royal Enclosure at Meroe. [23] That decoration consisted of frescoes depicting bound Roman prisoners and other enemies under the feet of a seated queen while under the threshold of the temple they placed a bronze head of Augustus taken from an imperial cult statue at Syene, where it would be stepped on every time someone entered the shrine, a common way for Kushites to symbolize their supremacy over enemies.

At the same time, there clearly was a renewed emphasis on Kushite tradition. So, unlike Hellenistic Kushite kings, who often modeled their titularies on those of the Ptolemies, Roman period Kushite kings ignored the titularies of the contemporary Roman emperors and modeled theirs instead on those of the Twenty Fifth Dynasty and their successors, thereby reaffirming their ties to the founders of their kingdom.

Not surprisingly, therefore, while there is evidence for the incorporation of significant elements of Greek material culture in Kushite elite life and even, as we'll see, for the teaching of Greek at Meroe, except for limited penetration of Greek cults, particularly that of Sarapis, [24] there is no evidence for significant Hellenization. Instead, developments in Kush paralleled those in Roman Egypt where "Greek" and, one should add, Greek art, had become, in the perceptive characterization of David Frankfurter "simply a neutral lingua franca, the medium of broadest circulation." [25] As such, Greek and Greek art were both, therefore, also available for the expression of Kushite concepts and values without signifying acculturation to Greek culture. In the area of art the result was the creation of an eclectic art that combined Greek and Kushite elements to express Kushite concerns.

Examples are the victory stele of Prince Sherkarer at Jebil Qeili with its Greek style solar deity, the fresco of Herakles as master of animals from the royal enclosure at Meroe, the use of Greek architectural orders—specifically Corinthian—on Meroitic temples, and the adaptation of the iconography of the Greco-Egyptian god Sarapis to portray the Kushite royal god Apedemak. The use of Greek themes in Kushite religion was not limited, however, to public culture but extended into funerary religion as illustrated by a pair of remarkable blue glass flutes from a tomb at Sedeinga, that were broken into dozens of pieces during a late version of a traditional Kushite burial ritual, the breaking of the red pots. [26]

The flutes, which bear Greek inscriptions reading "Drink, you shall live," also raise the question of the knowledge of Greek at Kush. While we probably should not expect to find assimilated individuals like Paccius Maximus at Meroe or elsewhere in independent Kushite territory, the discovery in the royal enclosure at Meroe of a column drum with the Greek alphabet does suggest that Greek was taught at Meroe. As in the Hellenistic period, the initial motive was probably pragmatic; the Kings of Kush needed officials like the appropriately named Great Ambassadors to Rome who were fluent in both Greek and Egyptian to deal both with Roman officials and the priests of the temple of Isis at Philae.

One tantalizing but frustrating piece of evidence, however, raises the possibility that the flute you just saw was not isolated but that the Kushites used Greek or, at least, the Greek script, relatively widely for religious purposes. Sir John Garstang discovered during his excavations at Meroe an offering table in the noble cemetery at Meroe that was inscribed in Greek letters. Unfortunately, all that we have of this important find is a muddy photograph so, barring its rediscovery, we cannot determine whether the offering formula had been translated into Greek or, alternatively, the Greek alphabet had been adapted to write Meroitic just as was being done in Egypt at about the same time. [27]

Can we say anything more about the extent of the knowledge of Greek in Kush? Most scholars doubt it, but there is one piece of evidence that suggests that Greek did, in fact, become fairly widely known at Meroe. Fragments exist of two victory thrones set up at Meroe by kings of Axum bearing Greek inscriptions celebrating the establishment of Axumite authority over Kush in the 4 &supth; th century AD. [28] Now, Axumite royal inscriptions were regularly inscribed in Ge'ez, Sabaean—a South Arabian language--and Greek. The fact, therefore, that Axumite kings chose Greek and not one of their other official languages for their monuments at Meroe suggests that they believed that it was the language most likely to be understood there. Unfortunately, this has to remain only a suggestion for the moment.

Be that as it may, the establishment of Axumite suzerainty over Kush marked the beginning of a profound transformation throughout Nubia. That transformation took almost three centuries and changed fundamentally the political and cultural life of Nubia. The first step in this transformation was the disappearance of the kingdom of Kush in the mid-fourth century AD, and with it the political order that had dominated the upper Nile valley for more than a millennium.

More than a century of conflict followed between two of Kush's former subjects, the Nobatai—the ancestors of the contemporary Nubian peoples--and the Blemmyes. By the end of the 5 &supth; th century AD that struggle had ended with the victory of the Nobatai and the replacement of the Kushite empire with three Nobatai dominated kingdoms: Nobadia in northern Nubia, Makuria in central Nubia, and Alwah in southern Nubia. By the end of the sixth century AD the three kingdoms had converted to Christianity--specifically, to the Monophysite form of Christianity followed by the Coptic Church to the present. Fast forward almost another century and the new Nubian kingdoms were faced with a new political reality: the establishment of Arab rule in Egypt and the eastern Mediterranean and isolation from what was left of the Roman Empire.

CHRISTIAN NUBIA [29]

Taken together these three developments mark the end of the ancient history of Nubia. [30] As usual, our limited sources preclude a detailed narrative of these events, allowing only brief snapshots of scattered