

## From Raids to Conquest (and Retreat): The Middle Kingdom in Nubia

by George Wood

*"Nubians, I was hoping to avoid them"<sup>1</sup>*

It seems that, for the typical ancient Egyptian, the world was the Two Lands, the strip of black earth along the Nile River inundation from the Delta in the north to Elephantine island at the First Cataract in the south. Moving away from the country was unusual, and with a mindset focused on a pleasant afterlife, the risk of being buried outside the Two Lands without the proper preparation should have been unthinkable. "The Story of Sinuhe" not only reflects the homesickness of an Egyptian in exile, it would also seem to underline the vital importance of being put to earth within the Two Lands if one is to enjoy eternal life.

Outside the Two Lands the earth was red and dry, or the rivers ran in the sky<sup>2</sup> or backwards (north to south like the Euphrates).

So longterm adventures abroad would have been somewhat contrary to the core Egyptian spirit. (There is another opinion here, Williams<sup>3</sup> says that during the 12th Dynasty, the period just after Sinuhe, there were many expatriates who left Egypt.)

The New Kingdom empire in Syria-Palestine was a bit like the Soviet domination of Eastern Europe after 1945, a buffer zone prompted by invasions from outside (Sweden in the 18th century, France in the 19th, and Germany twice in the 20th). In the case of ancient Egypt, the move into the Levant during the New Kingdom was in response to the trauma of the Hykos invasion.

Egypt's ventures south, however, into Lower Nubia (Wawat) and Upper Nubia (Kush), were for quite another reason, to secure access to resources, both those available through direct mining and quarrying as well as those procured through trade.

In mineral wealth, Nubia offered primarily, gold, but there was also amethyst, turquoise, copper, and gneiss.<sup>4</sup> It was also the channel for exotic items from the African hinterland from ivory, giraffes, and incense to a famous dwarf<sup>5</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> "Jewel of the Nile", 1985, DVD release Twentieth Century Fox, 2005, chapter 1

<sup>2</sup> Ancient Egyptian Legends, by M. A. Murray, [1920], at [sacred-texts.com](http://sacred-texts.com) (p 86) and Peters, Elizabeth, A River in the Sky (Harper Collins 2010)

<sup>3</sup> Williams, p 444

<sup>4</sup> Shaw, p 147

<sup>5</sup> Wikipedia, "Harkhuf" and Mertz, pp 87-88

The venture south started slowly. The traditional southern border of Upper Egypt was Elephantine island, at modern Aswan. During the Old Kingdom there were already trading missions south, and the oldest construction at the fort of Buhen, below the Second Cataract, probably dates from the reign of Sneferu in the 4th Dynasty<sup>6</sup>.

The Old Kingdom site showed evidence of what has been claimed to have been copper crushing and smelting. There are early dynastic traces and the royal names of Khafra and Menkaura from the 4th Dynasty and Userhaf, Sahura, Neferirkara, Djedkara, and Isesu from the 5th Dynasty have been found,<sup>7</sup>

During the 6th Dynasty Harkhuf, governor of the southern part of Upper Egypt<sup>8</sup> led three or four diplomatic and/or trading expeditions south, to the apparently still unidentified land of Yam. He brought back ivory, incense, oil of some kind, panther skins, and even a dwarf (apparently a pigmy), the latter much to the delight of the pharaoh Pepy II<sup>9</sup>. His reports also reflect a growing centralization of power in Nubia. At first he writes of the three countries, from south to north, of Satju, Irtjet, and Wawat . After his second expedition he says Irtjet and Satju had merged, and finally by the next expedition, Wawat has been joined to them as well.<sup>10</sup> This growing power, possibly the people called the C group, seems to have forced the Egyptians out of Nubia late in the 5th Dynasty, after a presence there of around 200 years.

This situation apparently continued through the First Intermediate Period, although there are reports that during this period many Nubian soldiers served as mercenaries under the Egyptians<sup>11</sup>.

## **The Return**

The Egyptian presence returned to Nubia, ultimately in a much more spectacular fashion, with the rise of the Middle Kingdom.

Under Mentuhotep II a garrison was established at Elephantine, and the Vizier Khety conducted campaigns in Lower Nubia<sup>12</sup>. An inscription of Mentuhotep reads: "Wawat and the Oasis, I annexed them to Upper Egypt"<sup>13</sup>. Reliefs at a chapel at Denderah

---

<sup>6</sup> Wikipedia, "Buhen"

<sup>7</sup> Kemp in Trigger, p 195

<sup>8</sup> Wikipedia, "Harkhuf", Mertz, pp 87-88

<sup>9</sup> Trigger, p 123, Mertz, p 88

<sup>10</sup> Kemp in Trigger, p 126

<sup>11</sup> Grajetzki, p 20

<sup>12</sup> Shaw, p 141

<sup>13</sup> Kemp in Trigger, p 130

indicate that during the reign of Mentuhotep II various Nubian tribes had to pay tribute to the Egyptians<sup>14</sup>.

But these 11th Dynasty interventions were more along the lines of raids, with no lasting presence. Indeed, Mentuhotep III was the first Middle Kingdom monarch to send an expedition to Punt<sup>15</sup>, which might indicate that going through Nubia at that time was difficult, and it was easier or more profitable to go straight to the source for trade goods.

It was during the reign of the first king of the 12th Dynasty, Amenemhat I, that the policy towards Nubia changed, although this did not occur immediately. Early in his reign Amenemhat took an army to Elephantine, but it wasn't until his year 29 that activity was launched farther south, and Nubian policy changed from "a network of sporadic trading and quarrying to conquest and colonization"<sup>16</sup>.

Rock inscriptions at Abu Handal (around 150 kilometers south of Aswan) mention this campaign against Lower Nubia: "In year 29 of Sehetepibre (Amenemhat I) we came to vanquish Wawat." Another, by the vizier Intefiqer, reads: "Then the Nubians of the remaining part of Wawat were slaughtered. Thereupon I sailed victoriously upstream, slaughtering the Nubians on the riverbank and then I sailed downstream plucking corn and cutting down their remaining trees. I set fire to their houses, as one has to act against him who has rebelled against the king"<sup>17</sup>.

The real expansion, and with it the establishment of what Williams calls "the greatest secular construction from the ancient Nile Valley" and the greatest fortifications in the world before the Romans<sup>18</sup>, and compared by Silverman to the great castles of Medieval Europe<sup>19</sup>, came in two stages.

The first was under Amenemhat's successor Senusret I, who seems to have led some 7 campaigns into Nubia, in his year 18 all the way to the Second Cataract. His general Mentuhotep went even farther south. For the first time Egypt conquered and held an area outside the Two Lands. This is when the fort building began. Besides rebuilding Buhen, a huge fortification much larger than the Old Kingdom settlement, built during year 5 of his reign, forts were also built under Senusret I at Aniba, Kubban, Ikkur, and Kor<sup>20</sup>.

---

<sup>14</sup> Grajetzki, p 20

<sup>15</sup> Shaw, p 145

<sup>16</sup> Shaw, p 147

<sup>17</sup> Grajetzki p 31

<sup>18</sup> Williams, p 435

<sup>19</sup> Silverman, David, "Ancient Egypt", Oxford University Press (2003), p 78

<sup>20</sup> Brown, p 1, Kemp, p 172

Buhen became the new southern border, and Lower Egypt became an Egyptian province<sup>21</sup>.

There is little record of Nubia under Amenemhat II beyond at least one expedition to mine gold and amethyst at Wadi el-Hudi, 35 km southeast of Aswan<sup>22</sup>. Citing Grimmel, Yare says there was a long period of Egyptian military inactivity in Nubia during the reigns of Amenemhat II and Senusret II, allowing the Sudanese tribes to advance gradually north again<sup>23</sup>.

Apparently to forestall this perceived threat, an even bigger Egyptian push into Nubia began during the reign of Senusret III, who led several campaigns (in his years 8, 10, 16, and 19), rebuilding the old forts and building a whole series of new fortifications along the Belly of Stones, a 35 kilometer unnavigatable series of rapids that distinguishes the Second Cataract, and establishing the new southern border of Egypt at Semna and Kumma, across from each other at the southern end of the Second Cataract.

Under his reign, a canal was also built around the First Cataract, to facilitate trade from Nubia<sup>24</sup>.

An inscription of Senusret III from Semna confirms this was the border:

"Year 16, 3rd month of winter: His Majesty made the southern boundary at Heh. I have made my boundary, having sailed farther south than my fathers. I have increased what was bequeathed to me...."<sup>25</sup>

There is another fort 1500 meters south of Semna. Measuring around 52 m squared, it is referred to as "Semna South", and seems to have been an observation post or a frontier checkpoint. There's also a defensive wall running at least 4.5 km around Semna and south, which may have extended all the way to Semna South, as well as a number of lookout points in the Second Cataract area<sup>26</sup>.

There were other new forts at Dorginarti, Mirgissa<sup>27</sup>, Dabenarti, Askut, Shelfak, Uronarti, and Serra East.

---

<sup>21</sup> Grajetzki p31, Shaw p 149

<sup>22</sup> Grajetzki, p 47

<sup>23</sup> Yare

<sup>24</sup> Grajetzki, p 53

<sup>25</sup> Kemp, p 174

<sup>26</sup> Kemp, p 175

<sup>27</sup> There are indications of earlier fortifications at Mirgissa built by Senusret I, Wikipedia "Mirgissa"

These Nubian forts fall into two types, built on different terrain, and reflecting the two building periods. The first group are the "plains type" on flat banks of the river, around the Second Cataract. The largest fort ever built in Nubia was that of Buhen. The citadel itself measured 150 x 138 meters, and this was surrounded by an outer fortification about 420 x 150 meters<sup>28</sup>.

The second group of forts resulted from the annexation of entire Second Cataract area during the reign of Senusret III. Except for Mirgissa and Askut (the latter on an island about halfway between Buhen and Semna), these all cluster around the Semna Gorge (Kemp in Trigger, p 132) . These forts are built in rugged terrain, each taking "the form of an irregular polygonal figure designed to fit over an irregular natural prominence"<sup>29</sup>.

The first group of forts built under Senusret I had easy access by water from Egypt. Those farther south along the Second Cataract were harder to reach<sup>30</sup>. When all were in place, each of the forts was in visual contact with its neighbors<sup>31</sup>, and most of the forts not on islands were on the west bank, making it easier to send messengers and reinforcements.

One example is Shalfak, on the west bank. It is small, measuring 80 x 49 m at its widest, with a 5 meter thick wall and external towers. Spur walls on narrow ridges running into the fort added to its defensive capabilities.

The river was the primary communications lifeline. Each of the forts had river frontage with quays (and the later fort Serra East even had a small harbor within its wall)<sup>32</sup>.

Among the forts, those at Kor and Uronarti contain very different structures, described as "royal palaces"<sup>33</sup>, or perhaps better described as temporary sites used to house the kings during their campaigns. Unlike other structures they are aligned, apparently ritually, north-south<sup>34</sup>.

Many of the forts had large granaries. Based on the calculations for Lahun, Reisner estimated that this would have meant a garrison at Kumma of around 50-100, at Semna of 150-300, and at Uronarti of 100-200<sup>35</sup>.

---

<sup>28</sup> Kemp, pp 168-169

<sup>29</sup> Kemp, p 172

<sup>30</sup> Williams, p 444

<sup>31</sup> Yare

<sup>32</sup> Kemp in Trigger, p 131

<sup>33</sup> Grajetzki, p 135

<sup>34</sup> Kemp, p 179

<sup>35</sup> Kemp, p 177

There appears to have been specialization among the forts. Besides suggesting the unusual structures at Kor and Uronarti as administrative centers, Williams says Buhen, Semna South, and Mirgissa could have been staging centers for campaigns<sup>36</sup>. Mirgissa and Askut, both away from the frontier, had the largest granaries, and may have served as emergency or supply depots<sup>37</sup>.

Kubban, located unlike most of the other forts on the east bank, was at the head of the Wadi el-Allaqi and other areas with rich finds of gold and other minerals<sup>38</sup>. Copper was worked at Buhen and Kubban, and possibly Mirgissa as well<sup>39</sup>.

As conquest turned to occupation, a bureaucracy was needed to administer it. Scribes came to join the soldiers at the forts<sup>40</sup>. The governor of the 1st Nome (Ta-Seti) at Elephantine was apparently responsible for the administration of the new province. The first known of these was Sarenput, during the reign of Senusret I<sup>41</sup>.

A collection from the reign of Amenemhat III known as the Semna dispatches contains regularly written reports to Thebes. These deal with trading with Nubians as well as desert patrols<sup>42</sup>. Some record the arrival of Nubians to trade in unspecified commodities. In return they were given bread and beer (the staples of the ancient Egyptian diet), but it is unclear if this was a gift or part of the transactions<sup>43</sup>.

The dispatches also refer to the Medjay, who appear to have been a group of Nubians separate from the C group, who were in close contact with the forts in Lower Nubia, and from the Kushites around Kerma farther south. The Medjay appear to be dwellers in the Eastern Desert<sup>44</sup>. Semnet, at the First Cataract, seems to have been used for gold trade with the Medjay<sup>45</sup>.

Later, during the 13th Dynasty, as forts close and the border moves north, the Medjay appear to begin entering Egypt, taking Egyptian names, and serving as Egyptian police and soldiers<sup>46</sup>. More than 150 of their graves, called "Pan-graves" have been found in Upper Egypt, at sites such as Lahun, Abydos, Ballas, Edfu, and Karnak, as

---

<sup>36</sup> Williams, p 444

<sup>37</sup> Kemp, 178

<sup>38</sup> Baines and Málek, p 181

<sup>39</sup> Kemp in Trigger, p 131

<sup>40</sup> Kemp, p 166

<sup>41</sup> Grajetzki p 84

<sup>42</sup> Kemp p 175

<sup>43</sup> "Egypt Beyond the Pyramids", History Channel, episode 3 " The Daily Life of the Ancient Egyptians", 2009, Kemp in Trigger, p 135

<sup>44</sup> Souza, p 7

<sup>45</sup> Kemp in Trigger, p 135

<sup>46</sup> Souza, p 10

well as at the Nubian forts of Kubban and Mirgissa<sup>47</sup>. (Ultimately the word "Medjay" would come to refer to elite police of any ethnicity in Egypt, and not just Nubians<sup>48</sup>.)

A stela at Semna reads "The southern boundary made in year 8 under the majesty of the king of Upper and Lower Egypt, Khakaure (Senusret III) (given life for ever and ever) in order to prevent any Nubian from passing it going north, either on land or in a boat, or any herds of the Nubians, except a Nubian who comes to trade in Iqen or on official mission."<sup>49</sup>

Iqen has been identified with the great fortress at Mirgissa, located well behind the frontier<sup>50</sup>, which would seem to have been a trading post.

During the reign of Amenemhat III measurements began to be taken at Semna and Kumma to mark the high Nile floods. These measurements last at least until the reign of Queen Sobekkare Sobeknofru, the last ruler of the 12th Dynasty<sup>51</sup>.

## Why?

A key question among Egyptologists has been the reason behind the construction of such mighty fortresses. They were all built (or rebuilt) about the same time, a project that would have required thousands of workers. Forts had been common in Egypt during the turmoil of the First Intermediate Period, but with the establishment of the Middle Kingdom they were no longer used within Egypt. They were expensive to man, and if left unmanned, provided strongholds for bandits or rebellious local noble to establish themselves<sup>52</sup>.

The argument seems to be whether they were intended primarily for trade, or foremost as a defence against the Nubians. There is obvious evidence that the forts were used in connection with mining in Lower Nubia, and the reference to Nubians who wish to trade being referred to Iqen. The forts were certainly there to obtain resources from Nubia (and Egypt was impoverished when control over Nubia was lost).

They may have also served a diplomatic function. Two private stelae suggest that Egyptians were venturing south into Kush on official visits of some sort<sup>53</sup>.

---

<sup>47</sup> Kemp in Trigger, p 170

<sup>48</sup> Wikipedia "Medjay"

<sup>49</sup> Grejetzky, p 52)

<sup>50</sup> Kemp, p 177

<sup>51</sup> Grejetzki, pp 60 & 62

<sup>52</sup> Williams, p 438

<sup>53</sup> Kemp in Trigger, p 132

But Williams argues that the forts were clearly not intended to be trading emporia, as in his opinion the many defensive works made them too cramped for such purposes. He says that under Senusret I Egyptian didn't need to conquer Nubia, but it did need to control its frontiers<sup>54</sup>. (This distinction does seem a bit like splitting hairs.)

The scattered forts of Senusret I might not have withstood a well-organized enemy. Under Senusret III new forts were built, which Williams calls Egypt's "Mudbrick curtain"<sup>55</sup>. Apparently a power was rising to threaten Egypt's hold on Lower Nubia.

As the local C group and the Medjay seem to have been friendly, the new threat would appear to have come from farther south, from the Kingdom of Kush.

## **The Retreat**

Beyond Semna, farther upstream at the Third Cataract of the Nile, lies Kerma. Reisner, who excavated at Kerma in the 1920's, believed he had found the capital of an Egyptian governor, a conclusion he seems to have largely based on the finding of statues of an Egyptian prince and his wife. But such statues could have been spoils of war long afterwards, and in that official's tomb at Assiut there is no record of his serving in Nubia<sup>56</sup>. Scholars now believe Kerma was in fact the capital of Kush, the state that eventually pushed the Egyptians out of Nubia<sup>57</sup>.

The 13th Dynasty continued to hold the forts in Nubia, for awhile. For example, there is an Egyptian-style grave at Buhen with jewelry bearing the Horus name of Khasekhemre Neferhotep I (who ruled during the mid-13th Dynasty as the Middle Kingdom declined into the Second Intermediate Period)<sup>58</sup>. But, while during the 12th Dynasty soldiers seemed to be stationed in Nubia for short periods, and buried in Egypt, during the 13th Dynasty there is evidence of Egyptian people joining the soldiers at the forts, and their cemeteries have been found there, at the forts<sup>59</sup>.

This indicates a shift, but the decline is unclear. As the 13th Dynasty continued, the middle forts seem to have fallen out of use. Semna and Buhen continue into the Second Intermediate Period, but no longer appear to be under Egyptian rule, having at some point switched their allegiance<sup>60</sup>.

---

<sup>54</sup> Williams, p 438

<sup>55</sup> Williams, p 444

<sup>56</sup> Mertz, pp 113-115

<sup>57</sup> Kemp in Trigger, p 126

<sup>58</sup> Grajetzki, p 71

<sup>59</sup> Grajetzki, p 134

<sup>60</sup> Grajetzki, p 72



By the beginning of the Second Intermediate Period, the southern boundary of Egypt was back at Elephantine, and the conquests of the 11th and 12th Dynasties were erased.

Much later, of course, after another Egyptian occupation and the subsequent fall of the New Kingdom, the Nubians struck back into Egypt, ruling as the 25th Dynasty. After their defeats by the Assyrians drove them out of Egypt for good, the Kingdom of Kush expanded southward from their capital of Meroë instead, fought off the Roman rulers of Egypt, and survived as a state until around 350 AD. They seemed to have adopted Egyptian gods, mastered pyramid building, and learned something of the art of war from their original Egyptian conquerors<sup>61</sup>.

As Barry Kemp writes "It is a truism of history that, given the chance, the underdog imitates his master"<sup>62</sup>. This seems to have been the legacy of the Middle Kingdom and its policies in Nubia.

---

<sup>61</sup> Wikipedia, "Kingdom of Kush"

<sup>62</sup> Kemp, p 31

## **Bibliography**

Baines, John and Málek, Jaromir, Atlas of Ancient Egypt, Andromeda Oxford Limited, 1996.

Brown, Marina, "Middle Kingdom Gold Mining in Nubia",  
[http://citation.allacademic.com/meta/p\\_mla\\_apa\\_research\\_citation/2/3/7/6/7/pages237677/p237677-1.php](http://citation.allacademic.com/meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/2/3/7/6/7/pages237677/p237677-1.php)

De Souza, Aaron, "POTS and PANS Observations on the Pan-Grave Culture in Egypt",  
[https://www.academia.edu/6841853/Pots\\_and\\_Pans.\\_Observations\\_on\\_the\\_Pan\\_Grave\\_Culture\\_in\\_Egypt.\\_MA\\_Thesis\\_2012\\_](https://www.academia.edu/6841853/Pots_and_Pans._Observations_on_the_Pan_Grave_Culture_in_Egypt._MA_Thesis_2012_)

Grajetzki, Wolfram, The Middle Kingdom of Ancient Egypt (Duckworth 2006).

The History Channel, "Egypt Beyond the Pyramids", 2005.

Kemp, Barry, Ancient Egypt. Anatomy of a Civilization (Routledge, 1989)

Mertz, Barbara, Temples, Tombs & Hieroglyphs, A Popular History of Ancient Egypt, revised edition, (William Morrow, 2007)

Shaw, Ian (ed.), The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt (Oxford University Press 2000)

Trigger, B.G. et al., Ancient Egypt, a Social History, Chapter 2 "Old Kingdom, Middle Kingdom, and Second Intermediate Period" by Barry Kemp (Cambridge University Press 1983)

Williams, Bruce Beyer, "Serra East and the Mission of the Middle Kingdom Fortresses in Nubia (1999),  
[https://www.academia.edu/3358708/Serra\\_East\\_and\\_the\\_Mission\\_of\\_Middle\\_Kingdom\\_Fortresses\\_in\\_Nubia](https://www.academia.edu/3358708/Serra_East_and_the_Mission_of_Middle_Kingdom_Fortresses_in_Nubia)

Yare, Brian, "Middle Kingdom Egyptian Fortresses in Nubia,  
<http://www.yare.org/essays/fortresses.htm>

