



Standing on the Shoulders of Giants Curriculum

Racism And The Rediscovery Of Ancient Nubia

From the PBS Series: Black Kingdoms of the Nile

By Timothy Kendall

In the 1820s, the Western world was thrilled to hear news of the rediscovery of the monuments of ancient Nubia - or "Kush," as it was called in the Bible. The ruins, hundreds of miles south of Egypt in the Sudan, had been reported almost simultaneously by individual British, French, and American travellers, whose excited descriptions and glorious illustrations of temples and pyramid fields delighted scholars and reawakened interest in this mysterious African kingdom.

Greek traditions told of Memnon, a legendary Nubian king who had fought in the Trojan War; they spoke of Nubia's people, who were the "tallest and handsomest on earth," and whose piety was so great that the gods preferred their offerings to those of all other men. They also knew that historical Nubian kings had once conquered Egypt and ruled it for sixty years and that their dynasty was counted as Egypt's Twenty-fifth. The Greeks, however, did not call these people "Nubians" or "Kushites," as we do today; they called them Aithiopes ("Ethiopians"), which in Greek meant "Burnt-Faced Ones." They knew perfectly well that Nubians were black-skinned, as are the Sudanese of the same regions today.

During the 1840s, the great German Egyptologist, Karl Richard Lepsius (1810-1884) led an expedition to record the monuments of Egypt and Sudan for the King of Prussia. On his return, he asserted confidently that the Greek term "Ethiopian," when referring to the ancient civilized people of Kush, did not apply to "negroes," but was used to describe reddish-skinned people closely related to the Egyptians, who "belonged to the Caucasian race." Again, in 1852, when the American diplomat Bayard Taylor (1825-1878) visited Sudan and gazed upon the temple carvings of sumptuously clad gods and rulers with clearly African features, he also found it inconceivable that they could have been created by black-skinned Africans. Rather, he asserted, echoing Lepsius, they must have been created by Egyptians or by immigrants from India or Arabia, or, in any case, "by an offshoot ... of the race to which we belong."

Lepsius and Taylor failed to acknowledge the fact that the Greeks themselves never confused "Ethiopians" with Egyptians, or that they always used the term "Ethiopian" to apply equally to the peoples of Kush and central Africa. Such racist opinions and "scientific" distortions among Western scholars of the 19th century, while not universal, did, unhappily, predominate and shaped the attitudes that for another full century would retard and confuse the discipline of Nubian Studies and African civilization in general.

So remote was the northern Sudan that scientific archaeology could not take place there until the British seized control of the country in 1898 and opened it up with the completion the Cairo-Khartoum railway. The first major excavations were undertaken by famed Egyptologist George A. Reisner (1867-1942), whose team, sponsored by Harvard University and the Museum of Fine Arts,

Boston, would first excavate Kerma in 1913, the Gebel Barkal Temples from 1916-1920, and all the royal pyramids of Kush between 1917-1924. Almost single-handedly, Reisner laid the foundations of Nubian history, reconstructing it from the Bronze Age to the dawn of the Christian era. He also deciphered the names and approximate order and dates of all the Kushite monarchs through some seventy generations, from the 8th century B.C. to the 3rd century A.D. It was a towering achievement, almost unparalleled in the annals of archaeology.

While Reisner's deductions still strike us as astonishing for their brilliance and essential correctness, we are equally appalled to discover his inability to accept that the monuments he excavated were built by bona fide black men. Using entirely specious evidence, he formulated a theory that the founders of the 25th or "Ethiopian" Dynasty of Egypt were not black Sudanese but rather a branch of the "Egypto-Libyan" (by which he meant "fair skinned") ruling class of Dynasty 22, and that they were called "Ethiopians" by the Greeks simply because they dominated a darker-skinned native "negroid" population, which, as he stated, "had never developed either its trade or any industry worthy of mention." Like Taylor and Lepsius, believing absolutely that skin pigmentation was a determinant of intellectual ability and enlightenment, Reisner attributed the apparent cultural decline of the Napatan phase of the Kushite culture (ca. 660-300 B.C.) to the "deadening effects" of racial intermarriage between his imagined light-skinned elite and darker-skinned hoi poloi. The Meroitic cultural renaissance (after ca. 300 B.C.) he explained as simply the result of new influxes of Egyptians. Nubian cultures, he reasoned, were not as developed as the Egyptian because the people were of mixed race, yet by virtue of their relationship to the superior Egyptian race, they were elevated far above the "the inert mass of the black races of Africa."

This was Reisner at his worst. Such unabashed racist interpretations, widely published in scholarly journals at the time and accepted as gospel by the popular press, today offend and embarrass all of us. Yet it is interesting to note how such pervasive racism then affected the discipline of Nubian Studies in America. Reisner, very much a product of his time, seems to have had an unconscious need to believe that his Kushite kings were "white" (or "white men" in darker skin, or dark men with "white souls") in order to make them and their culture more worthy of study to himself and more acceptable to the contemporary scholarly and museum-going public ~ and perhaps even to his financial backers at the Museum of Fine Arts. Yet whether judged as "white" or "black," Nubian civilization could not have received much popular interest at the time. If it were merely an offshoot of a "white" Egypt in central Africa, as Reisner theorized, then it would inevitably be judged as late, decadent, and "peripheral" (i.e. to the Egyptocentered and Eurocentered universe). If it were "black," then in the minds of his contemporaries it would be utterly irrelevant to history. In either case, it seemed to offer few attractions as an area of study for Egyptologists of that generation, and almost none pursued it. Contemporary books on Egyptian history virtually ignored it.

Even as late as the 1940s and 50s, the racial identity of the Nubians remained problematic for "white" scholars. For example, when the bones of the Kushite royalty, recovered from Reisner's excavations, were sent for analysis to the specialists at the Peabody Museum at Harvard, the latter identified them as belonging to the "basic white stock of Egypt". In this case, the osteologists, like Lepsius, Taylor and Reisner, evidently wished to claim them for their "own race." Yet when the respected University of Chicago Egyptologists Keith Seele and Georg Steindorff, who were not subscribers to Reisner's "Libyan

theory," published their own history of Egypt in 1942, *When Egypt Ruled the East*, they left no doubt about their biases in the two sentences they used to dismiss the 25th Dynasty:

"In the place of a native Egyptian pharaoh or of the usurping Libyans, the throne of Egypt was occupied by a Negro king from Ethiopia! But his dominion was not for long."

Today, fifty-seven years after the publication of this book, the 25th Dynasty "Negro" kings are now recognized as having sponsored an important renaissance of Egyptian art and culture; they developed an almost scholarly interest in ancient Egyptian traditions and language and have been called "the first Egyptologists." The empire over which they presided was greater in extent than any ever achieved in antiquity along the Nile Valley. Their kings were said never to have condemned prisoners to death; they forgave their enemies and allowed them to retain their offices; they also actually gave public credit for achievement in their inscriptions to individuals other than themselves. Such characteristics among other ancient monarchs of Egypt or the Near East are unheard of, and we can only assume these were native Nubian qualities. Yet for Egyptologists of the first half of the 20th century, the fact that they were "negro" marked this period as the lowest level to which Egyptian civilization had sunk in all its history.

When the mass of material from Reisner's excavations in the Sudan was sent back to the Boston Museum in 1924, most of it went into storage and was all but forgotten. When in the late 1970s it was rediscovered by the Museum's curators, they joyously identified it as one of the Museum's most important and unique treasures, assigned it to several national and international touring exhibitions, and finally installed it in a special permanent gallery.

"White racism" in scholarly circles disappeared with the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, but it was replaced with a virulent new "black racism," which many African-Americans adopted as a belated response to the former, even before the rehabilitation of ancient Kush. This spawned the discipline called Afrocentrism, which interpreted ancient African history through the anger of the modern black experience, and which vaunted Egypt as a "black African" culture and even the fountainhead of European civilization. Ironically, like the racism of Reisner's day, this trend also diminished the significance of Kush, since the exponents minimized the ethnic and cultural differences between it and Egypt and still give primary emphasis to the achievements of Egypt.

In the 1990s, the future of Nubian Studies in America looks brighter than ever. The "blackness" of Kushite art and culture, which once generally negated its interest for Americans, is now precisely what makes it so interesting for them. It is to be hoped that in the new millennium all Americans will come to grasp ~ what neither Reisner and his contemporaries, on the one hand, understood nor the modern Afrocentrists, on the other, understand ~ that proper study of the past is not attainable unless we can identify and transcend our own biases. At some point we will all need to recognize that "the race to which we belong" ~ to use Bayard Taylor's phrase ~ is neither black nor white, but simply human, with all its extraordinary creative abilities and all its eternal failings.

Source: PBS: Black Kingdoms of the Nile

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