Egypt and Nubia in the 5th–4th millennia BCE: A view from the First Cataract and its surroundings

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Introduction

Prehistoric sites were first found in the area of the First Cataract of the Nile more than a century ago (Weigall 1907; Reisner 1910; Junker 1919). These sites were assigned to the A-Group culture (Reisner 1910) because of the Nubian elements identified in their material remains. A Nubian cultural affiliation was expected since the sites were located in the region of Aswan, positioned at the border between Egypt and Nubia. However, a review of the available data has shown that, in the area surrounding Aswan and southward to Metardul, the percentage of Nubian material is always extremely low compared to the Egyptian component, thus suggesting that the sites in this region should be affiliated with the Naqada culture rather than the Nubian A-Group (Gatto and Tiraterra 1996; Gatto 1997; 1998; 2000; 2006a; 2006b).

This revised cultural affiliation, however, does not answer the question of how the Nubian and Egyptian components are related. Before this relationship can be assessed, two questions must be addressed:

1) What is a frontier, and so how should we define the Egyptian-Nubian frontier?
2) What are the cultural consequences resulting from the interaction of two human groups in their boundary zone, and how can this be detected in the archaeological record?

The definition of frontiers was for a long time based on a colonialist viewpoint with the expectation of sharp boundaries visible in cultural markers. Moreover, the colonists were seen as cultural innovators and the natives as passive recipients (Lightfoot and Martinez 1995). This is often still the way we define the frontier between Egypt and Nubia and interpret the interaction between Egyptians and Nubians.

The reconceptualization of frontiers as zones of cultural interface and fluidity in group affiliations is a new perspective in anthropological theory (Lightfoot and Martinez 1995). The

1 This perspective was applied by Stuart Tyson Smith in his study of the New Kingdom frontier between Imperial Egypt and Nubia. In his work *Wretched Kush* (2003), he discussed how the two groups adjusted their ethnic identities in accordance with the new political situation. The architecture, material culture and ritual contexts of the town of Askut in Lower Nubia were analysed and found to be almost exclusively connected to the Egyptian tradition. However, the study of pottery types and their function, and an investigation of domestic religious areas, gave insight into the Nubian presence in the town. Nubian cooking pots were commonly used for cooking, and Nubian pottery and clay figurines were commonly offered in the domestic shrines. Moreover, residue analysis of the Egyptian and Nubian cooking pots showed that there were two different foodways at the site, which were connected to the two pottery traditions. Thus, even if at an official level the town and its community were Egyptian-like, at a domestic level (where the female sphere was more involved) the Nubian identity was displayed. The New Kingdom cemetery at Tombos, in the Third Cataract region, was chosen to investigate ethnicity in a funerary context. There again, most of the tombs where made following the Egyptian style, except for a few graves of women which followed the Nubian tradition. The two communities
assumption is that frontiers are socially charged places where innovative cultural constructs are created and transformed. The fluidity of group affiliation in boundary areas may thus produce integrated new entities. In the present case, we should expect that the Egyptian and Nubian groups modified, created and syncretized emblemic elements, or cultural markers, to produce an integrated new entity in their culture contact situation. This process is what anthropologists call “creolization” (Lightfoot and Martinez 1995). It is our goal as archaeologists to bring to light which aspects of their social life (corresponding to symbolic principles) are hybrid elements and which are elements of the two original identities.

To address the questions posed above, we can make the following observations:

1) It is more likely that the boundary zone between Egypt and Nubia should be interpreted in a more nuanced manner; thus a sharp line somewhere at the First Cataract should not be expected, but rather a larger, more fluid zone, which included not only the Nile Valley but also the nearby deserts.

2) At this stage in current knowledge, the Egyptians cannot be defined as colonists and the Nubians as natives; neither can it be said that there was a new cultural entity, although these ideas should be seriously considered. The most ancient evidence for Egyptians in the First Cataract area is dated to Naqada IC, while the first two sub-stages of the Naqada culture are missing here, as they are from the site of Naqada southward. At Hierakonpolis, for example, the oldest occupation phase predates Naqada IC (Hoffman 1984), but the cultural affiliation of the material is still unclear. This might be a matter of defining what form the early Naqada I stage takes in the southern portion of Upper Egypt, at a time when settlement material in particular is characterized by regional differentiation. Proving a Nubian presence in the area prior to Naqada IC is also a difficult task, because in the 5th millennium BC both Tasian and Badarian cultures are strongly related to the Nubian tradition. Thus it is difficult to determine whether a rippled sherd from the southern part of Upper Egypt is Tasian, Badarian, early A-Group or something else entirely if it is not located within a broader context. In this respect, it should also be noted that some of the undisturbed graves in the cemeteries of the First Cataract contained Nubian objects datable to the Early A-Group phase, but lack any Egyptian artefacts. Because of this, H.S. Smith (1991) felt that they might be older than Naqada IC. The point to be stressed is that in the area defined as the First Cataract region—which may include the section of the Nile Valley from Armant to Metardul, and probably even to Dakka, and the surrounding deserts—not only is a Nubian component always present in the material culture (with high variability in the percentages from north to south), but the material culture also

were mixed as far as their ethnic membership is concerned: the population consisted of both Egyptians and Nubians. The Egyptians were mainly officials and soldiers and thus male; the female component appears to have been for the most part local and thus Nubian. The New Kingdom situation may seem very similar to that of the Predynastic period, but this might not actually be the case. The communities Smith analysed were clearly Egyptian or Nubian, and they adjusted their ethnic affiliation in a rather opportunistic way. In the Predynastic period, the Egyptian and Nubian identities still shared many common traits derived from a common ancestry. The Naqada culture developed from the Badarian culture which, as the Tasian, was related to the Nubian Neolithic tradition (Gatto 2002; 2006c). Thus, the definition of what was Egyptian or Nubian at that time in the First Cataract region (and the southern part of Upper Egypt) is not so obvious: are the local cooking pots (shale-tempered ware), for example, Egyptian or Nubian?
shows peculiarities not encountered elsewhere. These peculiarities include the presence of animal burials and animal remains within the human graves, and hybrid elements in secular and religious artefacts (Gatto 2003; 2006a; in press). It is not by chance that the southern section of Upper Egypt was considered and defined as something different (i.e., “the Head of the South”) in the Pharaonic period by the Egyptians.

Several studies of frontiers emphasize the need for both macro- and micro-scale analyses, as well as the availability of funerary, domestic and ritual sites for study (Lightfoot and Martinez 1995). Unfortunately, most of the sites found in the Aswan area are cemeteries. In an effort to remedy this bias in the evidence, the ongoing survey and rescue excavation work of “The Aswan-Kom Ombo Archaeological Project” is searching for new Predynastic/A-Group evidence in the region. Most of the sites are, unfortunately, in poor condition due to modern damage, but a settlement and two associated cemeteries were found at Nag el-Qarmila, a small valley just to the north of Kubbaniya. With its well-preserved domestic and funerary remains, Nag el-Qarmila is partially filling the gap in the available record. Moreover, the discovery of an isolated stone tumulus in the desert south-east of Kom Ombo, and of a rock art station in Wadi Abu Subeira, provide witness to other aspects of Egypto-Nubian social life (Fig. 1).

The tumulus of Wadi al-Lawi

An isolated stone tumulus was found at Wadi al-Lawi, the main southern tributary in the Kom Ombo plain (Gatto 2005; 2006a; in press). It is located in a very small valley to the west of the main wadi, called Shaab Negema. It had already been plundered, and the structure of the tumulus appeared heavily disturbed. The cleaning of the structure brought to light the complexity of its building technique (Fig. 2a–b). It consists of two concentric stone rings partially standing on the bedrock and partially on sand or a layer of crushed bedrock. Three pots were found, one decorated on both surfaces with a wide rippled motif on a dark brown burnished exterior and a black interior (Fig. 3). Once the plunderers’ backfill was removed from the shaft, we collected human bones, potsherds, a quartz flake, and two bone awls, one of which had an incised herringbone pattern on the basal part (Fig. 4). According to the bioarchaeological analysis (B. Dickman pers. comm.), the human bones were from two different adult individuals: one male between 35 and 50 years of age, and a younger female between 20 and 35 years of age. Unfortunately, the plunderers completely disturbed the burials, and it is now difficult to reconstruct the relationship between the two bodies.

The grave has parallels both in Nubia and in the deserts. The pottery associated with the Shaab Negema tumulus is definitely related to the Early Nubian tradition of both the Abkan and A-Group cultures of Lower Nubia, dated to the 5th and 4th millennia BCE, respectively. However, strong similarities are also recorded with the Badarian, Tasian and the Final Neolithic of the Western Desert, dated to the 5th millennium BCE. Moreover, during the UNESCO Campaign of the 1960s, some campsites, radiocarbon-dated to the mid 4th millennium BC, were located in the Kom Ombo plain, far from the valley (Butzer and Hansen 1968). Because the pottery found was mostly burnished and black-topped, ceramics
already out of production in Egypt during the contemporaneous phase of the Predynastic period, they were assigned to the Nubian A-Group. Based on these ceramic parallels, the Shaab Negema grave may be assigned to either the early A-Group phase, or to an earlier phase contemporary with the Badarian. The latter hypothesis is far more interesting, as no 5th millennium BC evidence has yet been found in the First Cataract area. There is, however, an unpublished site, that was found in the 1980s by the Combined Prehistoric Expedition at Wadi Kubbaniya. Although it was defined as a C-Group settlement by Wendorf and associates (cf. British Museum Wendorf Collection Archive; Gatto in preparation), it may be connected to a more ancient phase of occupation in the area. The three sherds now housed in the British Museum as part of the Wendorf Collection show more affinities with Neolithic material from Nubia and the Western Desert, including the Gilf Kebir, than to the C-Group culture (Fig. 5a–c). Unfortunately, the site has not yet been relocated and no further information about its location is available. In addition, some evidence for a 5th millennium occupation in the First Cataract region is provided by a few sand-tempered brown burnished sherds, very similar to Abkan pottery, which were found at Elephantine in a secondary position in one of the natural water holes cut into the island’s granite (Gatto and Raue in press).

A human bone sample from the Wadi al-Lawi tumulus is now being processed for radiometric dating at the IFAO laboratory in Cairo. Unfortunately it appears that the amount of collagen in the bone is very low, so it is unlikely that radiocarbon results will help us to illuminate the date and cultural affiliation of this isolated tumulus.

The Predynastic sites of Nag el-Qarmila

A Predynastic/A-Group settlement and cemeteries were discovered at Nag el-Qarmila north of Kubbaniya (Fig. 6; for a detailed report on the first field season, see Gatto et al. 2009a). According to the pottery, the excavated part of the settlement and the northern cemetery date to Naqada IC, probably continuing into Naqada IIA, with some Naqada IIC–IIIA2 sherds recorded on the surface. The radiocarbon dates from the stratigraphic sequence confirm the chronology established by the ceramic remains. The village is the only settlement site, datable to Naqada IC–IIA, north of the Second Cataract and south of Hierakonpolis, that has ever been studied.

The northern cemetery is located on top of a Middle Pleistocene sandy river terrace. This unfortunate location, combined with wind erosion and ancient plundering, has resulted in major post-depositional damage to the graves. The burials related to the upper stratigraphic unit have completely eroded away. Those from the still in situ upper stratigraphic layers are spread over the area, but only clusters of disarticulated bones could be recorded within the sand deposit. However, in the northern part of the cemetery, where the surface is more level, one intact burial was found suggesting that graves at the bottom of the stratigraphy are still preserved.

A long transect in the central part of the cemetery was excavated (Fig. 7). Due to the post-depositional disturbance and the sandy sediment, no real stratigraphy could be recorded and no evidence of cutting, superimposition, or disturbance could be seen in the sand.

An intact burial (Fig. 8), found below almost 1.2 m of sand in the northern section of the...
trench, is that of a young woman, between 20 and 25 years of age, tightly contracted in a very unusual position. The body is oriented NW–SE with the head to the north-west and the feet to the south-east. The legs were flexed toward the east (left side), while the upper body was laid flat with the head in an upright position with the chin on the chest. In this arrangement, the individual is facing south-east, or upstream of the Nile. The right arm was extended towards the left shoulder with both hands resting on the left shoulder.

This inhumation was placed in a very small concave oval area, measuring 80 x 53 cm. The sides of the grave were plastered with mud (and possibly leather), and the body, resting on the sand, was covered by matting and linen (the latter most likely only on the lower limbs). Both were very poorly preserved. Apart from a small Black-topped jar found close to the right shoulder (Fig. 9), the only other funerary offerings were a pebble and pieces of malachite close to the chin and a small basket with malachite fragments on top of it, found by the waist on the left side.

Almost all of the potsherds collected on the surface and found during the excavation are Predynastic in date. In the excavated area, the strong dominance of Black-topped and Red-polished Nile silt pottery, with Black-topped pottery being about two to three times more numerous, corresponds well with distributions in contemporaneous Naqada IC–IIA cemeteries. The significant presence of shale-tempered pottery, making up about 30% of the assemblage, is remarkable because this ware-type is not expected in such quantities from a cemetery site.

Nubian pottery is present as less than 10% of the assemblage, the most common class being Black-mouthed ware, with or without rippled decoration. In a few cases, the typical features of the two traditions were found together on the same vessel; for example, milled rim decoration was noted on Red-Polished Naqada bowls (Fig. 10a–b). The southern cemetery was discovered during the 2008 field season, and thus the information available at the moment is very scanty. However, because of its location, the pits are dug into the sandstone and this gives hope for better preservation of the graves. Moreover, very few human bones or sherds are visible on the surface and the area does not appear to have been damaged by modern activities, suggesting that intact graves may still be present.

The nearby settlement, situated just to the south of the northern cemetery, is located on the northern slope of the Nag el-Qarmila valley on top of the Pleistocene silt deposit (Gatto et al. 2009a). The campsite overlooks the bottom of the valley where there would have been water, either from rain runoff down the wadi, or from ponds remaining after the summer Nile flood. An area of 5 x 8 m was excavated in the central section of the settlement. The stratigraphy consisted of superimposed seasonal occupation layers with hearths (Fig. 11), postholes, in-situ pots, and plastered pits (Fig. 12).

The pottery found in association with the settlement is very homogeneous. The quantitative importance of shale ware (Fig. 13), making up approximately 50% of the assemblage, reflects the situation at Adaïma, where it represented up to 40% of the ceramic material in layers contemporaneous with those at our site. The presence of the shale-tempered ware is restricted to southern Upper Egypt from Gebelein (Friedman 2000; Buchez pers. comm.) to at least Aswan. For the sites excavated by Reisner, the material available at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and at the Nubian Museum in Aswan does not include statistically
significant evidence for cooking pots, making assessment of the full ceramic assemblage impossible. However, it is most likely that shale-tempered pottery is not present from Gerf Hussein southward.

The Nubian ceramics are mostly comprised of Black-mouthed bowls, including one made using a fine shale fabric never before encountered in the Lower Nubian repertoire. The percentage of Nubian pottery is similar to that in the cemetery, and therefore extremely low. As in the cemetery, the Nubian sherds from the village correspond rather well with the tradition represented by the Nubian fabrics and wares in the south, but the paste of this Aswan variant has its own characteristic traits (white clay, silty groundmass, mixture of mineral and organic inclusions). This suggests that the pottery was being made locally.

A Nubian influence can also be detected in the lithic assemblage where quartz and chalcedony are used, although in low percentages, together with Egyptian flint. Notable is the presence of a few, very tiny lunates typical of the Nubian tradition (Fig. 14), made in the aforementioned raw materials (Usai 2008). The lunates were use in a series as elements of a sickle. Among the artifacts found during the excavation, a clay model of a boat and a copper ring are particularly noteworthy. Complete and fragmentary upper and lower grindstones and a stone mortar were also recovered.

The Khor Abu Subeira rock art site (KASS1)

KASS1 is located at the upper course of Khor Abu Subeira South, at the beginning of a lateral branch of the main khor where the rocky outcrop, articulated in different large blocks, creates steps descending from the surrounding plateau to the wadi bottom (Fig. 15). It consists of many carved panels, located on different walls and on different levels. The short description of the site by Murray and Myers (1933) in the 1930s mentions that “the drawings were near a depression in the wadi where water remains after there has been rain.” A drill core test made in 2008 in the depression and subsequent geomorphological study of the sediments confirm the occasional presence of water in this natural pool (De Dapper pers. comm.). Only a small number of rock engravings were mentioned by the original discoverers; Murray and Myers also recorded the presence of a Clayton ring and a disk on the gebel near the site. These rings and disks are objects commonly recorded in the Western Desert and are dated mainly to the Predynastic period/Old Kingdom (Riemer and Kuper 2000; Gatto 2002–2003; Riemer 2004).

The majority of the engraved representations can be dated to the Predynastic period (for a detailed description of the site, see Gatto et al. 2009b). They consist of boats (Fig. 16), human figures, ibexes, antelopes/gazelles, bulls (Fig. 17), ostriches, dogs, a giraffe, an elephant and a hippopotamus. One of the boats shows a falcon placed above the boat’s cabin (Figure 18). As the boat type can be dated to Naqada IIC, this representation of a falcon is among the most ancient known in Egypt (Hendrickx and Friedman in press), and probably one of the southernmost ever found.

According to the study of rock art by Dirk Huyge (2002), giraffes, boats, human figures with raised arms, and ibexes, are all solar symbols, implying the idea of rebirth. The falcon representation, on the other hand, has to be linked with royal iconography, particularly related to the Hierakonpolis monarchy, where royal evidence dates back to an even earlier period.
Both cosmological and ideological elements are thus present in the artistic record of the site, all clearly related to the Naqada culture. However, there may be other, more ephemeral, elements in the surrounding landscape that may be linked to Nubian religious beliefs. The hidden location of the site, the presence of rocks creating a water pond after rain, and the consequent use of the site for watering by wild desert animals (such as gazelles, antelopes and ibexes), may be interpreted as relevant to Nubian religious symbolism. It is interesting to note that rocks, water and gazelles are elements characteristic of the two female divinities of Elephantine Island, Satet and Anuqet, both of Nubian origin.

The combined interpretation of the artistic repertoire and the surrounding landscape may suggest a ceremonial function for the place.

**Conclusion**

Evidence we can present for the elements that might be of use for detecting creolization in the archaeological record of the First Cataract region can be summarized as follows:

1) Because of the scanty data available for the 5th millennium BC in the First Cataract region, as well as in southern Upper Egypt generally, not much can be said. It is notable, however, that evidence present in this region prior to Naqada IC is always related to the Nubian tradition, the same tradition shared by the Badarian and Tasian cultures of Middle Egypt, meaning that at that time there was not a clear distinction between two different groups, and that probably a cultural boundary was located further north between Tasa/Badari and Fayum/Merimde.

2) In the same region, the bulk of the archaeological record dating to the 4th millennium is related to the Naqada culture, but a small Nubian component is always present in many aspects of the material culture, such as pottery and lithics. It is notable that the Nubian pottery is a local production.

3) In the ritual sphere, elements from both cultural entities might also be present, and this is visible not only at KASS1, but also on Elephantine Island in the Satet temple (Dreyer 1986).

4) There are some hybrid elements such as the milled rim on Red-polished Naqada bowls.

5) In the First Cataract region and southern Upper Egypt there are regionally distinctive elements such as animal burials in the human cemeteries (Flores 2003) and the great amount of shale-tempered vessels.

There can be little doubt that the interaction between Egyptians and Nubians in their borderland created a new cultural entity, but how best to characterize this, is still far from being understood.
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Fig. 1: Map with the location of the sites mentioned in the text.
Fig. 2a, b: The Wadi al-Lawi tumulus before and after the cleaning.
Fig. 3: Rippled bowl from the Wadi al-Lawi tumulus.

Fig. 4: Bone awls from the Wadi al-Lawi tumulus.
a) sherd with an alternating pivoting stamp decoration and a vegetal-tempered fabric.

b) sherd with an incised decoration and a sandy fabric.

c) sherd with a combed/rippled decoration with a very fine sandy fabric (courtesy The British Museum, Department of Ancient Egypt and Sudan).

Fig. 5: Sherds from a possible prehistoric site found by the CPE at Kubbaniya
Fig. 6: Overview of the Nag el-Qarmila valley with the excavated cemetery WK14 in the foreground and the settlement WK15 in the background; the newly discovered cemetery WK22 is located on the first terrace of the gebel on the other side of the valley.

Fig. 7: Trench excavated at WK14, the Predynastic cemetery at Nag el-Qarmila.
Fig. 8: Intact tomb found in the Predynastic cemetery.

Fig. 9: Small Black-topped jar from the intact grave.
Fig. 10a–b: Naqada Red Polished bowl with milled rim decoration.
Fig. 11: Hearths in stratigraphical position in the Nag el-Qarmila settlement.

Fig. 12: Mud-lined pits from the settlement.
Fig. 13: Shale tempered pot found in situ in the Nag el-Qarmila settlement.

Fig. 14: Lunate implement from the settlement.
Fig. 15: General view of the rock art site at Khor Abu Subeira, looking south.

Fig. 16: Example of a boat from KASS1.
Fig. 17: Bulls from KASS1.

Fig. 18: Facsimile copy of a scene showing a Naqada II boat with a falcon on top of the cabin.

http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/online_journals/bmsaes/issue_13/gatto.aspx