



Charles Bonnet: The Black Kingdom of the Nile

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Julia Budka

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It is no exaggeration to say that Charles Bonnet has rewritten the history of the Middle Nile Valley over the past 50 years. This book is a splendid summary of his life's research, presenting important results which are primarily based on archaeological fieldwork in the city of Kerma and the nearby site Dukki Gel at the Third Cataract of the Nile in modern Sudan. This well-illustrated volume will be of interest to Egyptologists and Nubiologists, as well as a wider audience without expert knowledge. It introduces the reader to the Kingdom of Kerma, an important early African state whose political, military, and technological achievements have long been underestimated due to former Egypto-centric biases. Bonnet's excavations and his studies, as well as his contributions to the new Kerma site museum discussed in this book, allow a more balanced assessment of this African civilization which has long been hidden in the shadow of Egypt.

The book is structured in three parts, reflecting its origins in three Huggins Lectures delivered at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 2016. This structure follows a chronological sequence, both for the history of Nubia and the history of excavations. The focus of the book is on the architecture and the corresponding evolution of a highly complex archaeological site at Kerma.

Part 1 (pp. 7–68) offers an overview of the archaeological remains from the city of Kerma in a detailed diachronic assessment, focusing on its urban evolution during the Early, Middle, and Classic Kerma periods. The overview starts with Early Kerma in 2500 BCE and outlines major changes in the course of the Nile due to climate change and aridification, which resulted in certain modifications of lifestyles across the region. The author points to a north-south route from Kerma city to Dukki Gel as one of the key elements for the site structure. Building techniques like wood-strengthened earthworks, numerous post holes, and the Nubian tradition of *galous* technique are summarized. Bonnet highlights differences and similarities to Egyptian-style buildings and fortresses to stress the indigenous tradition of the Kerma bastions. Infrastructure such as pottery kilns and workshops, enclosures for herding cattle, and magazines are also described. According to Bonnet, the process of urbanization was completed around 1800 BCE, as evidenced by an increase in the size of the city, the number and density of the structures, and the focus on a religious precinct.

During its peak (1750–1500 BCE), several changes were visible at Kerma: more regular building plans; changes in the religious precinct; and the considerable enlargement of temples. Metallurgic workshops and the port area became important infrastructural features of the city. A royal tomb measuring 17 m in diameter and 6 m deep, dug into clay and silt, dates to around 1520 BCE. Preceding the Egyptian conquest

J. Budka (✉)
Ludwig Maximilians University Munich, Munich,
Germany
e-mail: Julia.Budka@lmu.de

in 1500 BCE, this tomb probably reflects a change in customs and confirms the emergence of an increased hybridization of Nubian groups in Classic Kerma times (see also Williams, 2021).

All in all, Bonnet uses a well-established approach in Egyptology to study architecture as a reflection of historical patterns in the State. He interprets the abandonment of Kerma city as the result of conflict with Egypt at the beginning of the New Kingdom, while the site of Dukki Gel continues to flourish. Although these interpretations are tempting, they pose a general danger insofar as archaeological data is read as support for textual sources, rather than as evidence in its own right.

Part 2 (pp. 71–124) presents the site of Dukki Gel, a city founded by the Egyptian king Thutmose I just to the north of Kerma after its abandonment. The discovery of Dukki Gel challenges a general understanding of the Kerma region because this site has a very distinct architecture, including some features that predate Thutmose I and are markedly different from Kerma and wider Egyptian and Nubian traditions. The current hypothesis offered by Bonnet is appealing: Dukki Gel was founded during the Kerma Kingdom as a second urban site for a different population, most probably people from central Sudan. Although it remains to be confirmed, this illustrates the global impact and far-reaching influence of the Kerma empire at its zenith.

Among the architectural remains preceding the Egyptian conquest, most noteworthy is Palace A, an oval-shaped example of African architecture with 1400 columns (pp. 83–85). Bonnet compares it to central African structures of past centuries (including the burial site of a ruler in Uganda) and stresses that there are no parallels in antiquity in Egypt or Nubia, though he argues that we might find parallels in regions that need further study, such as Kassala, the Land of Punt, and Darfur. In other words, the major urban site of Dukki Gel can help to address questions of an entangled Africa beyond the Middle Nile Valley, and therefore deserves attention beyond the fields of Egyptology and Nubian studies.

Following the Egyptian conquest of Nubia, Dukki Gel underwent some important changes as a new ceremonial city built in several phases. The author interprets the site as the *mnnw* of Thutmose I, which is appealing but does not fit well with comparisons to other known *mnnw* sites (see Budka, 2020, p. 399).

In Bonnet's analysis, several historical events, like the Nubian coalition against Thutmose I, are reflected in the archaeological record (e.g., with a destruction layer of the *mnnw*). A rebuilding of the site began in the time of Thutmose II and Hatshepsut—short-lived periods which are extremely difficult to date in Egyptian archaeology, raising some *caveats* about the reconstructed sequence at Dukki Gel.

Part 3 (pp. 127–185) focuses on Dukki Gel in New Kingdom (1500–1080 BCE), Napatan (750–400 BCE), and Meroitic (400 BCE–400 CE) times and on the identification of the site as Pnubs (a place name well-attested in Egyptian texts). First, Bonnet describes Thutmoseid building phases comprising Egyptian temples, local cult installations, and Egyptian palaces. The important discovery of so-called *talatat* blocks (sandstone blocks in a format used exclusively by King Akhenaten) from the Amarna period is presented and the scarce evidence for later occupation in the Ramesside period discussed. Bonnet mentions a possible climatic change at the end of the Egyptian colonial period and this ties in with new evidence from other colonial sites, most prominently from Amara West (see Binder, 2014; Woodward et al., 2017). Dukki Gel also yielded rich evidence for the Napatan Kingdom and the Meroitic period. The remarkable ritual deposit of Napatan royal statues, including statues of two Nubian rulers of the 25th Dynasty, is mentioned for its historical importance.

A concise conclusion (pp. 186–195) completes the book and underlines the importance of Bonnet's interpretation: without talking about Egypt, or about Nubia in the light of Egypt, he presents for his readers the complex evolution of a poorly known African social entity. Throughout the book, the author is aware that his proposals are tentative and need to be confirmed by future work. The fact that Bonnet himself raises so many open questions about the Kingdom of Kerma after 50 years of excavation should stress the importance and quality of his work, as well as the urgent need to continue research on prevailing mysteries about the origins of African civilizations, entanglements along and beyond the Nile Valley, and much more.

The importance of this book does not lie in a postcolonial theory-based discussion of an African kingdom (as partly criticized by de Souza, 2021), but rather in its splendid illustration of the potential for vast, highly complex archaeological remains to

write alternative narratives of non-literate societies and civilizations. This highly recommended book nicely shows that this process is only just beginning in Sudan, and will require common efforts by archaeologists working at various sites and across different regions of the Kerma empire.

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