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CHAPTER 30

DEATH AND BURIAL IN THE KINGDOM OF MEROE

VINCENT FRANCIGNY

In a changing cultural landscape such as Nubia during Late Antiquity, there is more to learn from the common population than from the conservative circles of power that surrounded the royal family and the capital Meroe. With only a few settlements thoroughly studied, compared with over one hundred excavated cemeteries, there is also no doubt that funerary archaeology has been our primary source of information on the living, reaching beyond the usual descriptive analysis to understand the complexity of the Meroitic society itself. Through iconography and art, we develop a sense of what Meroites looked like and how they prepared themselves to face death. Symbols and texts point at local or widespread religious beliefs, underlining cultural differences between imported traditions and regional practices. Individuals, often buried together in the same grave, offer an opportunity for bioanthropology (Buzon, this volume) to study family relationships and improve our knowledge of food, diet, health, diseases, and environment. The role of gender, often associated with Meroe and the prominent figure of the Kandake, also raises questions about the social structure in the provinces of the kingdom, where some women from elite groups seem to have been quite influential and to have held important religious titles.

Elaborate protective measures to preserve the corpse, perhaps mummified for some members of the royal family, show undeniable concerns about the afterlife and reflect a constant influence from Egyptian traditions and the Mediterranean world. However, Meroites always proved to be selective in borrowing ideas from the outside world and extremely resourceful in how they adapted them to their own political, cultural, and religious system.

The Last Pyramids of the Nile Valley

During the Napatan-Meroitic Period, new features slowly occupied the funerary landscape of Nubian cemeteries. First built for the royal family, the pyramid became a common marker of elite burials around the capital and progressively throughout the kingdom. Particularly valued by the ruling class in the north, near the border with Egypt, the monument came to be accompanied by a miniature offering chapel and some material such as a stela and an offering table, sometimes covered with an inscription. While in royal graves the size of the chapel easily supports a detailed iconographic program showing the funerary ceremony (Yellin, this volume), no decoration can be found on monuments built for the rest of the population. Only during the Meroitic period will a statue of the dead find its place near elite graves. Resembling first the Egyptian *ba*-bird, this statue rapidly evolved to adopt an almost complete anthropoid shape representing the dead with all his or her attributes of wealth and power (Francigny 2009).

The origins of these new features lie in a combination of cultural practices adopted from Egypt and pragmatic choices made by the royal family, later copied by a growing part of the population. They help us to understand how the Kushite society was shaped in a land marked by a considerable Pharaonic heritage, particularly visible in official and religious architecture. In that sense, the adoption of the pyramidal monument represents an important step into the formation of what should be called a Nubian Pharaonic identity.

Contrary to a common idea, the pyramid was not introduced to Nubia under the rulers of the 25th Dynasty, as the first monuments built in Nubia date back to the New Kingdom colonial period. At that time, though the Egyptian kingship had abandoned it for over eight centuries, it was common for the aristocracy to be buried under small pyramidal monuments. Some of them, while sent to administer the newly conquered regions of Wawat and Kush, so to speak the north of actual Nubia, imported this new funerary tradition. At Aniba, where the King's Son of Kush ruled, and later at Tombos, small mudbrick pyramids were thus erected for the first time in Nubia (Steindorff 1937; Williams 1993).

Later, while a native kingship emerged in the region of the Jebel Barkal, the pyramid rapidly became part of a strategy to establish a new Pharaonic society in Nubia. Adopted by the king Piankhy in the second half of the 8th century BCE, the funerary pyramid tradition began a new life that would only end toward the 4th century CE. First reserved for the king and the royal family during the 25th Dynasty and the early Napatan Period, the monument progressively appeared at the surface of the high-ranked official graves in the cemeteries of the main administrative centers of the kingdom.

At the end of the Napatan Period and especially during the Meroitic Period, the multiplication of small pyramids accompanied by a chapel and other mortuary features began to transform the religious landscape of Nubia. Temples, palaces, royal graves, and places of pilgrimage, so far the main locations to celebrate the official cults, had to

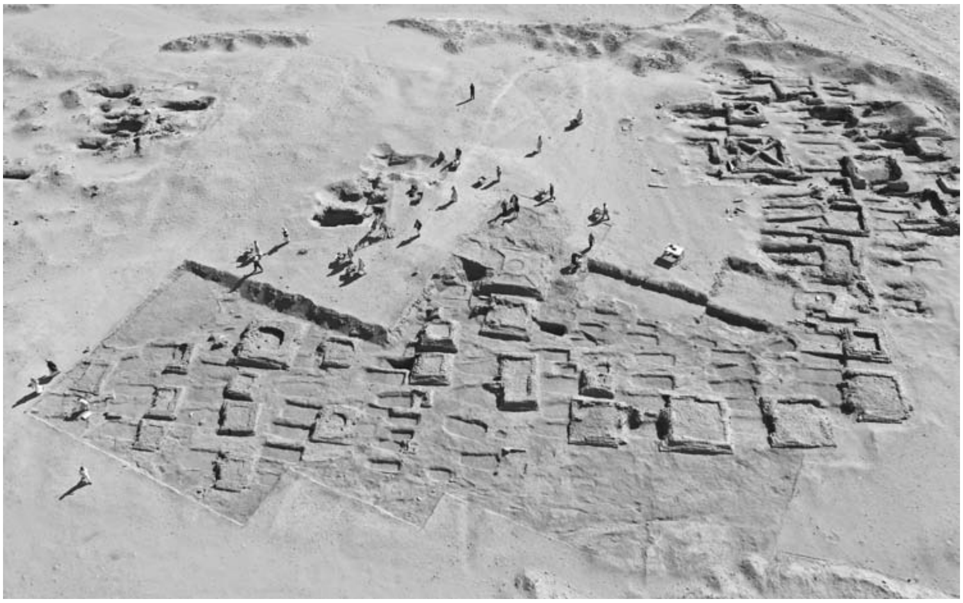

FIGURE 30.1 Aerial view of pyramid field at Sedeinga. Sedeinga Mission © B-N Chagny.

witness the rise of an authentic cult for the dead, closer and easily accessible for the common population. A deceased person, commemorated and remembered through his monument, and possibly an inscription, could thus become an approachable intercessor between the realm of the gods and the living world.

The reasons behind the adoption of the pyramid by the new rulers of Nubia are linked to the conquest of Egypt and probably also to the fascination of the royal family for some ancient figures of Egyptian history (from whom some borrowed their coronation names) and their astonishing monuments. The choice of the pyramid was indeed profoundly opposed to the old burial tradition under a tumulus, a funerary structure that was used across the entire sub-Saharan region. The older tradition of the tumulus that survived during the Meroitic Period through a fringe of the population would therefore naturally come back to the forefront of the scene after the collapse of the Egyptianized central power at the capital Meroe.

The advantages of borrowing from Egypt its well-established official cult of the dead king matched the determination of the new rising family that wanted to legitimatize its authority across the Nubian territory. This process, described as “the Egyptianization of the royal tomb” (Török 1997:327), was initiated from Nubia and to a certain degree adapted to the Nubian culture. It also followed the changes in Napatan-Meroitic society by opening to a larger part of the population over time. The appropriation of the pyramidal symbol by the king and the elite helped to build a new victorious identity for the Nubians, as they began to see themselves as the true heirs of the Egyptian cultural history. It is quite a surprising outcome considering the very long history of Egyptian propaganda against “wretched Kush” and the many conflicts that had opposed the two, often to the disadvantage of the Nubians. The occupation of Egypt, though limited in time, might have injected enough strength in the Nubian culture to overcome the past and faithfully embrace its newly built history.

All the kings of the 25th Dynasty, and later those of the Napatan and the Meroitic kingdoms, were buried under a pyramid. First located at El-Kurru during the 8th century BCE, the royal cemetery moved to Nuri under the reign of Taharqo in the 7th century BCE, then to Jebel Barkal around the 4th century BCE (reign of Aktisanes?) and finally to Meroe under the reign of Arkamani I at the beginning of the 3rd century BCE. At the beginning of the 2nd and at the end of the 1st centuries BCE, some royal burials took place again at Jebel Barkal, but it is still unclear if these episodes correspond to a split of Meroe in two, or to the local origin of the ruler at that time (Dunham 1950, 1955, 1957).

Royal Kushite pyramids, like their late Egyptian models, were small in size but with steep walls that gave a powerful impression when seen from the ground. The tallest was about 50 m high (for Taharqo in Nuri), but in average most did not exceed 30 m in height. Non-royal pyramids were generally much smaller, also because they mostly used mudbricks instead of stone. By adopting the pyramidal grave monument, provincial elite groups had intended to copy the king's grave, though in reality they followed the models already established by non-ruling members of the royal family. The well-known monument built for the prince Tedeqene in the West Cemetery at Meroe is often cited (Török 2009:420) as an example of this influence toward local elite.

Though the pyramids built for the elite tried to copy the official standards, from the very beginning they also had their differences. Furthermore, most of the components of the funerary monument such as the chapel, the capstone, the texts, or the statuary also changed over time, accentuating the gap between the two traditions, royal and non-royal. The capstone is a good example of these disparities. In Egypt, royal monuments had a pointed decorated block (pyramidion) at the top, while in Meroe the last stone on a pyramid had a circular base with two holes, probably to insert a bronze solar disk. On elite graves in the countryside, the capstone didn't follow either of these traditions, but rather took the shape of a lotus bud about to bloom but tied with symbolic ropes. This diversity shows how the adoption of foreign traditions was made possible at Meroe by creating new models adapted to the local architectural, religious, and artistic background. It also illustrates how regional traditions and beliefs could override the codes used in the capital.

A Twofold Funerary Tradition

Unlike the graves from the royal circles and the highest elite groups at Meroe, which were all Egyptianized, many graves from lower-level officials seem to have mixed local and foreign traditions. It is therefore possible to encounter in a single unit two contemporaneous burials, one following the Egyptian way (coffin, extended position, bead net), and the other a Nubian-style ritual (crouched position without coffin). The latter burials were never totally closed to foreign influence, but had not embraced all the aspects of Egyptianized mortuary practices.

Above the grave, the choice of the superstructure also revealed the existence of two traditions. If the king, the royal family, and many high-ranked officials opted for the pyramid, a part of the population continued to use the tumulus, the traditional funerary monument used in Nubia since the protohistoric period.

Until now, only a few excavations have revealed the true extent of the tumulus grave tradition in the kingdom of Meroe. But discoveries such as the 4th-century CE royal tumuli at El-Hobagi (Lenoble 1994), in Central Sudan, proved that the tradition had never been abandoned and was probably strong enough in the southern part of the kingdom to be reinstated by the new ruler who succeeded the last kings buried under pyramids at Meroe.

In Central Sudan (Wolf and Nowotnick, this volume) at the end of the 1st millennium BCE, new royal cities such as Hamadab, El-Hassa, and Muweis emerged in the periphery of Meroe. Based on official institutions such as an Amun temple or a royal palace, the elaborate plans of these towns confirm the high density of population that surrounded the capital. But for every settlement discovered and currently excavated, almost no attempts have been made to look at the cemeteries. This unbalanced approach leaves us with random discoveries to study the nature of the funerary religion in the region. One of them was made in the 1980s at El-Kadada, during the construction of a large channel and water pump (Lenoble 1987a). Unsurprisingly the site showed that during the Late Meroitic Period, wealthy people of the local community were buried under tumuli.

The difficulty with tumulus architecture is that it uses natural material available in the vicinity of the cemetery, on top of the soil extracted from the excavation of the grave itself. In other words, it has a tendency over time to disappear into the landscape, unless it is covered with rocks or has kept its circular elevated shape. Unfortunately, Central Sudan is a region affected every year by strong rains, washing away the plain-lands between the hills.

Another problem with the tumulus is that it belongs to a long-lasting tradition. Except for a few cases such as C-Group tumuli, it can be quite difficult to date a tumulus from its general appearance. During the recent survey of the Fourth Cataract region, many tumuli thought to be Post-Meroitic in date were finally attributed to the Kerma Period after some of them were excavated. Of course, the material left at the surface by plunderers help determine the cultural profile of the grave—up to a certain limit though, because tumuli fields hide another problem: they can be diachronic, which means that different historical phases can be found in a single funerary area, with structures that all look similar. The case study of Jebel Makbor (Lenoble 1987b), near Meroe, summarizes it all. On a *jebel* covered with approximately one thousand graves, four tumuli with the same appearance and located only a few meters from each other show that one belongs to the protohistoric period, one to the Meroitic Period and two to the medieval period. Though in the Fourth Cataract area, after years of intensive archaeological activities, we are now able to refine our expertise with mound graves typologies, such tools are paradoxically missing for the most populated area of the kingdom, where we continue to massively focus on royal foundations.

The geographical distribution of tumulus fields of the Meroitic period or the transition with the Post-Meroitic Period is quite informative, even though our knowledge remains limited for Central Sudan.

To the north of the region between Jebel Barkal and Kawa, the tumulus was completely abandoned during the Meroitic Period. While elite groups and later the middle class adopted the pyramid, the poorest graves found in Meroitic cemeteries seem to have had no superstructure on the surface. Sometimes this was because a pyramid originally built for one or two burial chambers became, after generations, a collective monument for a cluster of graves installed all around, where space was still available.

The last tumulus superstructures in this region are found at Sedeinga (Francigny 2016:64). They date back to the Late Napatan Period and were built with a mixed architecture consisting of an oval-shaped soil mound coming from the pit excavation, covered with a mudbrick dome sealed with mortar. All the known examples belong to tombs of children while monuments of adults were already pyramids, some of them having a surprising circular wall built in the middle and completely hidden when the construction was completed.

Upstream of Jebel Barkal, both traditions are found, with pyramids erected for the royal family and the subsequent circles. Recent discoveries such as Gabati (Edwards 1998) and Berber (Mahmoud Suliman Bashir 2010) indicate that a few pyramids for highest-ranked local officials are even expected in almost all the cemeteries of a decent size.

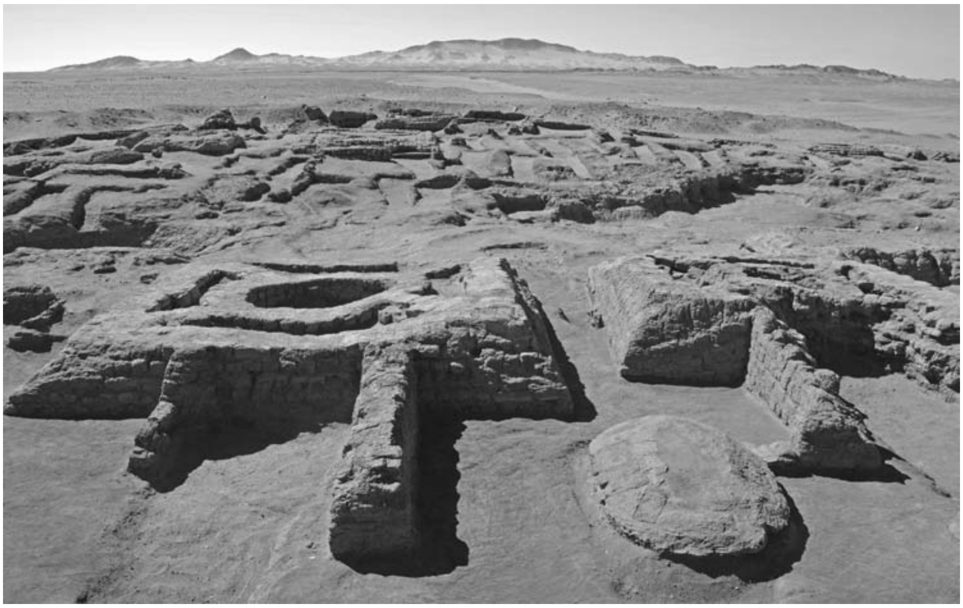

FIGURE 30.2 Late Napatan tumulus grave between two pyramids. Sedeinga Mission © V. Francigny.

THE CULT OF THE DEAD

The funerary rituals developed from a combination of Egyptian concepts and local traditions are still puzzling because of their diversity and the selective process they imply, although they can partly be described through archaeological observations. Their regional distribution, also reflected in the material culture and the funerary equipment, would benefit from a better understanding of the administrative divisions of the kingdom. Török (1997:512) points out that the so-called democratization of the funerary religion during the Early Meroitic Period corresponds to a broader change in the society marked by the emergence of the first Kandake and the creation of a new writing system. But it is not clear to what extent ~~which extend~~ all these transformations were part of an intentional reform, or whether they correspond to the growing independence of regional powers and changes in the structure of the royal family itself.

Spreading rapidly and probably influencing the populations living beyond the margins of the kingdom, the Meroitic cult of the dead is mostly known through the large series of pyramidal monuments, funerary chapels, and liturgical material associated with them. For the people still buried under tumuli, even when the graves possess plenty of similarities with those found under pyramids, the post-mortem rituals remain hard to define. During the Fourth Cataract survey, the great number of Meroitic tumuli found untouched but with a lot of ceramic pots broken at their surface (Wolf and Nowotnick 2005) indicates at least the possible existence of a funerary cult performed in a more humble and traditional way.

The funerary chapel, as we know it (built on the east side of a pyramid) during the Napatan-Meroitic Period, was introduced in Nubia during the New Kingdom colonization. However, a funerary cult was performed outside the grave as early as the C-Group period, and funerary temples were already built next to royal graves at Kerma (Bonnet 2000). Apart from the royal graves at Meroe and Barkal, most of the funerary chapels dating from the Meroitic Period were reduced-size monuments that could only, in the best case, host a stela and some material. The chapel, even symbolic, was seen as a tangible bridge between the grave (i.e., the deceased) and the living (i.e., the family or the clan); a place in front of which rituals could be performed and prayers conveyed to the other world.

For the largest non-royal chapels, it became common to combine the mudbrick architecture with stone elements such as a threshold, a lintel, and doorjambs. Local differences are often observed in this regard, and not only in artistic style and technique. For example, all the lintels with an inscription come from a single site, Sedeinga, and attest the relative freedom of high officials to turn funerary rituals to their advantage (Rilly 2013).

When decorated, the doorjambs usually opposed two divinities, one on each side of the door, pouring a libation for the dead. Anubis, the Egyptian god protector of the grave, generally faces either Isis or Nephthys. This scene appears on the doorjambs

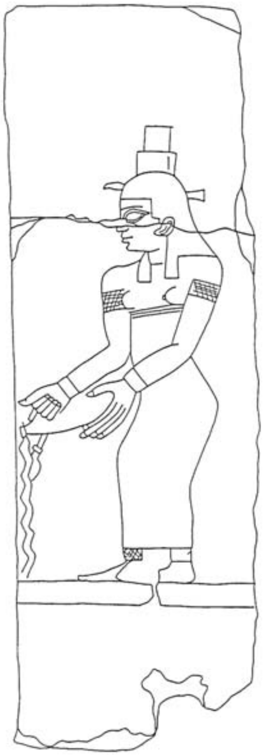

FIGURE 30.3 Isis pouring a libation for the dead. Doorjamb of a chapel at Sedeinga. Sedeinga Mission © V. Francigny.

around the 2nd century BCE and was borrowed from the iconography of the offering tables. Anubis, gaining in popularity during the Roman Period, is also more often depicted in Meroitic art than he was during the Napatan Period. However his name is never mentioned in the funerary texts, where Isis and Osiris remain the main figures of the funerary religion.

The lintels of non-royal funerary chapels were made in an archaic Egyptian style, figuring a winged sun disc flanked by two uraeus-serpents. Most of the official buildings (temples, palaces, royal tombs) during the Meroitic Period have their doors surmounted with this type of lintel. More than an act of faith local elites appropriated a symbol that legitimated their status and power, because a private edifice that looks like an official temple carries the idea that it participates in the cosmic order, of which the central figure is the king himself.

The space in front of the chapel was used to perform the rituals dedicated to the dead, among which the libation poured on an offering table was probably most important. The table was placed on a small pedestal made with mudbricks, often built on top of the descendary after it was filled up at the end of the funeral. During the libation, the table would receive the liquid before it could find its way to the ground through the apex.

During that process, the water would magically convey the prayers and the food offerings carved on the table, directly to the dead.

Initially found in Egypt to serve the gods and goddesses in their temples, as well as the dead king, the offering table travelled to Nubia during the New Kingdom colonization and remained a central object in Napatan sanctuaries. In the kingdom of Meroe, the number of tables discovered increased considerably as it was commonly found associated with the main tombs of elite groups. Meroitic offering tables are so similar to those made in Roman Egypt that, without a text, it would sometimes be impossible to differentiate the two. Its surface decoration alternates between carved and incised scenes, always with great care for bilateral symmetry in the composition. Two categories of decoration dominate: the representations of offerings and the figural scenes where divinities perform a libation. In the latter case, Anubis generally faces Isis or Nephthys, as on the doorjambs of the chapel.

The offering tables with a figural scene were first associated with the extended royal family members, as they were not designed for the king whose chapel was already adorned with offering rituals. Reaching the provinces of the kingdom quite quickly, the first known examples in Lower Nubia were always reserved to the highest figures of the local elite. Török (2009:422) used the distribution of offering tables to locate the most influential centers of power in the Meroitic kingdom: Meroe, Karanog, Faras, Sedeinga, and Sai Island. In addition to the growing enthusiasm for pyramidal burial monuments, the democratization of the offering table offers another example on how the distance that separates the royal family from "local rulers" was unrelentingly shrinking during the Meroitic Period.

Another vital element for the cult of the dead was the funerary stela, probably set up in the small chapel. During the Napatan Period, it was reserved to the royal circles, while at Meroe it became as common as the offering table in front of graves of officials. Here also, two main categories can be identified, though a multitude of alternatives exist. The first one consists of stelae only conceived to support a funerary inscription, with the exception of a winged sun disc sometimes carved at the top. The second one shows a figural scene representing the deceased, alone or accompanied by a member of his family, and sometimes a text written in the spaces left empty. If for the first category the texts were always carved, the figural scenes could be incised, carved, or painted. Their details represent an invaluable source of information for the studies of garments, ornaments, and physical appearance.

In the countryside, funerary texts start to be written around the 1st century BCE. Invocations addressed to Isis and Osiris, benedictions for the dead, and statements of family relationships are the main focus of these texts (Rilly, this volume), which thus provide a unique insight into Meroitic society and its administrative structure. Depending on the context, some titles could remain in the same family and in one place for generations, while in some other cases high-ranked officials could accumulate many titles by travelling throughout their career.

In the West Cemetery at Sedeinga, nine graves were installed on a small hillock at a distance from the rest of the funerary area. Dating from the Napatan Period, the graves were later reused during the Meroitic time with new pyramids added in front of the ruined monuments. One grave in particular, belonging to a local ruler named Natemakhora (end of 2nd century CE), was found with three funerary texts carved on the stela, the lintel, and the threshold of the chapel. This abundance of written material, each text repeating and completing the other, reproduce at a lower scale the ostentatious logic of the texts covering the walls of a temple. In that case, the inscriptions were not meant to better serve the deceased in the afterlife, but to emphasize his rank and social identity. Unsurprisingly, Natemakhora's inscriptions bear the highest title known in the region between the Second and the Third Cataract: *sleqene: Atiye-te-l-o-wi* ("He was *sleqene* at Sedeinga").

The mobility of the elites, and their tendency to mention far kinship ties if a person held an important title or was based in the capital, are very useful for studies of geography. Through funerary inscriptions, we can thus locate some of the main settlements and specify their role. This is how we know, for example, that the regional capital of Lower Nubia was located in *Nlote* (Karanog), where the *pesto* (a sort of governor) was buried with his family; that *Tene* (Shablul) had many ambassadors sent to Roman Egypt; that Gebel Adda was the fief of the powerful *Wayekiye* clan; or that Shablul was probably the place where the priests of Qasr Ibrim were buried.

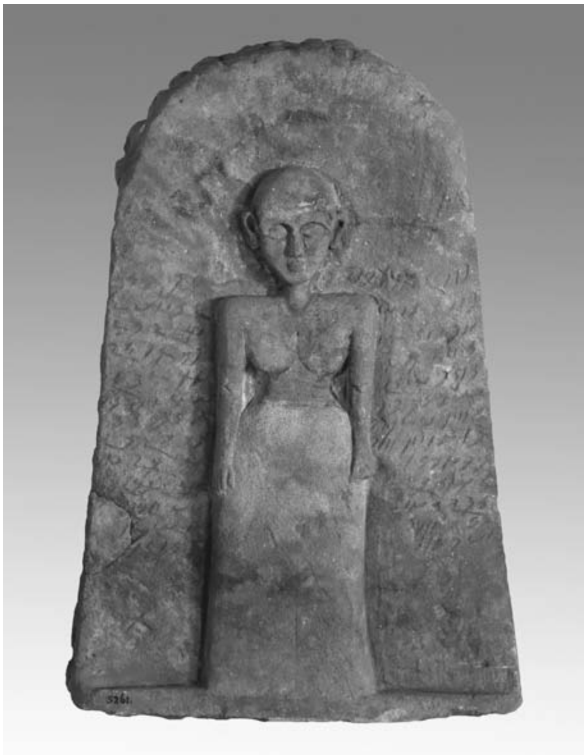

FIGURE 30.4 Stela of Lapakhidaye. Sudan National Museum © V. Francigny.

All the non-royal funerary texts were written using the cursive Meroitic script (Rilly, this volume). Its creation was probably motivated by practical needs in the administration of the kingdom, but the fact that it was also commonly used for royal texts, instead of hieroglyphic, shows that it was meant to be widely accessible; by contrast with Egypt, where hieroglyphic script was exclusively used by elite and religious communities. The development of funerary inscriptions dedicated to local rulers, officials, and their relatives became an important step in forging the identity and domination of elite groups upon the rest of the population. The emergence of a new writing system probably owes a lot to these elite groups who used it very early to commemorate their dead. So many changes such as the widespread uses of pyramidal monuments or the increasing number of formal titles given to local administrators would never ~~had~~ have happened if they were not reflecting a major evolution in the relation between the royal family and the court or provincial elite groups. The tacit agreement between the royal and non-royal authorities regarding the use of former royal prerogatives in funerary contexts was apparently facilitated by the common use of this script and the easy flow of communication it offered.

THE *BA*-STATUE: A MEROITIC REINVENTION

When stelae and offering tables became popular among the elites, another component of the cult of the dead appeared in the shape of a funerary statue. Known through hundreds of pieces, mostly incomplete, these statues changed from a bird-like shape to an almost complete anthropomorphic sculpture. It was called a *ba*-statue, in reference to the Egyptian *ba*, the human soul that would leave the body at the time of death, and often represented as a bird with a human head. In the case of the Meroitic specimen (a reference to the Sokar-Osiris depicted on some royal chapels?), it probably had a broader significance encompassing the other Egyptian concept of the *ka*, the vital essence that could inhabit the statue and be sustained through food offerings.

It was recently proposed that the early *ba*-statues were located at the top of the pyramidal monuments, before the capstone appeared (Francigny 2012:56). Indeed, late anthropomorphic statues have a flat surface at the bottom that is sometimes paired with a stone base where it was inserted. A statue of this type could not be placed in a location that was subject to strong winds. Moving down from the top of the monument to the chapel, the reduced distance between the statue and the ground provided a good reason to personify the sculpture and turn it into a representation of the deceased with all his insignia of power. However, this progressive change and focus on the identity of the dead was not to the benefit of the grave owner only, but was also meant to highlight the status of the whole family or clan.

From the descriptive point of view, late *ba*-statues offer detailed information about garments, ornaments, headdresses, and other symbolic attributes. Though they certainly all refer to social ranks, functions, or titles, we are still far from being able to identify all of them. For example, the long necklace with large spherical beads seen on some statues belongs to the highest official (*pesto*), while the short version was reserved to the royal heir (*peqer*), as seen on the chapel decoration at Meroe (for example Beg. N 20).

The late anthropomorphic *ba*-statue is clearly influenced by the representation of the male royal court members depicted on the walls of palaces, temples, and royal funerary chapels. Female anthropomorphic *ba*-statues, with apparent nudity, emphasize the social role of mother and ultimately the fecundity figures of the queen and the goddesses assimilated to her. Thus, there is a direct connection between the official representations of the queen shown with prominent breasts and the elite female figures buried far from the capital. It supports the idea that more royal privileges were conceded to regional powers during the Meroitic Period, in comparison with the more conservative Napatan time. The human-like sculpture associated with the grave can then be compared to the statues of gods and kings hosted in temples. The chapel, serving as a private family temple, probably replaced in certain occasions the main religious sanctuaries.

Mortuary Equipment

During the funeral, the choice of the objects that would enter the grave and accompany the deceased through their journey to the afterlife was extremely meaningful. Likely, the funerals for the lowest classes of the Meroitic society were accompanied by rituals performed by the family itself, rather than local priests. As much as the elite groups could copy the royal family mortuary practices, the commoners must have tried to reproduce the sacraments performed for the elite.

A well-known object associated with the Egyptianized grave of the first Nubian kings was the *shabti*. From Piankhy until Nastasen, it belonged to the equipment of the grave, but completely disappeared when the royal cemetery was transferred to Meroe. However, non-royal graves were never equipped with *shabtis*, suggesting that the royal prerogative remained strong and that even the highest-ranked officials had limited options to copy the king's tomb and funerals.

Apart from liturgical tools used during the ceremony such as libation bowls and incense burners, two other main categories of objects were placed in the burial chamber: personal belongings and the remains of the funerary banquet.

On the body itself, it seems that most of the dead who had valuable ornaments and jewelry were buried wearing them. Amulets on necklaces could play a role in protecting the deceased, though they were initially made for the living. The most popular were Isis Lactans and Bes amulets, often buried with children. Anklets, armlets, and earrings were quite common, while fingers could have one or more seal rings. Not all the ornaments were put on the dead, as some of them were placed in small boxes or caskets made of wood. A rare talisman (Rilly 2007:216) was once found in a grave at Sai Island, with an inscription written on leather and probably brought from a pilgrimage to the Amun temple at Primis (Qasr Ibrim). Other personal objects included small metallic utensils like tweezers, needles, or spatulas. Wood or ivory kohl tubes and small oil containers made of glass or ceramic were sometimes put in a casket or on basketry trays.

Next to the body, a range of weapons could be placed, though they were not always authentic, nor do they indicate ~~stating~~ that the deceased belonged to the army. For example, large series of arrows and quivers were probably given to honor an official, rather than to signify the burial of a real archer (Lenoble 1997).

The largest series of objects found in Meroitic graves are always ceramic containers (jars, bottles, etc.) and utensils (bowls, cups, etc.). Both local wheelmade and handmade traditions are represented, in addition to imported vessels such as amphorae or lekythoi. Resembling the well-known Roman tradition of the funerary banquet (Riggs 2005), wealthy Meroites were buried with the food and drink containers that were probably used during the funerals. The large quantities and the rarity of some products must have been used to reinforce the leading position of some families over the communities of riverine settlements. Other containers, such as water bottle covered with a cup, might also have played a practical role in sustaining the deceased in the afterlife.

The Treatment of the Corpse

No canopic jars or bandages have been found in non-royal Meroitic graves, meaning that no mummification process was involved, though it is often mentioned in modern literature. The reason could be that it was widely accepted throughout the kingdom that natural desiccation of the corpse was sufficient to preserve the dead. If the royal iconography sometimes refers to mummification, it simply shows that even when an Egyptian concept was borrowed by the Kushites, it was not necessarily adopted as a practice. While Meroites were aware of the mummification but did not use it, in Egypt it was so popular that it turned into a kind of funerary industry.

The absence of mummification eliminates the existence of specialized workshops where the dead were sent, and most of non-royal post-mortem rituals on the corpse must have been done within the family premises. To avoid rapid decay, the body was probably washed or scented with oils and preserved from insects with incense-like substances. Both tools, the oil container and the incense burner, were then placed into the grave, as well as the bed (if any was used), as the living could probably not use them anymore. Many beds, generally with the legs dismantled due to the lack of space, were therefore discovered in Meroitic graves.

Lying on a bed, on a funerary bench made of stone or simply on the floor, the deceased was often resting in a wood coffin or wrapped in a shroud. Mostly using cotton fabric, a typically Nubian production that later spread to Egypt (Mayer-Thurman and Williams 1979:36), shrouds were usually not decorated, though a few exceptional specimens show references to Egyptian religious figures.

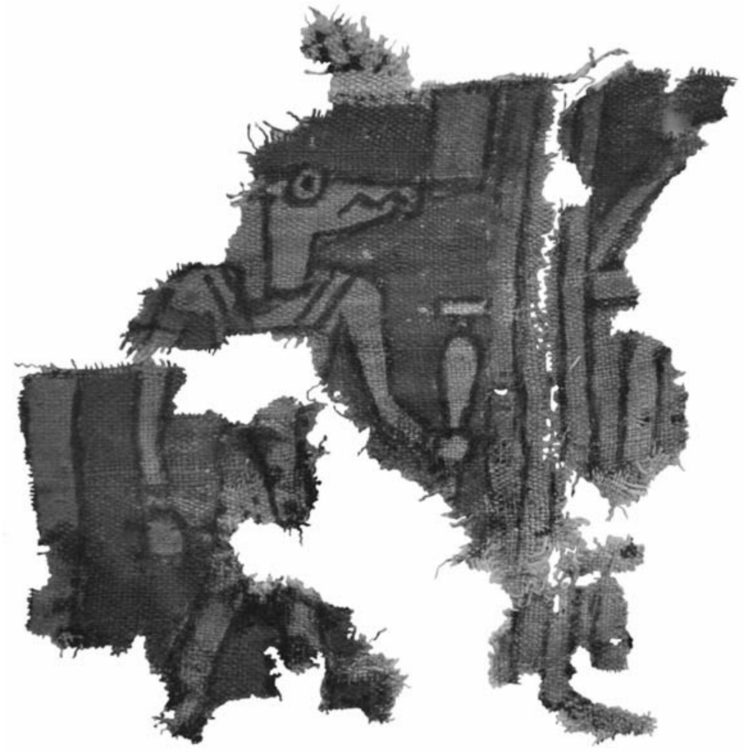

FIGURE 30.5 Decorated shroud from Sai Island. SIAM © V. Francigny.

Inherited from the Egyptian colonization and the Napatan Period, the wood coffin was another common feature of Meroitic burials. Men and women could both be buried in coffins. Some Meroitic coffins were made with *Ficus sycamorus* wood, also used in the Egyptian tradition. It attests the deep influence of the Osirian theology throughout the Kushite period, with its particular focus on the preservation of the corpse, as the transfiguration of the dead allowed them to be assimilated to the god and to triumph against death.

Once the grave was closed and the funeral over, many things could still happen to the corpse in relation to human activities. As some Meroitic graves were from the beginning designed for several burials, they could be reopened and the corpses moved if not reduced over time to a selection of a few bones. Alternatively, with openings for legitimate purposes, plunderers looking for metal and jewelry could periodically visit the grave, often causing irreversible damage to the bodies.

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