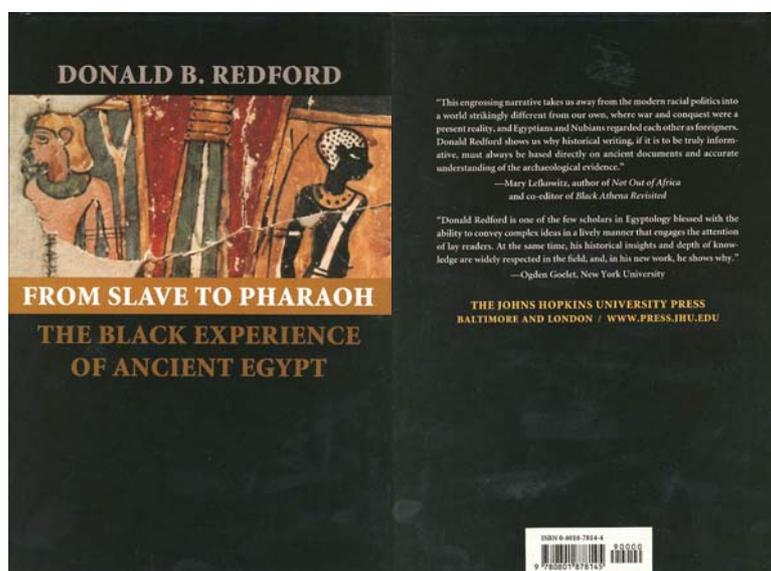


Redford, D.B. 2004. From slave to pharaoh. The black experience of ancient Egypt. – Baltimore/London, The Johns Hopkins University Press

Book review by P.J. Cowie



Donald Redford (Penn State University) enjoys a reputation for the ability to make the broad sweep of ancient history simultaneously accessible *and* fascinating for layman, student and scholar alike. This much-admired talent stems in no small part from the fact that Redford is that, once common but presently rare, combination of both specialist and generalist; Egyptologist, ancient historian and archaeologist, a veteran commentator able to capture and effectively convey a vision of sometimes difficult history, marshalling the available sources in all their range and variety to reconstruct the past in his own inimitable style.

Redford maintains his hard-won reputation in the handsome yet compact publication that is presently the subject of review (the inspection volume was the hardback edition), achieving *largely* for relations between Egypt and Nubia, that which his 1992 work 'Egypt, Canaan and Israel in ancient times' achieved for Egypt's relations with the Levant and Western Asia: a scholarly-based overview of primary developments and trends, employing a semi-popular style with wide appeal to survey the range of available sources and scholarly thinking. If anything, the current title achieves greater general readability, presented in a decidedly more concise fashion and penned in a less verbose, more accessible level of language. This praise is not without some qualification, however...

The guiding premise of the work lies in the gradual rise of ethnic Kushites, the inhabitants of Nubia (present day Sudan), from the status of an Egyptian-oppressed and -exploited population at the beginning of recorded history in the 4th millennium BCE, through to an apogee with the 25th dynasty in the second quarter of the 1st millennium BCE. At this time, their representatives (at least) established a dynasty able to rule the entire Nile Valley north of the Fourth Cataract for a period and, presumably, formed the core administrative elite around the pharaonic court. The somewhat romantic title 'From slave to pharaoh', therefore, represents a convenient, if somewhat simplistic synopsis of the present work.

Convenient, if also somewhat misleading, as not *every* Kushite experienced the same vertiginous rise to power, of course, or even benefited accordingly. 'The black experience of Egypt' as a sub-title stands somewhat misleadingly; some readers, indeed, may be disappointed, some purchasers feel slightly misled, to discover upon reading that only in the earliest chapters does Redford address himself, and remarkably concisely at that, to issues of race relations and the everyday, *majority* 'black experience' of Egypt. Instead, Redford's treatment settles quickly merely to outlining and discussing the socio-political experience of the Nubian elite alone, in their rise to power and influence in Egypt, with little if any deviation.

The suspicion must be that this otherwise effective treatment of the rise of the 25th dynasty, the so-called 'black pharaohs' (*cf.* Morkot, 2000), was so entitled, and perhaps partly written, to appeal directly to a potentially large Afro-American audience. Of course, this is not entirely poor practice: most books have a target audience, and if the present work encourages people of African background in Egyptology, it is to be highly commended. My only discomfort is that a book so-titled might develop its apparent central theme to a somewhat deeper extent, revealing in greater detail and depth the experience of Nubians *in general* within, and as affected by, Egyptian society. Of course, this is partly the result of poor encouragement from our available sources, for

which there is a relative lack, and virtual silence where they do exist; an unfortunate situation signalled by Redford himself (p. 10). Nonetheless, and looking from the viewpoint of Egypt's wider relations with the Near East, for example, it might have been useful to include greater discussion of the role of Nubians as soldiers/mercenaries abroad and policemen in Egypt. Where, for instance are the complaints by the vassal ruler of Jerusalem (Amarna Letter 287) for the heavy-handed tactics of Nubian garrison-soldiers in his city? Where the repeated requests by the ruler of Byblos for 'men of Melukhka' (Amarna Letters 95, 117, 127, 132, 133) to protect and validate his princely rule?

Redford moves very quickly in his early chapters (1 to 6 inclusive), fairly skimming the long period running from the Nubian prehistory of the late 3rd millennium BCE through to the end of the New Kingdom, *circa* 1070 BCE; indeed, this pace is somewhat exaggerated when one realises that the first three chapters are largely thematic in character, establishing (respectively): the general tenor of 'race relations' between Egyptians and Nubians; the concept of the frontier (and especially that set at the First Cataract/Elephantine); and the resources and general policies (of control, exploitation and extermination) pursued in Nubia by Egyptian pharaohs. The Nubian narrative or 'story', as such, begins only with chapter 4 and a cursory examination of the Egyptian Old Kingdom dynasties' incipient penetration of Nubia, alongside the coeval rise of the C-Group People (Medjay). The establishment of a Middle Kingdom Empire in Nubia follows: this latter phase, Egypt's first true *imperium*, that of mighty mud-brick fortresses at Semna and Buhen, and vast mining expeditions into the Nubian hinterland, is allotted a scant three pages!

Similarly treated is the rise of the Kerma state-chiefdom in the first part of the 2nd millennium BCE. Characterised by Redford (p. 33) as "[...] the earliest autochthonous efflorescence of high culture on the African continent ([...] Apart from pharaonic Egypt [...])" and therefore perhaps to be regarded as a useful harbinger for the later rise to pre-eminence by Kush, this embryonic Nubian polity evaporates in a single chapter of seven pages. Manifestly, enlarging on these earlier periods was *not* amongst Redford's intent for this work, serving merely to rapidly set the scene for later triumphs. Again we might ask, however, whether slightly more detail in these formative phases might usefully have helped to flesh out the 'black experience' and contribution to civilisation in the Nile Valley? Whilst the primary illustrations of 'black experience' are discussed briefly in these early chapters, much detail is foregone (where might the reader discover the wonderful Middle Kingdom tomb models of Medjay soldiers, for example, or, as a novice, ascertain the full importance of the Nubian A- and C-groups to the developmental history of the Upper Nile Valley?).

Having dealt quickly with the empire in Nubia of the New Kingdom thereafter, Redford's diachronic gallop thankfully decelerates, and rapidly, with the onset of the 3rd Intermediate Period. This, in preparation for his main focus in the Late Period when Kushite kings assumed rulership of the Nile Valley in its entirety with the establishment of the 25th dynasty. It is here, finally, that 'From slave to pharaoh' comes into its own; although not the sole work recently concerned with surveying the 1st millennium BCE in the Nile Valley (compare, for example, Myśliwiec, 2000), Redford's contribution nonetheless makes a welcome addition to what has been a period ill-served in the generalist literature, and is in keeping with a recent revival of interest in contemporaneous foreign and inter-racial relations, as well as the Late Period in general.

The progress of the 3rd Intermediate Period and the fitful rise of Kush to supreme power therefore form the larger, middle range of the book, Redford providing an effective breakdown of what is a little known and still poorly understood period. Indeed, the treatment of this topic and of the historical development of the Late Period in general are pleasingly up-to-date, incorporating new insights obtained, for example, through the medium of the recently-published Tang-i Var Inscription (*cf.* Frame, 1999; Redford, 1999). Interestingly, Redford regards the Nubian conquest of Egypt as complete only with the reigns of Shebitku and Taharqa; many would traditionally seek to place the transition with Piankhy's earlier campaign to the north, the siege of Memphis and his acceptance of the Delta rulers' subjection, as described vividly in the Piankhy Stela. Redford casts doubt on this interpretation, legitimately pointing to the continuing resistance of Tefnakhte and the 24th dynasty prior to Assyrian intervention in the Delta. Only with the collapse of the 24th dynasty and the successful repulse of Sennacherib's army in Egypt and the Levant does Redford consider the task complete. Of course, the Assyrians were not to be deterred ultimately: their return under Esarhaddon, described in chapter 15 named 'The End of the Twenty-Fifth Dynasty', assists Redford in drawing the narrative of Kushite rise to power to its premature close with the capture of Memphis and the staged retreat of Taharqa and his successor to the Napatan homeland, never to return...

A brief, three-page epilogue rather abruptly closes the main text, a shock somewhat relieved in learning that the ensuing 26th dynasty period will form the basis for future examination by the same author (or so Redford explains in his preface). Another disappointment then, in an otherwise engaging work: little has been said with regard to the subsequent 'black experience' of Egypt as it continued, confined once again 'south of the border', with the later Kushite and Meroitic kingdoms and cultures. These may hopefully make some appearance in this or another sequel; it is difficult to foresee, however, how they might easily be integrated (encouraging the resent

reviewer to think, perhaps, that an expanded version of the present work might have worked better, with greater thematic unity).

We must enjoy that which we are given, however, and Redford greatly enhances the value of his prematurely-curtailed survey with a wide-ranging overview of ‘Egypt of the ‘Black Pharaohs’’ in chapter 13. Here the reader will discover, first and foremost, a useful exposition of the changing nature of the monarchy and the 25th dynasty’s brand of kingship; this, alongside observations regarding Nubian relations with eclipsed Delta dynasts (their ongoing existence a prime example of pragmatic sufferance on the part of the black pharaohs); a concise explanation of the special administrative case of Upper Egypt and the Thebaid in the female personage of the ‘divine worshipper’ and, finally, a brief survey of the 25th dynasty’s building program. One item only is seemingly missing: some discussion of the prevailing artistic style ushered in at the start of the 25th dynasty, an unprecedented reversion to, or imitation of, Old and Middle Kingdom canons of proportion and decoration, as well as archaizing tendencies in literature, one of the most astonishing developments in the long continuum of Egyptian art and culture (so characteristic of a dynasty striving to be ‘more Egyptian than the Egyptians’), would have served well to round out treatment of the period. Somewhat surprising, its absence is keenly felt and represents another small, but cumulative disappointment in an otherwise effective publication.

By way of redemption, Redford’s 25th dynasty focus affords him an excellent opportunity to bring his own personal contributions and experience to bear upon the topic (no doubt representing a large part of the motivation behind the book). In one of the most valuable sections of the text, Redford elaborates on the archaeological findings from the ephemeral ‘Temple C’ and the adjoining extensive residential areas in East Karnak (excavated 1975-1991, under his own direction), dedicating an entire chapter (chapter 14) to ‘Thebes under the Twenty-Fifth Dynasty’. As we await still the final publication of the excavations, Redford’s interim inclusion of this discussion serves somewhat to fill the gap, the exposition of material evidences (including a pleasing number of plans and photographs) refreshing after the virtually unrelieved textual discussion to that point.

Having described the content of ‘From slave to pharaoh’, all that remains is to make observation regarding presentation. On the whole, the hardback edition is extremely readable and strongly bound. A well-constructed 10-page index, many entries with useful sub-headings, makes for ready access of common search items. The book has a pleasing level of illustration: line-drawings are, on the whole, clear, well-drawn and sourced directly from original publications. A good selection of photographic images has been included (although sadly only in black-and-white; a small insert of colour photographs might well have been a useful addition). Several images fall short in photographic finesse (e.g. figure 11a on p. 45), or appear slightly over-exposed (e.g. figure 6 on p. 17); the vast majority, however, are of a pleasing quality.

Redford has employed a system of endnotes to reference and further discuss the content of his main text; the length and detail of many notes clearly precluded the alternative use of footnotes within chapter pages. Even so, the endnote method of documentation could prove somewhat disruptive for the avid observer of citation. An additional level of inline referencing, explanation and the use of small-font footnotes would together have proven far less distracting (and involve far less page turning!) for the curious and/or thorough reader. The relationship between the index and endnotes is also somewhat strained, several references pointing to a location two pages previously: ‘Medjay’, for example, points to ‘154n31, 161n26’ (amongst other pages). Whilst the endnote numbering is correct, these particular examples are actually found on pages 156 and 163 respectively. What amounts to a unfortunate error in the process of publishing, however, does not detract significantly from the overall value of the work and its presentation.

Despite these minor oversights, the level of Redford’s documentation must be judged extremely high, encouraging the reader’s confidence in the author as being well in command of his necessarily diverse sources; not least, in being able to draw on the myriad archaeological sources and the kaleidoscope of Levantine, Mesopotamian and Egyptian textual records that together work alternately to illuminate and obfuscate the period for the novice.

In conclusion, ‘From slave to pharaoh’ must be considered on the whole an effective and well-rendered introduction to the ‘black experience’ of ancient Egypt, if not the comprehensive survey the provocative title might appear to promise. It is as an exploration of the tangled affairs of the early 1st millennium BCE, and the leading role undertaken by the black pharaohs within these, that the book succeeds best. Redford, as expected, proves simultaneously able to pique the reader’s curiosity *and* provide sufficient information for initial exploration (with but a few notable shortcomings and omissions), whilst offering the keys (in the form of up-to-date and full citation) to effective further self-exploration. The book is therefore recommended for purchase and for study, with those qualifications above outlined, and should serve students and the informed general reader ably as a welcoming door into a fascinating period of Egyptian and Nubian history.

Redford, D.B. 2004. *From slave to pharaoh. The black experience of ancient Egypt.* – Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press. 232 pp. ISBN 0-8018-7814-4. \$44.95 (hardcover).

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