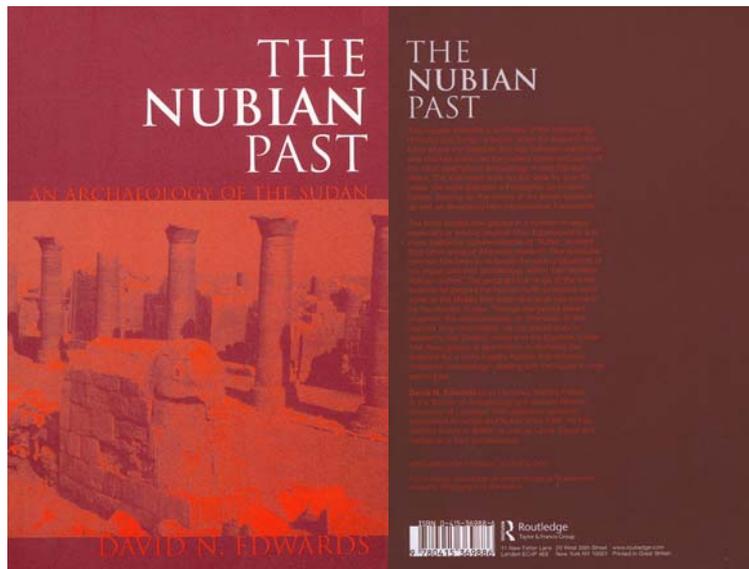


Edwards, D.N. 2004. The Nubian past. An archaeology of the Sudan. – London, Routledge

Book review by J. Phillips



After nearly two decades of almost unremitting exploration and excavation, an updated overview of the titular discipline has again appeared – and not before time. The last was the second (1984) printing of Adams's massive 'Nubia. Corridor to Africa', itself updated from the first (1977) only by a new introductory preface and appearing at a time when work was just beginning in earnest south of the 2nd Cataract. The difference in achievements between then and now is stated quite clearly in the language of their respective subtitles: a narrow *corridor* along the Nile valley, and a more all-encompassing *archaeology of the Sudan*. This implied regional expansion reflects the expansion of research itself, which has pushed beyond the limited view of the Nile valley to encompass the deserts either side and even the coast and borders with other modern nations surrounding the Sudan, placing both the valley and the country within their geographical contexts. It is a nice touch for Edwards to choose the indefinite article *an* for his subtitle; given the volume's philosophy, the alternative would have implied a knowledge far too absolute.

Edwards's volume follows the standard academic framework, with the usual acknowledgements, explanatory preface and introductory chapter, followed by a further eight chapters in historical order, then bibliography and index. The eight main chapters constitute its bulk, covering the Palaeolithic through Islamic periods and ending at '1900,' actually 1898 with the end of the Mahdist phase. It is suitably illustrated with some tables (historical phasing, king-lists), together with numerous line drawings and black and white photographs, of which lists are conveniently provided. So far, so formulaic.

However formulaic in outline, the contents are a breath of fresh air for the discipline. The first chapter places Nubia within the Sudan, and the Sudan within 'Sudanic Africa' (the term basically encompasses all of Africa between the same latitudes as the country). Overview histories of the progress and changing perspectives of archaeological developments for the region lead quite neatly into discussion of a series of various 'research themes' from which the archaeological evidence could be, and in the succeeding chapters are, reviewed: regional histories and environments, subsistence, technology and agriculture, cultural landscapes and social space, urbanism, material culture, ethnicities, and political histories. Not all are considered in each chapter (the nature of the available evidence sometimes precludes discussion for one period or another) but each are raised when it is possible to do so.

These seven themes are the backbone of the volume. Edwards considers each prehistoric and historical phase of cultural development with a fresh and inquiring mind. He casts a critical and even sceptical eye on long-held assumptions and interpretations of evidence and conclusions we have had for some time, reminding us that these are not *de facto* statements but only long-held assumptions that, in the light of more recent evidence, no longer are as obviously self-explanatory as they once were. He then presents alternative interpretations now just as, if not more, valid than the reiterated 'traditional' views often still found even in other recent literature. The various 'end of Meroë' scenario is one such problematic question given a new perspective investigated by Edwards and, indeed, the question of transitions between the various periods as well as regions are uppermost in his querying of past and present assumptions. He is not dogmatic in his interpretations, often suggesting more than one possibility and being rather depressingly repetitive in such phrases as '...are as yet unclear,' '...are

still very unclear,' and '...are not yet understood,' but he also provides some ideas and possible avenues to explore in further research. Anyone looking for a possible thesis topic in Nubian archaeology or Sudanese history is well advised to read this volume for ideas. It is obvious that we have yet far to go, and his lament at the lack of future academic security for (and in) this research field (pp. x–xi) is more than warranted. In essence, here is a *status quaestionis* for Nubian and Sudanese archaeology, summing up where we are now and asking where we could (and even sometimes should) begin to go from here. He is not always, one suspects he is often, not as in depth as he would have liked due to space limitations for the volume as a whole, as he states in his preface (p. x) but, nonetheless, he is quite careful to give each chapter (and therefore period) generally equal space. Edward's periods of specialisation have, and undoubtedly will continue to be, given greater depth elsewhere, e.g., his contribution to Reid & Lane (2004), where he goes into more depth on the 'end of Meroë' problem.

Nonetheless, some drawbacks must be noted. Edwards uses the Harvard reference style in the text itself, but annoyingly sometimes with and sometimes without specific page reference(s) cited for the specific point made, and randomly with or without authors' personal initials. He sometimes provides no reference at all for important points, e.g., to the bibliographic source for the "one major and potentially royal tomb" (p. 102) of 'post-Kerma' date uncovered at Kerma, which certainly should merit citation. His bibliography, whilst comprehensive, is inconsistent, often (but not always) lacking page references to articles listed, whilst Stuart Tyson Smith would be surprised to discover himself separately listed both as 'Smith, S.T.' and 'Tyson-Smith, S.' (pp. 330, 334; the former is correct). Whilst the volume's numerous photographs are reasonably clear, the drawings are poor: often too light, with detail faded or lost, and clearly scanned at too small a scale, leaving the pixels still evident on the final printed page, individual lines ragged and closely spaced lines interrupted. This is a clear example of why (visually) pixelated illustrations should not be employed in publication. Universal inclusion, or at least mention in the captions of some plans and all artefact illustrations, of drawing scales also would have been useful.

It also must be noted that the timing of this volume, like that of Adams, could either be viewed as premature or prophetic. It is somewhat premature in that two major publications appeared almost at the same time; Edwards's discussion would have benefited by access to them when writing: Shinnie & Anderson (2004) might have answered at least some of his imponderables on p. 187, whilst Zurawski (2003) might have been able to amplify aspects of his main chapters for the 'Debba Bend' area of the Nile valley. It is ever thus. Yet this volume can also be viewed as prophetic, in that current and future archaeological investigations under the collective banner of the Merowe Dam Archaeological Salvage Project, as well as in the many other regions of the Sudan where work has only just begun (p. 6), can only benefit from the insights afforded by Edwards's holistic approach to the region and his thoughts on how to view its offerings.

Edwards, D.N. 2004. *The Nubian past. An archaeology of the Sudan*. London, Routledge. 348 pp. ISBN ISBN 0-415-36988-6. Price £25.00 (paperback).

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