

**László Török, *Between Two Worlds: The Frontier Region Between Ancient Nubia and Egypt, 3700 BC-500 AD, Probleme der Ägyptologie Band 29*, Koninklijke Brill, Leiden, 2009.**

**ISBN: 978-90-04-17197-8**

**Reviewed by Ben Suelzle  
(Monash University)**

*Between Two Worlds* is a curious book and has been somewhat difficult to review. There exists a degree of compartmentalisation amongst the chapters and at times, it seems as if *Between Two Worlds* resembles one and a half books instead of a single narrative. Linkages between chapters are present but are not consistent and the text can be divided into two parts. The larger section includes Chapter One and Chapters Five to Sixteen. It focuses primarily on how the inhabitants and polities of the geographic area between the First and Sixth Cataracts utilised, incorporated and adapted foreign influences for their own benefit. The majority of these influences were Egyptian. The span of time incorporated by the larger section runs from the First Intermediate period to the post-Meroitic polities of the Noubadians and the Blemmyes. Major non-Egyptian kingdoms which dominated Lower Nubia over this extended period of time include Kerma, Napata and Meroe with colonial interludes provided by the Middle Kingdom, the New Kingdom, Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt. An undoubted strength of the author's analysis is his focus upon specific administrative positions within Egyptian, Napatan and Meroitic governmental structures, and how these institutions interacted with the peoples of Lower Nubia.

The smaller section encompasses Chapters Two to Four and Chapter Seventeen. It concentrates upon the concept of frontiers, Lower Nubia before the First Intermediate period and the intervals between protracted bouts of foreign control when the inhabitants of Lower Nubia were a political threat to their

neighbours. The first period of Lower Nubian expansionism occurred under the A-Group, the second began with the C-Group contemporary with the kings of Dynasty VI, and the third under the Blemmyes and the Noubadians. Each of these intervals is conspicuous not for the resulting length of independence but instead for the long durations between these three periods of autonomy. The A-Group was brought undone by the Egyptians of the Early Dynastic period, the C-Group by the Middle Kingdom and the kingdom of Noubadia was absorbed into a southern neighbor. Given the importance of these Lower Nubian cultural groupings, it is of interest to note the distaste for the terms developed by G. Reisner to describe ancient populations active in Lower Nubia and unknown to the archaeologists of the early twentieth century CE.

In the words of the author, the A-Group is a “particularly uncommunicative term” (p.33) and the C-Group is also an “uncommunicative term” (p.63). If only the dead could speak and tell us what they called themselves. It is probably better if terms uncommunicative, unimaginative and altogether dull are used to describe ancient societies either seemingly pre-literate, newly discovered or both. If more enterprising terms were utilised, an issue would arise when new data was added to the archaeological corpus. Additional arguments would have to be deployed not just against older hypotheses but against the very terminology used in the first place to describe the mute groupings of related communities. That said, the terms A-Group and C-Group do find an unhappy existence in *Between Two Worlds* but there is no mention of the X-Group, the last of G. Reisner’s terms for the most recent of his unearthed cultures.

Although the term X-Group has been superseded somewhat, there is still a degree of uncertainty concerning exactly what defines the various societies that succeeded Meroe. Even the author confirms that his views upon the political configuration of Lower Nubia after the collapse of Meroe and the retreat of Rome have changed within the last decade (p.521). In his current estimation, at least “four post-Meroitic polities correspond with three regional cultures” (p.522).

These cultural groupings include the Blemmyes and the Noubadians. A question worth asking at each of the relevant archaeological sites is how Blemmy are the Blemmy, how Noubadian are the Noubadian and how much overlap exists in the material record? The association between the fragmentary inscriptions and the archaeology in question also seems to be a bit tenuous, although these links have been interwoven masterfully within *Between Two Worlds*. That there is no discussion of which of the three regional cultures the author considers most representative of the X-Group is a matter of some misfortune.

Some related notions include the possibilities that two of the three regional cultures can be placed within the confines of the X-Group or that there exists portions of each of the three cultural groupings which were once considered to be emblematic of the X-Group. I do not claim to have any answers to these questions nor do I purport to have any expertise in this area but at a minimum, it would have been useful to understand how the term X-Group has fallen out of favour and to what extent the more recent terms have replaced it. This clarification would be of great utility when the general characteristics of the A-Group, the C-Group and the Noubadian kingdom are compressed into one narrative in Chapter Seventeen. If it is the case that the polity known as Noubadia and the persons defined as Noubadians correspond more or less with the X-Group, it would also have been helpful if this had been mentioned sometime before the Epilogue.

A second feature of the minor section is the often amorphous distinctions made by the author between simple chiefdoms, complex chiefdoms, proto-kingdoms and kingdoms. The differences in the complexity of social organizations are seen as “stages” in societal development (p.532). The A-Group grew from simple chiefdoms into complex chiefdoms and a few of the complex chiefdoms became “affluent” (p.532). Before the political unification of Egypt, there existed proto-kingdoms and after the unification, an Egyptian kingdom. The C-Group contemporaneous with Dynasty VI also progress from a number of simple

chiefdoms to one complex chiefdom. After a gap of around 2500 years, the polity of Noubadia remained a princely dominion as long as the rulers were buried at Qustul. When the location of the ruling elite's cemetery moved to Ballana, Noubadia became a kingdom. The Blemmyes are, I suppose, a cluster of complex chiefdoms but with the survival of inscriptional evidence, four Blemmyan kings can be also identified. Are these kings to be considered royalty simply because they say so or would the societal and political contexts in which these inscriptions appear detract from their titular claims?

Direct comparisons could also have been made in the Epilogue between the complex chiefdoms of the A-Group, the C-Group and the Blemmyes. This would have facilitated further analysis in the author's presentation of the stages of societal development apparent in Lower Nubia between 3700 BCE and 500 CE. An augmented interpretation may have led to a more complex and nuanced understanding of the interactions between specific historic contexts and more general theoretical frameworks that, by necessity, are imposed upon the archaeological and historical record. One example should suffice. In his inscription mentioned at the end of Chapter Sixteen, the Noubadian ruler Silko is considered to be a "king" within Lower Nubia but a "kinglet" in relation to the Roman Empire; however Rome is to be defined in the fifth century CE (p.527-530). The ambiguity in titles is reflected in the differences between the local and international political landscapes. An aggressive foreign policy undertaken by Silko towards his immediate neighbours might not be the same policy he wished to advance towards the nearest Great Power.

Specific historical and political contexts should inform the surviving archaeological and literary evidence, and hopefully the hypotheses which follow. The need for contextualisation can also be extended to periods of time often considered to be prehistoric or at the very least preliterate. Silko defined his status and titles against the political realities of the day and there is no reason to assume that, for argument's sake, the anonymous A-Group rulers buried at

Qustul acted in any manner different. It is suggested that the mace from Sayala and the decorated incense burners from Qustul indicate that the Upper Egyptians of the Protodynastic period “acknowledged certain similarities between rulership in Egypt and in Nubia” (p.128). Further elaboration upon the artefacts’ iconographic features, which articulate and reinforce these commonalities, would be welcome. The detailed analysis of these attributes would also highlight the differences in the stages of societal development which the author felt the various Lower Nubian populations went through. These distinctions would also emphasise the possible relationships at an elite level between the rulers of the Protodynastic Upper Egyptian polities and their Lower Nubian peers.

An excellent later example of this interaction can be seen in the author’s detailed analysis of the water sanctuary at Meroe City and it is a pity that no plates were provided of this “Hellenistic edifice” (p.508). *Between Two Worlds* is also Volume 29 in Koninklijke Brill’s *Problems in Egyptology* series but it is not entirely clear what the problems under consideration actually are. The chapters on Lower Nubia under the dominion of the Middle Kingdom, Kerma, the New Kingdom, Napata and Meroe are admirable but there does not seem to be any terse dilemmas or unyielding enigmas. It could be that the only area of stubborn controversy within the entirety of the book revolves around the differing chronologies of the post-New Kingdom rulers buried at el-Kurru. Besides the author considering the Third Intermediate period to be an “unfortunate term” (p.285), real passion is evident only in the argument over whether a long or a short chronology is appropriate for the forebears of Dynasty XXV. The remainder of *Between Two Worlds* is very well-written but restrained. Perhaps if the major section of the book had been expanded at the expense of the minor section, more detail regarding other contentious issues in Lower Nubian archaeology after the First Intermediate period could have been included.