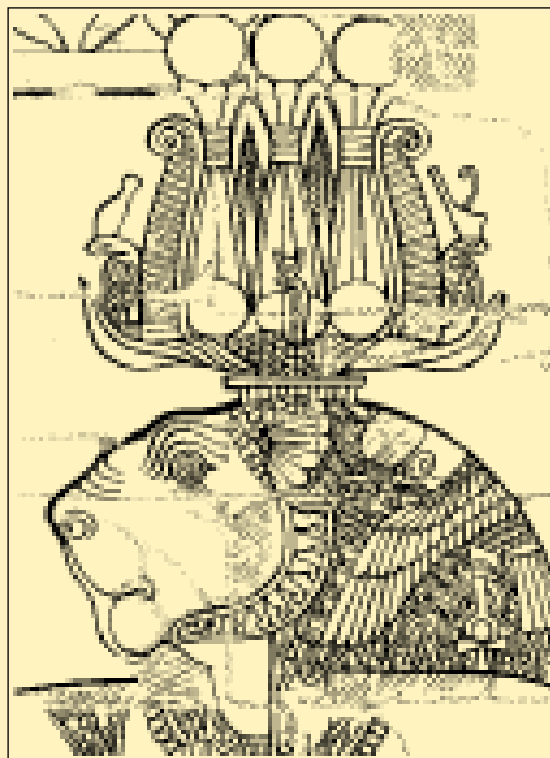


MITTEILUNGEN DER  
SUDANARCHÄOLOGISCHEN GESELLSCHAFT  
ZU BERLIN E.V.



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## THE NUBIAN COLLECTION OF THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

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Thanks to nearly twentyfive years of excavation in Egyptian and Sudanese Nubia, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, today proudly displays one of the finest and most extensive collections of Nubian art in the world. This material was excavated by GEORGE REISNER and his assistant, DOWS DUNHAM, between 1906 and 1932, and came to Boston as a result of the generous division of objects at the time. After years of conservation and research, approximately 500 of these objects were placed on view for the first time in their own gallery in May of 1992. It remains the only permanent gallery of Nubian art in the United States.

In 600 square meters of space, the gallery presents the cultures of Nubia both chronologically and thematically. On the north wall, a three-dimensional timeline begins with Prehistoric Nubia and ends with the Late Meroitic Period. Some of Boston's earliest objects chronologically were also the first excavated. They came as a result of Reisner's invitation on the part of the Egyptian government in 1906 to survey and excavate the area between the First and Second Cataracts prior to the heightening of the first Aswan dam. In the ensuing First Archaeological Survey of Nubia, Reisner and his assistants, CECIL FIRTH and A. M. BLACKMAN, identified and excavated more than 150 sites, largely funerary, before flood waters covered them forever. Although these sites spanned more than four millennia of Nubian history, they were particularly rich in early material. In the Gallery all the Prehistoric (ca. 4000 – 3100 B.C.) objects came as a result of the Archaeological Survey of Nubia. They include local ceramics, cosmetic palettes, necklaces made of shells from the Red Sea, and vessels imported from the Predynastic cultures of Egypt.

The Archaeological Survey of Nubia was also the source of the A-Group (3100 – 2800 B.C.) material in the Boston gallery. Hand-made conical

bowls slipped, burnished, and painted with a variety of designs are particularly fine. Some of the designs imitate basketry, others mimic the triangular shape of the vessels, and yet others are more free-form. The technique of patterned "ripple" burnishing is represented on other A-Group ceramics in the Gallery, as is the very delicate, incised cross-line decoration, which is another hallmark of the A-Group. Plain cooking pots, shell and semi-precious stone jewelry, mica mirrors, and hard stone palettes provide another dimension of daily life at the time. The A-Group cultures were also in contact with their Early Dynastic Egyptian contemporaries, as evidenced by ceramics of characteristically Egyptian style and material.

C-Group (2100–1500 B.C.) cemeteries excavated by the Archaeological Survey of Nubia provide the Boston gallery with an overview of that culture. Blackware ceramic bowls with incised geometric motifs, sometimes filled with white, are characteristic. Tiny cattle made of clay pinched into shape bear testimony to the importance of animal husbandry. The earliest human figures represented in the Boston gallery are from the C-Group. Abstract circular heads of ceramic have incised slits for eyes. Large buttocks and hips end in short, undifferentiated legs suggest these female figurines were associated with fertility. Necklaces of carnelian, faience, and steatite demonstrate a continuing interest in adornment.

Objects from the Pan-Grave culture (2200 – 1700 B.C.) of Nubian mercenaries and their families who lived in Egypt during Egypt's First Intermediate Period came to Boston largely through purchase. A Stela from Gebelain (Egypt) featuring a Nubian soldier, his Egyptian wife, and their Nubian children demonstrates the interrelations between the two cultures and the status Nubians enjoyed in Egypt. The same subject is represented three-dimensionally in the

form of a wooden model figure with black skin wearing a colorful wrapped garment and carrying a bow. Pan-grave material culture featured thin ceramic cups not unlike those of their Nubian contemporaries, bracelets made of rectangular plaques of shell woven together, and stone hoops with small openings which may have been among the earliest known earrings. The burials of the Pan-grave people, so-called because of their shallow circular “pan” shape when first discovered, were distinctive, because of the large and elaborately painted cow skulls which marked their superstructure. All the objects mentioned above may be seen in the Gallery.

George Reisner’s fascination with Nubian culture brought him to the Third Cataract in 1913 to the area of Kerma. There he investigated both the Upper and Lower Deffufa temples, and excavated the cemeteries surrounding the Upper Deffufa. As a result of the excavations between 1913 and 1916, the Kerma culture is particularly well represented in Boston. Kerma is best known for its hallmark pottery, specifically, ultra-thin walled, black-top red ware beakers of tulip shape. One very tall beaker represents seven of these vessels stacked together. Other splendid examples of Kerma pottery in the Gallery feature gold rims and spouts in the shape of ram and hippopotamus heads. Pottery imported from Egypt and the Aegean world in the Gallery demonstrates the widespread contacts of Kerma.

The Kerma people and the Egyptians also shared a fondness for faience, and some of the beautifully decorated and modeled faience in the Gallery undoubtedly comes from Egypt, while other pieces are of local manufacture. Damaged faience vessels and other objects were cut down and reused as star shaped inlays in a large sandstone ceiling. Solid quartz was also glazed, and this technique may be seen on a seated ram nearly on meter in length.

Because of the richness of the royal tombs of Kerma, the Boston Gallery displays a wide variety of objects of daily life. These include jewelry, amulets, mirrors, combs, razors, knives, mica ornaments from a cap, a vulture headdress made of silver, sandals, a wooden bed inlaid with ivory animals, and what may be the first ever upholstered stool.

With the rise of Egyptian power in the New Kingdom, Kerma’s material culture declined and Egyptian forts monitoring activity in the Second

Cataract area expanded. Egyptians in residence at the forts not only imported Egyptian goods but also used local materials to imitate them. Accordingly, because of the lack of available wood for coffins, ceramic was used instead. In the Gallery, a child’s coffin of painted clay is placed beside *shawabtis* and pottery of Egyptian style. Statuary in the Gallery found (and presumably made) at the forts attempts to incorporate the contemporary Egyptian canon of proportion and style, but often falls somewhat short. The result is touching but comical. In addition to the Egyptian and Egyptianizing goods mentioned above, new categories of objects evolved to meet the unique needs of life in the forts. Food “tokens”, made of flat pieces of wood shaped like breads and inscribed with the number of loaves allotted to each soldier offer an example of the last.

Nowhere is the Napatan Period better represented than in the Museum of Fine Arts thanks to excavations at Kurru, Nuri, and Gebel Barkal between 1916 and 1923. Colossal statues of Kings Anlamani and Aspelta found at Gebel Barkal dominate a second floor Gallery because their height precludes their placement with the rest of the Nubian material. Similarly a splendidly decorated barque stand of Anlamani, also from Gebel Barkal, is too heavy for the Nubian Gallery, so it also may be seen upstairs. Although Aspelta’s sarcophagus is not currently on view on account of its size and weight, it is hoped that the situation may soon change.

Highlights of the Napatan material in the Gallery include Piye’s bronze offering stand splendidly restored, and from the tomb of one of his queen’s, a criosphinx on a column inlaid with semi precious stones, a Ma’at figure in malachite wearing a silver feather, and a crystal ball amulet capped with a golden head of Hathor. Its exquisite workmanship and dazzling combination of materials make the Hathor crystal one of the Gallery’s most captivating objects. Amaninakhtebe’s silver mirror is in its own free-standing case so that all four gods which make up its handle may be examined closely.

Meroitic material came to Boston thanks to Reisner’s excavations at all three royal cemeteries of Meroe (1921 – 1923) and again from Gebel Barkal. From the last comes a sandstone shrine (omphalos) of circular shape imitating the round houses of the area. Gilt silver bridle elements adorned with Meroitic gods demonstrate

a devotion to horses. Bronze bells worn around horses' necks are decorated with prisoner figures so that as the horse moved, the bells' clappers "beat" the captives. A quiver, gold casings from a bow, and stone draw rings bear testimony to Meroitic military prowess.

The coffins which contained the mummified bodies of Meroitic rulers were placed on decorated "benches" cut out on three sides from the sandstone bedrock. One reassembled in the Gallery features, in high raised relief, the souls of Pe and Dep accompanying a solar barque ferrying an image of the rising sun.

Nowhere is the contrast between the Egyptian and Nubian standards of beauty more obvious than in a once painted and gilded sandstone triad from the tomb of a Meroitic queen. It features a voluptuous, bejeweled figure of the tomb owner between the Egyptian goddesses Isis and Nephthys, who are decidedly more slender, although still overweight by Egyptians standards. A Late Meroitic chapel of another queen shows the same idea two-dimensionally. Examples of the jewelry represented in sculpture in the round and relief may be seen in a special case devoted to Meroitic jewelry. An array of earrings, finger rings, necklaces and bracelets were fashioned from gold or combine gold with semi-precious stones. A number of these pieces were found in a pouch clutched to the chest of a maidservant who accompanied her mistress in the tomb.

Although centered as far south as the Fifth Cataract of the Nile, the Meroitic Empire maintained strong contacts with Mediterranean cultures, and fine objects from the Hellenistic world came in trade or as diplomatic gifts. A rhyton (drinking vessel) emerging from the back of a mounted Amazon was found in the chapel of a small Fourth Century Meroitic pyramid of a prince, probably just where it had been left by a votary. An exquisite red figure vase, it bears the signature of its potter, Sotades, who lived in Athens in the Fifth Century B.C.

From Egypt, Meroitic culture adopted custom of depicting the soul of the deceased as a human headed bird. The *ba*-birds in the Boston gallery were found at Karanog and came to Boston by exchange in 1990 with the University Museum of the University of Pennsylvania. Although the people of Meroe first used the Egyptian hieroglyphic writing system, they gradually abandoned it in favor of their own alpha-

betic script of 23 letters. One of the longest Meroitic inscriptions known to date is the stela of Tanyidamani from Gebel Barkal, which has yet to be translated. It occupies a central place in the Boston Gallery.

In its chronological overview on the north wall surveyed above, the Gallery offers a brief glimpse of Nubia's many cultures. The south wall case, in contrast, treats burial customs of the Napatan Period in depth, thereby highlighted one of the collections's strengths. A visitor is introduced to a royal tomb from the outside in viewing first a complete foundation deposit and then Aspelta's stela and offering table, which stood outside in his chapel. A staircase in the vitrine covered with menat necklaces is followed by treasures which adorned the royal mummies, including the gilt silver mask and faience and silver bead net which covered the mummy of Queen Mernua. Massive faience amulets, stone heart scarabs, and sheet gold finger and toe caps are shown beside the more delicately worked torque of a queen of Shebitku on a finely pectoral featuring Isis with outstretched wings. Although the wooden anthropoid coffins of the kings themselves have not survived, their gold foil overlays and semi-precious stone inlays have, and they are shown beside massive bronze-rimmed eyes of stone. Traces of gold foil on the bronze indicate the rims were originally gold-covered. A set of large alabaster canopic jars feature lids in the shape of the four sons of Horus, as they would have in contemporary Egypt. Similarly, the Egyptian custom of providing *shawabtis* to accompany the deceased is reflected in 82 stone *shawabtis* (out of a total of 1070) of Taharqa which stand in registers in the vitrine just as they once stood in that King's tomb.

Of all the Napatan Period royal tombs Reisner excavated, only Aspelta's escaped total plundering, largely because its roof partially collapsed. Aspelta's treasure consists, in part, of an 18 cm long pair of gold tweezers, a large gold pitcher, an alabaster vessel with a collar of semi-precious stones set in gold cloisons, and hollowed gold cylinders engraved with deities and divine symbols. It is one of the treasures of the Gallery.

Many other treasures too numerous to mention await the visitor in Boston's Nubia Gallery. An expanded installation is planned. Research on the collection is ongoing, and it is hoped that a catalog will be available within a few years. •