



# ESSEX EGYPTOLOGY GROUP - REVIEW

**May 2018 Meeting**  
by Margaret Patterson

## **Kings from Kush: Egypt's 25th Dynasty – Dr. Robert Morkot**

Chronologically the 25th Dynasty is in the Late Period at the end of the Third Intermediate Period. Kush is also referred to as Nubia, and is in the north of modern day Sudan stretching from Aswan to Khartoum. Nowadays this area is mostly desert but the rain line has changed and it was a much more fertile region during the time of Kush. Morkot prefers to use the term Kush instead of Nubia because it has fewer connotations. There are modern Nubians and it's not clear whether or not they have continuity with the 25th Dynasty era people. (Although old habits clearly die hard as he used Nubia and Kush pretty much interchangeably through the talk.) Morkot told us his interest in the region and period started when the temples were being moved when the High Dam was built at Aswan.

Morkot's talk was split into two parts - first he told us about what evidence we have for the Kushites and their time ruling Egypt, and then he put it all together to tell us what the modern reconstruction of the period is. In the first part he also told us about who found the evidence and what their worldview was - as he pointed out near the start of his talk, how people used to think shapes what we think of the subject now. So it's important to know where our "facts" come from and to re-evaluate them in the light of those biases.

One of these critical biases for early investigators of the 25th Dynasty is that one of the Pharaohs of that dynasty, Taharqa, is mentioned in the Bible. Both 2 Kings 19:8-13 and Isaiah 37 (which are identical) mention him:

- 8 So Rabshakeh returned, and found the king of Assyria warring against Libnah: for he had heard that he was departed from Lachish.
- 9 And when he heard say of Tirhakah king of Ethiopia, Behold, he is come out to fight against thee: he sent messengers again unto Hezekiah, saying,
- 10 Thus shall ye speak to Hezekiah king of Judah, saying, Let not thy God in whom thou trustest deceive thee, saying, Jerusalem shall not be delivered into the hand of the king of Assyria.
- 11 Behold, thou hast heard what the kings of Assyria have done to all lands, by destroying them utterly: and shalt thou be delivered?
- 12 Have the gods of the nations delivered them which my fathers have destroyed; as Gozan, and Haran, and Rezeph, and the children of Eden which were in Thelasar?
- 13 Where is the king of Hamath, and the king of Arpad, and the king of the city of Sepharvaim, of Hena, and Ivah?

And even more importantly to the Victorians, Taharqa is one of the "good guys" in the story - he's on the side of Judah and against the Assyrians. Nowadays Taharqa is more important to Egyptology because he has the first fixed date in Egyptian history. The year of his accession, 690 BCE, can be established by working backwards from known Roman and Greek dates cross-referencing with other cultures.

Manetho is the first source Egyptologists had for who ruled Egypt when - he lived during Ptolemaic times and his list of kings divides them up into the Dynasties we still use today. The decipherment of hieroglyphs then allowed the names in Manetho to be linked to names on monuments and stelae. There are also Assyrian records that tell us about the Kushites from the other side of the conflict between them. This textual evidence was then supplemented by evidence from excavations in Nubia through the 1920s and beyond, and the whole era was "sorted out" by the 1960s. Although of course the progression of knowledge has been a lot more messy than that short summary implies!

Having given us the overview Morkot went into more detail about the evidence that we have. One of the first modern(-ish) histories of Egypt was published by Ippolito Rosellini who travelled in Egypt with Jean François Champollion. One thing he was trying to do with his survey was to link the names in cartouches (that could now be read for the first time in millennia) to the names in Manetho. He was also interested in finding new names that Manetho hadn't mentioned, of which there are several in the 25th Dynasty. Manetho only names 3 kings but there are others both before and after those ones, who are rather more difficult to put in sequence and pin down to dates. There are many mentions of 25th Dynasty kings on the structures they built at both Karnak and Luxor - for instance Taharqa built a colonnade at Karnak and Shabaka built one at Luxor. In Medinet Habu there is a relief depicting Taharqa - much to the delight of 19th Century tourists who could now see this biblical ally of Judah.

Medinet Habu also has chapels each dedicated to a God's Wife of Amun. This was an important religious role (not just in the 25th Dynasty) and formed the backbone of the 25th Dynasty. References to their birth mother and father link them to the Pharaohs - they are daughters of kings. It is believed each woman adopted her successor. The imagery in the sculpture of these women is archaised - that is it looks like older Egyptian iconography rather than the contemporary Nubian imagery which has more ample bodies. The statues do have Nubian style faces so they mix both styles.

From textual evidence we know that Napata was a key city for the Kushites, but it has not actually been found and excavated - it is probably beneath the modern city in that area. Gebel Berkel is another key site and is on the other side of the river from Napata. The most striking feature of Gebel Berkel is the mountain, which stands out in isolation against the landscape. There are a lot of temples and palace complexes here, and it was excavated from 1914 by George Reisner. There are reliefs in the main temple which relate the conquest of Egypt by Piankhi at the start of the 25th Dynasty. Reisner also found a cache of broken colossal statues of the 25th Dynasty kings in black granite - they must have been quite spectacular when first made as they originally had gilded decoration.

Reisner also excavated the nearby Pyramids of Nuri, which include Taharka's tomb which was found intact. Its contents included many shabti, and vessels which had Egyptian forms but Nubian decoration. Morkot explained that like the God's Wife of Amun statues in Karnak these show how the Nubian and Egyptian cultures were mingled in the elite of the 25th Dynasty.

Reisner next excavated at el Kurru, which is a royal necropolis. The tombs here are two pyramids from later than Morkot's topic of the 25th Dynasty, a group of 25th Dynasty

Queens and a group of 25th Dynasty Kings. There were a lot of beautiful objects found here - again some with Egyptian ideas and Nubian implementation. There were also some very Nubian things which don't show up at all in Egyptian iconography or artefacts.

When Reisner excavated he developed a theory of how the tombs developed over time and reconstructed what he thought was the chronology at el Kurru, which he published, but didn't explain his reasons in his publication. The earliest burials have a lot of artefacts that look like New Kingdom period; including evidence for the red pot smashing ritual which Susanne Bickel also talked about in her talk in April about re-excavating KV40. But Reisner said that they were not New Kingdom but later. Which Morkot pointed out is difficult to square with the physical evidence, and with the fact that New Kingdom Egypt is known from other sources to have a presence in Nubia and to rule it. So it's not at all clear why Reisner drew this conclusion.

The paradigm is that nothing happens in Nubia between the time of Ramesses XI (end of the New Kingdom) and the 25th Dynasty, based in large part on Reisner's chronology. Morkot went off on a bit of a digression here about how ridiculous this idea, as this is a time close to his heart. His PhD thesis was on precisely this "in between" period, to the perplexity of his senior colleagues who felt it couldn't be interesting or worth studying because "everyone knew" nothing happened. However if you look at the archaeological evidence without Reisner's blinkers on then there's a lot that was previously overlooked filling the period. Morkot didn't go into any detail about what he thought was actually happening in this period, but in essence his argument was that the people who were living there through the New Kingdom and then in the 25th Dynasty period would have had no reason to stop living there in the time in between. And Egypt carries on through the Third Intermediate Period, so why wouldn't Nubia? After all, the Nubian conquest of Egypt didn't come out of nowhere!

The rise of Assyria is an important part of the context for the Kushite conquest of Egypt that establishes the 25th Dynasty, and conflict with the Assyrians is a key part of the politics of the dynasty. The Assyrian empire is growing during this period, and imposing its authority on a large swathe of territory - this includes the destruction of Israel and Judah (hence Taharqa showing up in the Bible). So this is a powerful state threatening, and even sometimes invading, Egypt from the north. But conflict is not the only way the two interact, trade is also important. For instance there's evidence that the Assyrians import horses from Kush - Napata is a horse rearing area.

The founding king of the 25th Dynasty is Piankhi (or Piye, Morkot used the two names interchangeably). A stela records that he went to Thebes and had been in the presence of Amun, i.e. had visited Karnak. This had significance for the Nubians - Amun is the god that the main temple at Gebel Berkal was dedicated to and he was an important god for the Nubians. This stela of Piye's also says that he has priests appoint Chiefs and Kings amongst the contemporary Libyan rulers of the Delta - i.e. he is claiming the power to decide who rules. The most famous stela from Piankhi's time is called (by us) the Victory Stela, and it shows the Delta kings kneeling to him.

At this point the Delta is ruled by Libyans who have divided the region between lots of chiefs, plus some kings who govern those chiefs. In response to Piye extending his influence they got together and marched south to besiege Piye's vassals. So Piye sends his generals north to deal with this, but they fail and Piye needs to go in person. He is successful - he doesn't just drive the Libyans back, he also captures Memphis and conquers the Delta and then returns to Napata. The chronology of this isn't clear, but it is somewhere in the second half of the 8th Century BCE probably between 750 and 720 BCE.

After this the Kushites install themselves in Memphis and in Egypt. It's well documented that Piye's successor Shabaka builds at Karnak and Luxor, and it is generally assumed that he is reigning c.700 BCE. He's also known to have diplomatic contact with the Assyrian ruler Sennacherib. Shabaka's successor is Shebitiqo (or Shabataka) and he is also shown in reliefs at Karnak.

The next Pharaoh in the dynasty is Taharqa, who comes to the throne in 690 BCE (our first fixed date). The majority of his reign is the high point of the dynasty. However, later in his reign he has significant conflict with the Assyrians. The Assyrian King Esarhaddon succeeds in conquering Egypt to some extent - he definitely sacks Memphis and Thebes, and Taharqa's family may have been deported. But Taharqa managed to fight back and re-conquer Egypt. Esarhaddon gathered his army and returned intending his own re-conquest but died before he could achieve this. Taharqa also died around that time and was succeeded by his nephew Tantamani. The conflict between Esarhaddon's son Ashurbanipal and Tantamani went even less well for the Kushites than did the conflict between their predecessors. Ashurbanipal finished the conquest and ended the 25th Dynasty. He installed a puppet ruler - this ruler's son would go on to found the 26th Dynasty as Psamtik I after he wrested independence from Assyria.

This wrapped up Morkot's narrative of the 25th Dynasty, but he ended his talk with an example of how no matter how settled and coherent a theory might seem to be, it can always be thrown into doubt by new evidence. Relatively recently an inscription dating to c.706 BCE was found high up on a cliff at Tang-I Var. As part of the preamble of the inscription it says that Shabataka had diplomatic contact with Sargon II before this date - which doesn't fit with the standard chronology of the 25th Dynasty which has Shabaka as king at this point. So a lot of ink has been spilt trying to fit this new evidence into a consistent story with all the previous evidence. However Morkot thinks that this is all a waste of time in this case - this is just one inscription, other contemporaneous inscriptions name Shabaka. It's also very high up a cliff on the outskirts of Sargon II's territory so it's unlikely to have a "truth" that other more central and accessible inscriptions don't have. And finally Shabaka and Shabataka are only one sign different when written in cuneiform, so it's much more likely that the carvers of this difficult to reach inscription made a simple mistake. After all, I'm sure there's at least one typo in this article of mine and our alphabet is so much easier to work with than cuneiform!

This was in general an interesting talk about a dynasty of Ancient Egypt that we don't often get to hear about in such detail. I did find it a little hard to follow at times though, so I hope I've succeeded in writing it up accurately!