



ESSEX EGYPTOLOGY GROUP - REVIEW

July 2020 Meeting

by Margaret Patterson

"Pyramids and Elephants: the Kingdom of Meroë"

Robert Morkot

At the beginning of July Robert Morkot (<https://humanities.exeter.ac.uk/archaeology/staff/morkot/>) gave a talk to the Essex Egyptology Group (and guests) via Zoom. He'd previously visited us to talk about the 25th Dynasty of Egypt who were from Kush, and this talk followed on from that to tell us about the culture in what is now Sudan after the 25th Dynasty were forced from Egypt in the mid-1st Millennium BCE. Morkot explained that he wanted to give us an overview of a huge span of time (from 700 BCE to 350 CE) and show us lots of photos of Meroitic artefacts. Not much modern work is being done on the culture of Meroë compared to Egypt - many of the people who work on the region come from Egyptology and tend to work on New Kingdom sites in North Sudan.

He began by giving us the geographical context of Kush and Meroë and talked about their perception in the Classical and Medieval Mediterranean cultures. Those two names are both applied to a region south of Egypt, centring at times on Gebel Barkal, at times Napata, at times at Meroë, as well as other places. The country of Punt, where Egypt sent expeditions, is these days thought to be to the east of this region at around the same latitude as modern Khartoum. Ethiopia (which will come into the story later) is to the south-east. But despite knowing about Meroë the Classical authors who drew maps or described the country (like Ptolemy in his Geography) populated it with fantastical creatures and weird peoples. It is a place on the edge of the world, to them, where anything could be true.

The landscape and environment is different in Nubia than it is in Egypt, and different to the way it was during the time period Morkot was talking about. He showed us a map of the region and essentially divided it into three regions. North of Aswan is the Nile Valley that we're all familiar with. In Lower Nubia (the northernmost part of the region) the landscape is pretty barren, with a lot of desert. Around the point of the big S-shaped bend in the river (that Khartoum sits at the downstream end of) during this period of history the Nile entered the rain belt (in modern times that happens around the location of Khartoum). This means that the environment was a lush savannah, with elephants and giraffes as typical animals.

In his previous talk to the group (see my writeup here:

<https://ninecats.org/margaret/blog/2018/07/08/kings-kush-egypts-25th-dynasty-robert-morkot-eeg-meeting-talk>) Morkot told us about Gebel Barkal and the 25th Dynasty. From a start ruling

in the Gebel Barkal region these kings expand rapidly and conquer Egypt. He showed us a list of their names - the best attested of them is Taharqo who reigned in both Egypt and Kush from 690 to 664 BCE. There's a lot of evidence for this period from the Egyptian records, and from the conflict with the Assyrians that happened during Taharqo's reign.

Taharqo's successor Tanwetamani inherited this conflict and forced out of Egypt by the Assyrians and their Egyptian successors - he was finally completely removed from Egypt in 656 BCE and that country was reunited under the Saite Dynasty. Importantly this is

not the end of either Tanwetamani or his dynasty - they continue to rule in Kush with some degree of continuity through into the Meroitic Period.

Morkot now moved on to post-25th Dynasty Kush - a time that we call the Napatan Period. We know about these kings from the pyramids they were buried in at Nuri, but there is otherwise not much information about them and their people. There is some other evidence from an Egyptian perspective surrounding conflict between Egypt and the Napatans.

The main pyramid at Nuri is the pyramid of Taharqo. Facing this pyramid are a line of royal kings' tombs, and behind is a crescent of many tombs of queens and other non-king royals - overall it is a huge cemetery.

George Reisner excavated here, and he found the burial chamber of Taharqo almost intact - there were shabtis arranged in ranks around the edges of it. Morkot now showed us some objects from other tombs in the cemetery dating to this time period. These included some rather fine metal vessels - including a silver vessel for milk shaped like a breast for the king to suckle on during the coronation ceremony (in the same way that he would be depicted in reliefs suckling on a goddess). Also a small vessel that Morkot said he used to call the royal bath-plug, because that's what it looks like, until people started to believe him!

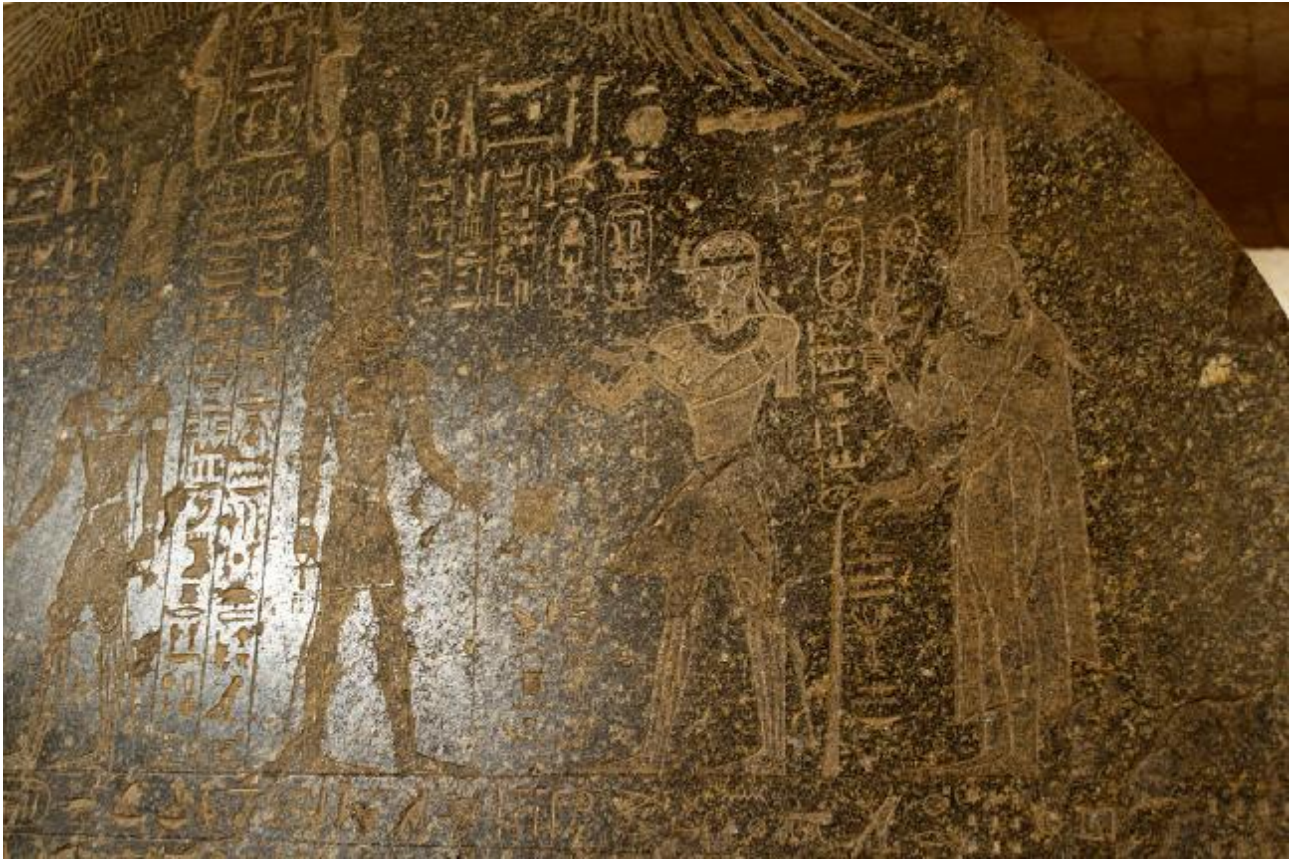
In 593 BCE, during the reign of Psamtik II, Egypt invaded Kush. One of the pieces of evidence for this is a graffito at Abu Simbel, which records the departure of the army on this campaign and says that the two generals were Potasimto and Amasis (who may be the same Amasis who later ruled as Ahmose II). Other documentation says that the army sacked Napata including the residence of the kwr (the Egyptian way of referring to the Qore (or king) of Kush), as well as other places further to the south. This is a key moment in the history of the region as after this destructive campaign the capital was moved from Napata to Meroë (which was a city that had been occupied from at least the 9th or 10th Century BCE).

The evidence from Nuri really just gives us a list of names of kings, who can be placed in roughly the right order but Morkot said that not much can be said about most of them. They did leave some fine objects, however, which are still very Egyptian in style.

One king, Irike-Aman-note (or perhaps Amani-nete-yerike) left a long inscription at Kawa, which was written in Egyptian hieroglyphs but it clearly wasn't written by a native speaker. This inscription tells us about the death of Talakhamani, Irike-Aman-note's predecessor - the relationship between the two is unclear - he died after the rebellion of the Rerehes north of Kawa. There is also a reference to another king called Malowiebamani at this point in the inscription. It also details how Irike-Aman-note was acclaimed by the army and then journey to Gebel Barkal. He receives the cap immediately after year 2 - which I think Morkot said was how the coronation was referred to. After this Irike-Aman-note goes on a progress to places such as Kortjen, Gem-Aten (at Kawa) and Penebes (Kerma) - in each of these places he makes offerings at the temples, participates in festivals and undertakes some campaigns. He then returns to the south of his country where he stays for the rest of his reign. This seems to be a fairly standard procedure for these kings - they go north to bury their predecessor and get crowned, go on progress to assert their authority and then go south again to Meroë.

A later king called Harsiyotef is also known from an inscription in Egyptian hieroglyphs. This is on a stela that was found at Gebel Barkal and is now in the Nubia Museum in Aswan. Unlike Irike-Aman-note's inscription this one is written in good Egyptian, implying the Harsiyotef had an Egyptian scribe to write it - and thus there must have been contact between Egypt and Meroë at this time. His wife and mother are both on this stela, and it's notable that the king's mother plays an important role throughout Napatan and Meroitic culture.

Harsiyotef had a long reign of around 35 years, and this inscription details many of the same sorts of events as Irike-Aman-note's. He goes north to Napata to be crowned, and then further north still to Kawa and Penebes amongst other places. He makes endowments at Gebel Barkal, and campaigns against the desert dwellers. He also celebrates the festivals of Amun in several places and goes as far north as Abu Simbel and celebrates the festival of Re there.



Stela of King Nastaseñ and His Mother In Front of Amun

Morkot said that the last of these long inscriptions belonged to a king called Nastaseñ, whose stela at Gebel Barkal was found in 1853 CE and is now in Berlin. The inscription talks about him making offerings at Gebel Barkal, again accompanied by his mother and wife. There is similar information about going north, being crowned, making offerings and campaigning. One of these campaigns takes place in Year 8 of his reign at Aswan against a local ruler in Lower Nubia called Kambasweden. At one point this was thought to be Cambyses, but that seems to be implausible and does not really fit the chronology such as we know it. Nowadays Kambasweden is thought to be someone who is known from Egyptian sources to rebel against the Persians in 340 BCE - although Morkot seemed pretty sceptical about this identification as well.

Nastaseñ was the last king to be buried at Nuri, following him the next kings are buried at Gebel Barkal in classic pointy Meroitic pyramids. This implies that these kings didn't see themselves in continuity with the previous kings - so Morkot says that perhaps we should see them a new dynasty. Most of the new pyramids have no royal names inside them, which makes them difficult to date and to fit into the chronology - there was also not a lot of material found inside them.

Morkot now moved on to the main point of his talk. Up until now the post-25th Dynasty kings that he had been talking about were really part of the Napatan Period, and now he's moving on to the Meroitic Period proper. But he stressed this is an arbitrary distinction that we draw in modern times, not necessarily how the people who lived through it would have seen it.

Morkot started this part of his talk with some historical orientation. This period that we call the Meroitic Period starts in 300 BCE and is divided into Early and Later Meroitic. The Early period is roughly contemporaneous with the Ptolemaic Period. Musawwarat es-Sufra is a key site, and the reign of the king Amekhamani is contemporary with Ptolemy III and Ptolemy IV. The Later Meroitic is roughly contemporary with Roman Egypt - running from 30 BCE to 350 CE. In this period there are temples at Naqa, and some key rulers are Natakamani and Amanitore who rule in the 1st Century CE.

A lot of evidence for the lineage of kings and queens who ruled during the Early Meroitic Period comes from the South Cemetery at Meroë. Their burials are in what we think of as classic Meroitic pyramids - very pointy compared to the earlier Egyptian pyramids, with east facing chapels. George Reisner excavated at the cemetery in 1920. In this cemetery are the burials of royal women going back to 25th Dynasty times. There are lot of inscriptions for these women - including Queens Peltasen, Arkamaniqo, Amanislo and Amanitekha. And from them descend a new and fairly well documented royal line.

Evidence for this line also comes from what seems a bit of an odd source - the Prudhoe lions (now in the British Museum) were once commissioned by Amenhotep and set up at Soleb. They were then transferred to Gebel Barkal, and later new cartouches of Meroitic kings were carved on them. This includes the king Ankh-nefer-ib-re, the Son of Re Imn-is-ro - whose name, Morkot told us, is immortalised in Verdi's opera Aida as Amonasro the king of Ethiopia! There is also evidence from Napata, Kawa, Tabo and Kerma and later from Amara and Sedeinga - all of which are to the north of Meroë. To the south there is evidence of these kings in Meroë itself, Musawwaret es-Sufra and Naqa.

The city of Meroë is in a resource rich area. It is an iron rich region, and to the south it was surrounded by lush, fertile savannah. There are also a series of large wadis in the area which become rivers in the rainy season. This city was excavated first by Garstang in 1910-1914, but this was not published until the 1990s. Since Garstang other people have also excavated there including Peter Shinnie, Rebecca Bradley and Kryzs Grzymiski.

Meroë is a walled royal city, with a large temple attached to it. It was probably on an island when it was first built, and temples dating to the 3rd Century BCE were built following the silting up of the Nile channel to the east. There is a temple of Amun at the site, which is rather large and looks a lot like an Egyptian type temple with the typical Nubian modifications, including a coronation chapel to the side of the sanctuary.

The royal city is a very complicated site, with a lot of rebuilding over previous structures - so there are multiple layers. It was clearly in occupation for a long time. Garstang named some of the buildings, like a "bath" and a "sun temple" and these identifications persist but Morkot urged caution because they really show how Garstang was influenced by the Classical authors and named things based on what people like Herodotus said about the city.

Some of the artefacts of the city are now in the Petrie Museum, and Morkot showed us examples of things from Meroë from that museum and elsewhere. There are a great mix of styles in the artefacts - he called it a strange amalgam. Some of them are influenced by classical statues - but instead of being carved in marble they are sandstone with a plaster layer to form the surface. Other objects are Egyptian influenced. Morkot particularly dwelt on a collection of objects from this city where we have both pictorial and physical evidence of a musical instrument - the Aulettes. This double flute is seen being played in at least two scenes - one from the "bath" and one on a jar. And there is an actual surviving instrument as well - so tantalisingly we know a tiny part of the musical culture of Meroë but not enough to have any idea what it might sound like!

As well as the South Cemetery at Meroë there are other cemeteries which are also very big - implying a lot of people living there for a long time. There are some pyramids in the other two cemeteries (West and North) but also a lot of non-pyramid burials. Like the South Cemetery the West Cemetery also goes back to 25th Dynasty times and includes minor royalty and members of the elite. So Morkot suggested that Meroë may have been

a powerful state in the pre-25th Dynasty period and that the 25th Dynasty had emerged from here on their meteoric rise of conquest and empire. Morkot explained that the chronology of the North Cemetery has been worked out from the details of the chapels and the pyramids, plus their position in the cemetery, and there is quite a complex set of variations of forms. Some things are consistent, however - the burial chamber is subterranean with an entrance some way in front of the associated chapel so there's a long passageway to actually reach the chamber. Morkot also showed us some chapel decoration from these pyramids, pointing out, in particular, scenes of processions of cattle and oxen - showing that this was still a cattle culture.

Meroë was not an isolated place with few connections to the outside world - instead the material culture shows wide connections including with the Mediterranean world. Morkot showed us jars which came from Aswan, from Rhodes or other places around the Mediterranean. Some even have Latin texts of them. So different commodities are being brought in from all around the Mediterranean. And not just the contents of jars - he showed us some rather fine silver vessels and some blue glass imports from the Mediterranean. Also found in Meroë were hanging bronze lamps, and a head of Dionysus in bronze. And a high quality piece of silverware from the Roman Empire which had an image on it that might be of the Emperor Augustus.



Architrave with Two Lion Gods and Amun as a Ram

The gods worshipped in Meroë also reflect a merging of Meroitic and outside influences. Unsurprisingly there is a strong influence from Egypt and continuity from the times when the two countries were ruled by one king (whether Nubian or Egyptian in origin). For instance, Amun was still a very important god; but other local gods like Apedemak were also important. This god was represented as a lion (or lion headed man) with a solar or lunar crown - Morkot said that he was definitely local because the Egyptians tended to have female lioness goddesses not masculine lion gods.

And there's evidence of people moving between Meroë and the Mediterranean world, some benign and some less so. Herodotus talks about Aithiopian warriors who fight naked, covered part in vermillion and part in chalk. Morkot noted that Aithiopian here is a generic term that Classical and Medieval authors used for sub-Saharan African cultures. That description of warriors isn't entirely accurate (as is so often the case for Herodotus!) but there are Meroitic alabaster vessels (an Egyptian form of stone vessel transferred to pottery) showing men with their faces painted in this sort of style - they are wearing clothes, though.

And less benignly than warriors (or tales of warriors) travelling to other countries, the kings of Kush and Meroë all profited from the slave trade. There is a lot of physical

evidence for sub-Saharan Africans in the Mediterranean world, and some of these must have come from (or via) Meroë as part of this trade.

The ruler of Meroë called Amekhamani was contemporary with Ptolemy III and Ptolemy IV. There's evidence of a close relationship between Meroë and Egypt at this time in his titulary, in which he starts out as "beloved of Amun" and becomes "beloved of Isis". This reflects a switch in Egyptian titles at this time too. But he's in no way an Egyptianised king - his iconography in statues is still distinctively Meroitic.

Morkot now talked us through some of the buildings that Amekhamani built at the key southern site of Musawwarat es-Sufra. One of these was a lion temple decorated inside and out with inscriptions and detailed reliefs. In the reliefs the king wears Egyptian style regalia, with the addition of Meroitic items. Inside the temple a lot of captives are portrayed, as well as elephants and other animals like lions. Elephants become important in Meroë around this time - they were probably hunted, but there's no evidence that they were trained for battle. There is evidence that some were exported to Egypt.

The site at Musawwarat es-Sufra is very complicated with a number of temples - Morkot said that only the lion temple he had just discussed could be dated with any confidence. Another structure in this region is referred to as the Great Enclosure. It's made of finely carved stone, and there is evidence of Egyptian stonemasons coming to work on this structure - more evidence of active connections between the two cultures. The inside of the enclosure is a very complicated structure which was built in many phases with lots of ramps. These ramps are sometimes thought to be to take elephants up, but Morkot seemed sceptical about this. There were statues of elephants around the edge of the enclosure, so elephants were important in some fashion. It's not known what the purpose of the enclosure was - one suggestion is an elephant hunting ground, another is a coronation site.

The son of Amekhamani was called Arka and he is probably the successor of Amekhamani who ruled as Arqamani. He left inscriptions at Kalabsha (now re-erected on Elephantine) in good quality Egyptian hieroglyphs - which let us know he was resettling northern Nubia. His reign was contemporaneous with that of Ptolemy V, and he supported an upper Egyptian revolt against Ptolemy IV and Ptolemy V in 207-186 BCE. But the rebellion was suppressed by Ptolemy VI and northern Nubia reverted to Egyptian control.

Morkot said that it's during this period that the Meroitic script was invented for writing the native Meroitic language. It comes in two forms, one of which is hieroglyphic and derived from the Egyptian script (but with fewer signs). The other script is cursive and has only 23 signs. Sadly the texts that survive don't really say much - Morkot said that it's like reading in a graveyard: names, dates and little else.

After a brief comfort break Morkot moved on to discuss the Age of the Kandakes - from the 2nd Century BCE to the 1st Century. Kandake is a title which was held by ruling women in Meroitic culture at this time. There are a number of well documented women who hold the title, as well as one who is titled Kandake Qore (Qore is the kingly title, and in the Q&A Morkot said that he thought this woman must have taken on the Qore role as well as her own Kandake role). There might even be a matrilineal succession in this period, but that's controversial. It is clear, however, that these women are important in a different way to the way royal women had been important before. The relationship between the Kandake and the Qore is unclear and a controversial subject - maybe she was his mother, or his sister, or his sister-wife - but there isn't a lot of direct evidence for any of the possibilities.

During the reign of the Kandake Amanirenas and Qore Teriteqas there was conflict with Rome. As the Romans took over Egypt Amanirenas saw an opportunity to push forward into Egypt. She is recorded as leading the Meroitic army against the Romans - recorded in a rather insulting fashion by the Romans "of rather masculine appearance and blind in one eye". As Morkot pointed out, this is an example of Roman misogyny and it's very relevant that this is all happening at the same time as the defeat of Cleopatra (this is what

Amanirenas is taking advantage of). So there's a lot of Roman propaganda produced to separate the Kandake Amanirenas from the Pharaoh Cleopatra in the Roman mind - not another seductive temptress leading Roman men astray, just some barbarian woman leading an army. As part of this conflict a Roman army lead by Petronius attacked Napata - but Morkot said whether or not that happened is disputed.

There were Meroitic victories during this conflict - including near Aswan. John Garstang excavated a temple in Meroë built in roughly the right period, which had a head of a statue of Augustus buried in the floor. Garstang's speculation was that this was brought back from Aswan after the victory and buried where it would be walked over - trampled on, effectively. This is speculation, but Morkot seemed to think it plausible.



Tomb Treasure of the Merotic Queen Amanishakheto

Amanirenas's successor as Kandake is thought to be a woman called Amanishakheto. Her pyramid is in the north cemetery at Meroë, and we have jewellery that belonged to her that was found in this tomb. It was found by Guiseppi Ferlini (a Italian doctor) in the 1830s - he brought it home and tried to sell it but at first no-one believed it was real, because they couldn't believe that sub-Saharan Africans were capable of such fine work. Eventually he managed to persuade the king of Bavaria and the Egyptian Museum in Berlin of the legitimacy of the objects and they bought half each. When I visited Berlin in 2013 I saw some of this jewellery, which is really elaborate and fine quality - see the photo above.

Robert Morkot's internet connection broke at this point, and so we initially thought the talk would have to end rather abruptly here because of that. But then he managed to re-connect, and after answering a few questions he continued with the rest of the talk.

He firstly finished up showing us the jewellery of Amanishakheto - there are four large gold rings with large bezels that appear to be seals. Some of these revive royal iconography which we recognise from 18th & 19th Dynasty Egypt - the royal birth cycle

(which Aidan Dodson also talked about in June, see my write up here:

<https://ninecats.org/margaret/blog/2018/07/08/kings-kush-egypts-25th-dynasty-robert-morkot-eeg-meeting-talk>). On one seal the Kandake is seated with her legs intertwined with those of Amun - indicating sexual union. And in another of the seals she is shown passing an infant to Amun - an indication of the divine parentage of that child. Morkot said that these seals indicated that one of the roles of the Kandake was as the mother of the next Qore, who would be the divine offspring of Amun. Despite the Egyptian origins of these motifs Amanishakheto still has Meroitic iconography - for instance in the two seals I described she wears a scorpion as her headdress.

Morkot also showed us a stela of Amanishakheto with the goddess Ameseme from Naqa, which had a similar mixing of Egyptian and Meroitic styles. The stela in general has classic Egyptian styling, but the iconography of the goddess is Meroitic - she has a falcon and a crescent moon on her head, and what appears to be scarification on her cheeks.

In this period there's a big emphasis on the Butana Plateau and Naqa. The site has been known for a while, and extensive excavations have been undertaken by a German team in the last couple of decades. It was a huge town with a lot of cemeteries.

Morkot first told us about a lion temple at this site which dates to the 1st Century CE. This is a single room structure, fronted with a pylon entrance with a cobra frieze and sun disc over the doorway in a very Egyptian style. The Qore and Kandake are depicted one on each side of the pylon smiting their enemies - she is as important as him and performing the same actions. Over the head of the Qore is a falcon, and the Kandake wears a sphinx on her head. Both are accompanied by lions who gnaw on the captives. At the back of the temple are the Kandake and Qore on either side of a lion headed god. They are dressed in their regalia, and Morkot pointed out that the Kandake has as much military iconography as the Qore - in particular he pointed out her archer's wrist braces. The people are wearing necklaces made up of hollow spheres, and woven robes with patterns on them.

There are two pieces of iconography on this temple which have led to speculation about Indian influences on the art and culture. The first of these is on the edge of the pylon outside where there is a motif of a lion-cobra rising from what seems to be a lotus. And on the inside the lion god that the Kandake and Qore flank has three heads and four arms! However Morkot told us that work done in the 1970s has laid that theory to rest. The flower the lion-cobra rises from is now thought to be an acanthus not a lotus, and so shows signs of Roman influence rather than Indian. And the three-headed, four-armed god is now thought to be an artefact of lack of space on the temple wall. Essentially there should have been two images of the god back to back, but they didn't have the space for that and so overlapped them - then added an extra head facing forwards to mask the rather weird looking seam at the top of the figure.

But although there wasn't influence from India Morkot explained that this site does show quite a bit of influence from the Mediterranean world. Meroitic culture was clearly in touch with the wider world and incorporating ideas that they encountered into their own culture. For instance, inside the lion temple are images of Zeus or Jupiter-Amon and Serapis - evidence of influence from Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt. Other gods' images have matches in contemporary Philae. And the architecture of the kiosk outside the temple also shows influences from contemporary Egypt. This isn't just a society with a veneer of Egyptian stuff dating back to the 25th Dynasty that they hold onto, there is a constantly replenishing set of influences and evidence of contact throughout their history. Morkot said that the time period when this temple was built was also clearly a time of great wealth for the Meroitic state, with lots of trade with Roman Egypt.

In contrast to the lion temple the Amun temple of Natakamani and Amanitore is a multiple room structure - much like the layout of an Egyptian style temple. But in the reliefs their iconography is more Meroitic than Egyptian - for instance they wear Meroitic crowns, which is unusual. Other structures that date to the time of this Qore and Kandake are several large scale palace buildings at Gebel Barkal - while they don't look impressive in

terms of what's left now they were once elaborate structures with a raised floor and ramps leading up to it.

Natakamani and Amanitore's successor was Shorkaror who first appears as crown prince with them on reliefs at Amara. He left a large rock inscription at Gebel Qeili. This has an image of the Qore with a god - he is standing on captives and there is a group of falling captives coming past him. At first glance the god in this vignette looks like Helios or like there is Parthian influence on the depiction. However this is not the case, and this is the Meroitic lion god Apedemak (I think the confusion is that the lion's mane is stylised and looks a bit like the rays of a sun).

The iconography of the captives is pretty brutal in this image. Morkot showed us a small bronze figurine that showed a captive bound in the same way as the ones that Shorkaror is standing on, which helped visualise what was going on. The prisoners were bound with their feet tied to their elbows behind their backs. An extremely uncomfortable position! In front of the king is a kneeling captive, and when you look closely you can see that he's leaning back with a spike through his chest.

The brutality of this state was not just in its art - a quiver with arrows has been found (now in the Boston Museum). It has nasty looking arrowheads with indications that they might be a poisoned. Morkot said that this was a heavily militarised state, and a slave state.

Another key site during this period of Meroitic history was Sedeinga (Meroitic name: Atiya). There had been a temple here dedicated to Amenhotep III and Tiye, which by the Meroitic Period had morphed into a temple of Isis. There is a cemetery with mud brick pyramids at the site, and Morkot showed us some of the objects that have been found here. This included some blue glass flute vessels with gilded and polychrome decoration with Greek text on them - indicating, once again, ongoing contact with the Mediterranean world. The site was an important provincial centre for this northern part of southern Nubia.

At this time the Meroitic state expands again into Lower Nubia. Dakka had been contested during the Ptolemaic Period but the border in Roman times was established at Maharaqqa to the south of that.

Faras was a site which had been inhabited since the 18th Dynasty - there is a temple dating to the time of Tutankhamun here. Then over the top of that is a Meroitic cemetery which has a lot of burials, and a Meroitic and Christian town. There is a huge amount of material that has been found in the cemetery and Morkot showed us some examples of the sorts of objects that have been found here which given insights into individuals who lived and died here. These include decorated vessels - and individual painters can be recognised, by their stylistic quirks. Some genealogies of the deceased can be reconstructed from their funerary stelae, like that of a woman called Lapakhidaye which lists her relationships to important people of the time - naming who she was neice of, and giving her relationship to the Kandake. So clearly the people of this northern region were culturally Meroitic and had strong connections to Meroë.

Another Lower Nubian site that was prominent at this time was Karanog. Morkot showed us quite a few objects that have been found here from this period. This included ba birds that once stood in the pyramid chapels - in concept they go back to the Egyptian idea of this part of the soul of a person, but the proportions and styling are not Egyptian but are uniquely Meroitic. Some of the pottery showed this mixture of influences - a northern style of tall pot decorated with giraffes, a quintessentially southern animal. Other pots had forms that had been common in this area since prehistoric times and would remain in use into the Christian era - whilst others had stylistic links to the Mediterranean. And there are still examples of decoration that reminds us that this was a cattle culture - for instance a bronze bowl with cattle scenes on it including a woman being offered milk. Not everything from here was fine quality - one particularly amusing pot had a dog as part of the decoration which looked rather more like a flipper!

Morkot now turned to the ending and aftermath of the Meroitic Period. The conventional end date is 350 CE - but it's not really an abrupt discontinuity more a case of fragmentation and fading away. There is evidence of an invasion by Noba, and of conquest by Axum (from Ethiopia), and of internal fragmentation. The pyramids in the north cemetery at Meroë do include several from this time - so Morkot had a list of names of rulers, but the history of the period is still pretty fragmentary.

Ethiopia proper now enters the story (as opposed to the classical authors' habit of using Ethiopia to refer to any sub-Saharan African land). Axum develops out of the culture of Ethiopia in the 1st Millennium BCE which had strong contacts with the Yemen. There is evidence that this new power invades the Meroitic state, but they also alter the balance of power in the region in other ways. Once all trade with the Egyptians and then the Roman Empire went through Meroë, but Axum began to trade directly with Egypt via sea routes rather than land routes. So they bypassed the Meroitic state and deprived it of income. The Axumite king also converted to Christianity around the time that Constantine was ruling the Roman Empire - so they became even better trade partners for the Romans as they were more culturally similar than the Meroitic state was.

And the Meroitic state also collapses into smaller states - evidence from cemetery sites suggests they centre on population centres that had been important since prehistoric times. There is evidence from places like el Hobagi for post-pyramidal Meroë so there is still something left of Meroitic culture but it is losing some of the key features and beginning to become something new.

Later at Ballana and Qustul there are burials in tumulus mounds. Inside the mounds were burial chambers, which hark back to the Kushite practice of bed burials. The deceased ruler was laid on a bed, with his crown on and lots of imported material gods around him. There were also sacrificed animals and retainers buried with each ruler. The burial chambers were built of stone and brick, and re-used bits of earlier Meroitic stonework. Morkot showed us several images of this sort of burial, and some of the artefacts that have been found in them. These include objects with Christian symbols on them - but clearly this was not a Christian culture, instead these had come from raiding Christian churches and were kept for their exotic value. The crowns of these rulers still included iconography that had its original roots in Egypt - like a stylised atef crown on a crescent suspended above a silver circlet.

In the reign of Justinian there were attempts to Christianise Nubia which was now situated between two Christian kingdoms (Egypt and Axum). Three kingdoms form during this period between those two powers. There are several kings named of the southernmost of these kingdoms at Kalabsha, so Morkot said we have some idea of the chronology of this kingdom. He showed us reliefs depicting a king called Silko and pointed out how even now the iconography showed influences from the Mediterranean world as well as the local area. Silko is depicted wearing Roman armour, with other Roman iconography - but this is mixed with iconography that is recognisably Egyptian and Meroitic. Faras, which Morkot had discussed earlier as it had been an important regional centre, was now the capital of the northern Christian kingdom of Nobatia. But even here there were some remnants of Meroitic culture.

So there was no sudden break with the past. Instead the Meroitic state fragmented into smaller pieces which each metamorphosed in their own way into something with connections to the past but nonetheless new.

Despite some technical issues this was a really interesting talk about a time and place that I really knew very little about beforehand. Morkot managed to cover an astonishing amount of material in his talk, and gave us a very thorough overview of the kingdom of Meroë.