

MORTIMER WHEELER ARCHAEOLOGICAL LECTURE

## ROME BEYOND THE SOUTHERN EGYPTIAN FRONTIER

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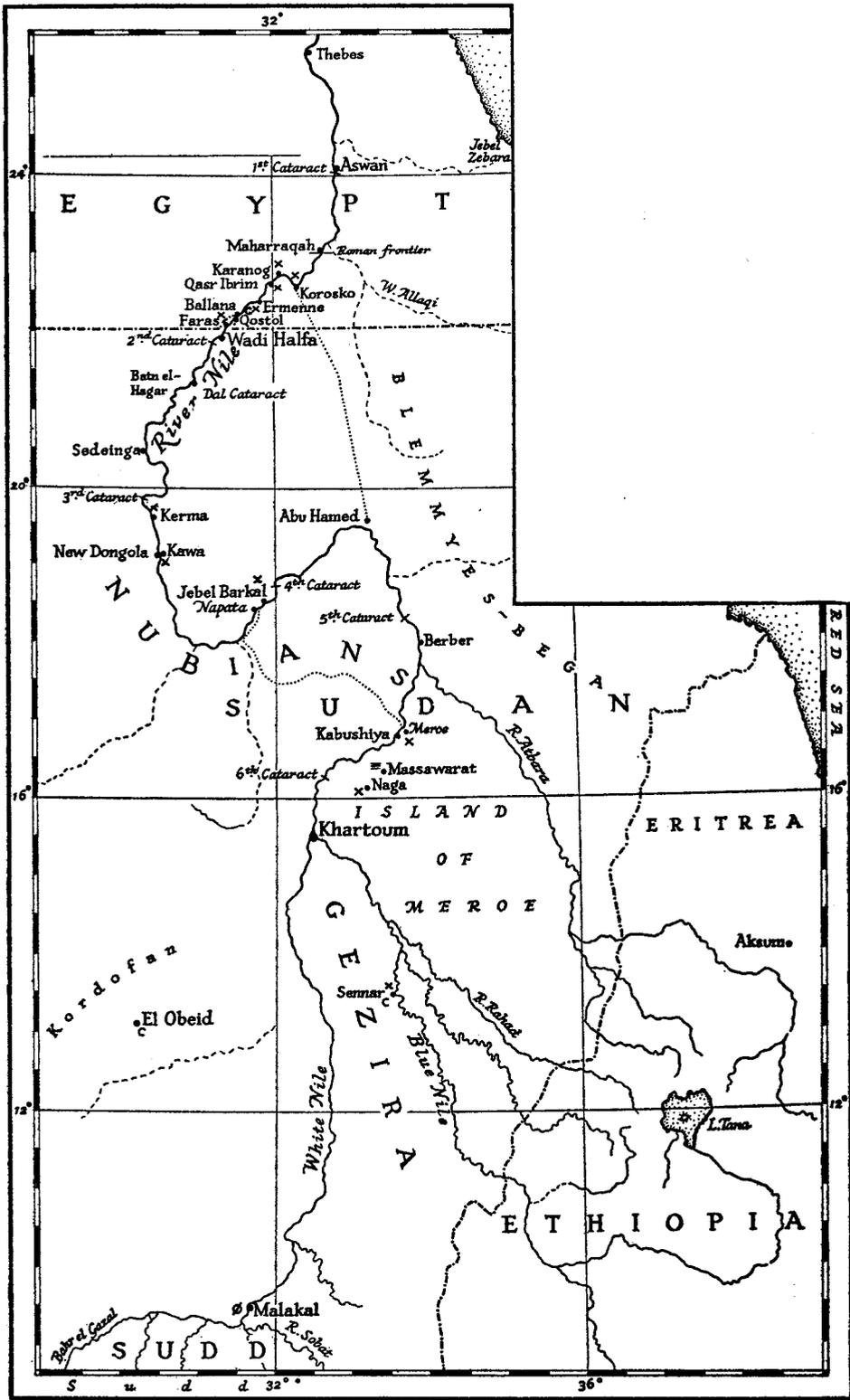
Read 26 January 1977

THE title of this lecture, on a theme inspired by one of Sir Mortimer Wheeler's many books, calls for some explanation. Rome here means Roman ventures, particularly trading ventures, under the earlier Empire. And I use the term 'Roman' in the same loose and general way that Wheeler used it in his *Rome Beyond the Imperial Frontiers*. As he declared in that book, in characteristically robust and ebullient fashion, 'There shall be no great pedantry here in the matter of race or colour or even citizenship.'

Then there is the frontier, or rather frontiers. There are two frontiers to be crossed, not one. When the Roman Army, under Cornelius Gallus, first Prefect of Egypt—no general but a poet admired by Ovid and a friend of Virgil's—arrived at the First Cataract of the Nile in 29 B.C., Egypt's frontier, for all practical purposes, lay close to the island of Philae, on an ancient boundary line which divided Egypt proper from Lower Nubia, the Wawat of the Pharaohs. Under Augustus, however, the frontier was advanced twelve schoinoi, 130 km., to the south as far as Hierasykaminos (el-Maḥarraqa), thereby enclosing a stretch of the Nile valley known from Ptolemaic times as the Dodekaschoinos. In A.D. 297, so Procopius says,<sup>1</sup> it was withdrawn, back to the vicinity of the First Cataract, by Diocletian (Map I).

As far as the regions beyond Egypt are concerned, I will concentrate primarily on the Nubian Nile valley, now submerged as far south as the Dal Cataract under the waters of the High Dam. This Nubian stretch of the valley and beyond, as far probably as the latitude of Sennar on the Blue Nile, comprised the Sudanese kingdom of Meroe during the early Empire. The site of the capital, Meroe, with its remnant temples, its

<sup>1</sup> *History of the Wars*, 1, 19.



MAP I.

palace enclosure, and its pyramid tombs, can be seen today on the east bank of the Nile some 200 km. north of Khartoum. But I will touch on modern Ethiopia's ancient kingdom of Aksum, in the highlands of Eritrea and Tigray, as well, and on the coastlands of Somalia, Kenya, and Tanzania. Aksum is essential. The course of Rome's relations with Meroe and of her trading activities up the Nile can hardly be seen in proper perspective without some reference to the rising power and counter-attractions of Aksum and to the steady growth of Roman trade through the Red Sea and beyond to the incense-bearing lands and coastal slave-markets in the Horn of Africa.

Meroe and Aksum were the principal powers with which Rome had to do in eastern Africa south of Egypt. In origin, in cultural orientation, in their sharply contrasting physical environments, they could hardly have been more different. Aksumite civilization, emerging on a mountain plateau geologically, biologically, and climatically affiliated to the highlands of south-west Arabia, had from the fifth century B.C. been influenced by Sabaeen immigrants from across the Red Sea and Arabian influences there became dominant. We know little of this Arabian-orientated kingdom during the first two centuries A.D. or of Rome's relations with it beyond a passing mention of Aksum in *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*.<sup>1</sup> But an imposing rock-cut tomb recently discovered by the British Institute in Eastern Africa below the giant monoliths at Aksum included architecture in burnt brick, with horseshoe arches (Fig. 1), quite un-Aksumite and probably Romano-Syrian in origin, and imported Roman glass of the third-fourth century. The tomb has since yielded a radio-carbon date of A.D. 280±80.<sup>2</sup>

By contrast with this highland civilization, Meroe was a lowland, essentially riverain, kingdom which emerged in the rainlands between the Atbara and the Nile—'the Island of Meroe'—from the sixth century B.C. There it developed as an African civilization. But its roots lay further north, in an earlier, highly Egyptianized kingdom centred on Napata near

<sup>1</sup> W. H. Schoff (ed.), 23, 40 'della raccolta milanese' might refer to a late first-century desert battle between Troglodytes of the coast and Aksumites, and the Romans. See E. G. Turner in *Journal of Roman Studies*, 40 (1950), 57-9, where 'Ethiopia' is interpreted as meaning Meroitic peoples who were essentially riverain.

<sup>2</sup> H. N. Chittick in *Azania IX* (1974), 159-205; and for date *Azania XI* (1976), 180.



the Fourth Cataract. One aspect of Meroe's pervasive and persistent Egyptian inheritance which appealed to Rome was her devotion to Isis. Indeed, Meroe's fame as an antique centre of Isis worship, remote, mysterious, beyond the deserts and the turbulent cataracts of the Nile reached Rome itself, and Juvenal wrote of one ecstatic female devotee who was prepared to travel even 'to the confines of Egypt and fetch water from Hot Meroe with which to sprinkle the temple of Isis' in the Campus Martius.<sup>1</sup>

These two kingdoms, however, had one attribute in common from Rome's point of view, the contribution they could make to her wealth through trade. Aksum had its Red Sea port of Adulis, in the Gulf of Zula (Map II), a port from which elephants, 'Troglodytic' and 'Ethiopian', captured by the Egyptians, had been shipped north for use in the armies of Ptolemy II and III.<sup>2</sup> Pliny, who recalls the port's close links with Egypt, describes it as a part used by both Troglodytes and Ethiopians, by the coastal people and, here probably, the people of the highlands.<sup>3</sup> It was one of those 'established marts' listed in *The Periplus* which served both coast and hinterland.

Meroe for her part held the key to the Nile valley trade route linking Egypt with the resources of the southern Sudan. Her geographical position and her association with friendly tribes far beyond the boundaries of the kingdom which Seneca mentions<sup>4</sup> gave her direct access to the resources and the manpower of inner Africa. The southernmost Meroitic settlement known,<sup>5</sup> near Sennar, a trading outpost yielding first- to second-century bronze vessels imported from Roman Egypt, lay within the perimeter of a primitive, purely African, culture centred on near-by Jebel Moya, in the Gezira. Excavations carried out there before the First World War—by a disappointed Sir Henry Wellcome who had hoped to find the burial ground of a lost white race—produced clear evidence of trade with Meroe.<sup>6</sup>

But this Nile route had severe disadvantages; long desert journeys to bypass the cataracts and the two great bends in the river, journeys across the territory of two tribal confederations of nomads, both independent of Meroe, both a potential

<sup>1</sup> *Sat.* 6, 528.

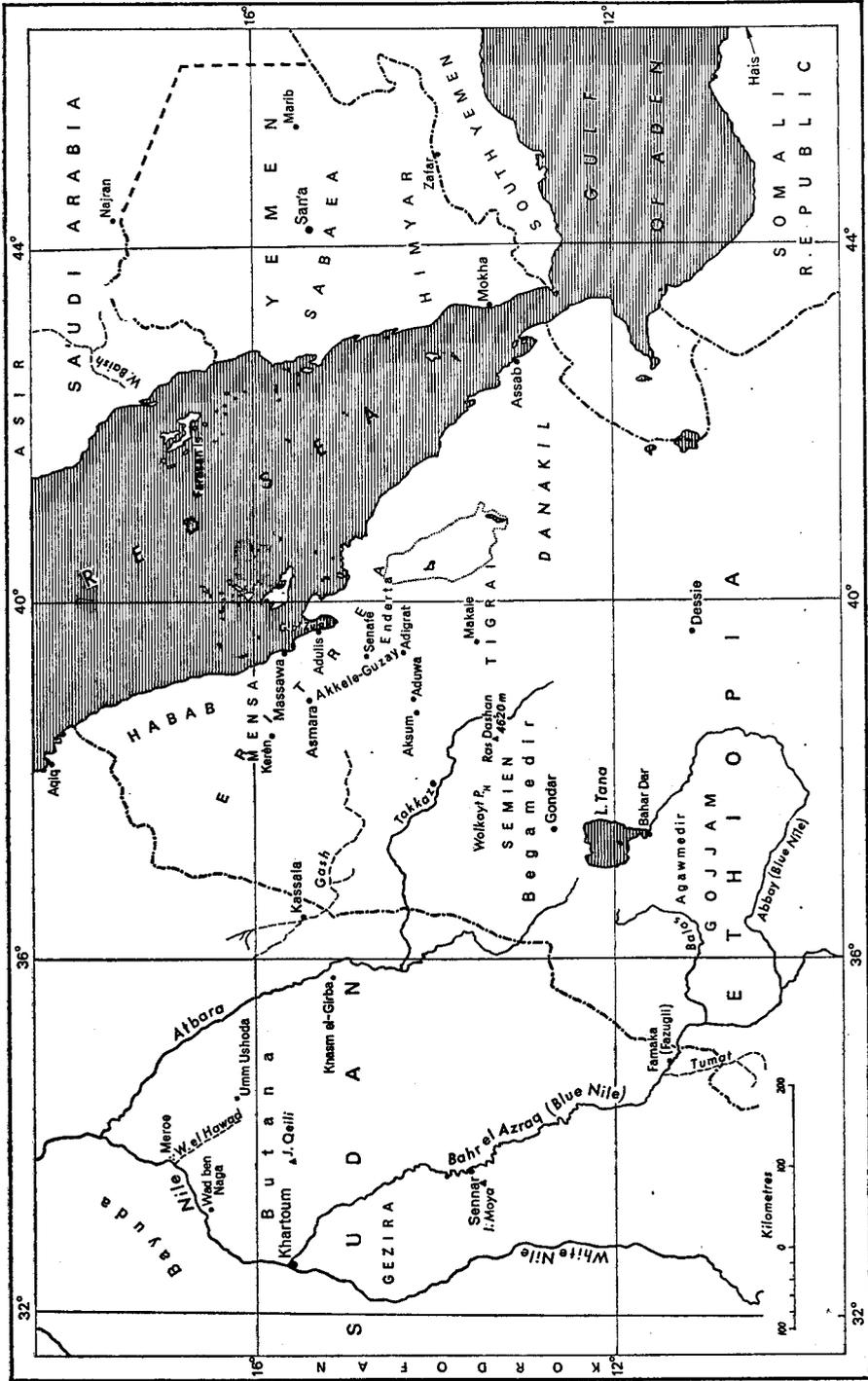
<sup>2</sup> W. Wolska-Conus (ed.), *Cosmas Indicopleustès, topographie chrétienne*, i, 370.

<sup>3</sup> *HN* 6, 172–3, 181.

<sup>4</sup> *Nat. Qu.* 6, 8, 3–5.

<sup>5</sup> D. M. Dixon in *Kush*, xi (1963), 227 ff.

<sup>6</sup> F. Addison in *Kush*, iv (1956), 4 ff.



MAP II.

menace to trading caravans. These were the Blemmyes in the Eastern Desert and the Nubians in the Bayuda and west of the Nile. The Blemmyes, first mentioned under that name by Theocritus,<sup>1</sup> have been identified with the marauding Bega<sup>2</sup> of fourth-century Aksumite inscriptions and of early Arabic literature. Indeed they were almost as much a menace to Aksum as to Meroe and Egypt. The northern tribes of the confederation, ancestors it seems likely of the notorious 'Abābda of whom the nineteenth-century Swiss traveller J. L. Burckhardt gives such an unflattering description in his *Travels in Nubia* were those mentioned in classical and Coptic literature and inscriptions. In the late third century they dominated Upper Egypt.

The Nubians, brigands Strabo calls them,<sup>3</sup> were spread across the Bayuda and west of the Nile from the latitude of Meroe to the Third Cataract. Nothing is known of any Nubian encounters with Rome under the early Empire apart from a doubtful reference by Procopius to their enrolment as federates by Diocletian; an event which should probably be dated a century later. But mid-fourth century inscriptions<sup>4</sup> of the Aksumite king Ezana leave no doubt about the part they played in the decline of Meroe and in the kingdom's ultimate disintegration.

But this background sketch of the kingdoms and tribal confederations confronting Rome beyond Egypt's borders is looking too far ahead and I must return to the main story. When Cornelius Gallus arrived at the First Cataract in the spring of 29 B.C., frontier security, not trade and trade routes, was Rome's immediate preoccupation; security on the frontier of a country destined to be the great granary of the Empire, and one all too ready to revolt as Cornelius Gallus had good reason to know from his recent experiences in Upper Egypt. Meroe was the immediate problem. In the course of the century she had pushed north into the Dodekaschoinos, traditional Egyptian territory, the domain of Isis of Philae, which had been administered as a *limes*, a military frontier district, under the Ptolemies. Strabo who was at the First Cataract a few years

<sup>1</sup> *Idylls*, 7, 112.

<sup>2</sup> J. M. Plumley and W. Y. Adams in *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, 60 (1974), 238.

<sup>3</sup> *Geography*, 17, 1-2.

<sup>4</sup> E. Littmann, *Äthiopischen inschriften* in *Miss. Acad. Berol.* ii (1950), 2; 97 ff.

later says that Pselchis (Ed-Dakka) in the Dodekaschoinos was an 'Ethiopian', a Meroitic, city. Cornelius Gallus had not pushed south beyond Philae. Meroe thus had effective control over the whole territory right up to the frontier.

This was the situation when the Prefect of Egypt met delegates from Meroe at Philae. The outcome of this meeting is contained in Cornelius Gallus' trilingual inscription,<sup>1</sup> in Latin, Greek, and Egyptian, found in the temple of Augustus on the island, broken and reused as paving slabs after his exile and suicide. There were three principal stipulations, couched in decidedly less conciliatory terms in the Latin than in the Greek version. The kingdom of Meroe was declared a Roman protectorate. It was to pay an annual tribute. And a tyrant, a governor, answerable to Rome, was to be appointed to take charge of a stretch of the Nile valley, thirty schoinoi, 320 km., in length, called the Triakonteschoinos.

The precise significance of this term has been a source of much misunderstanding affecting even our interpretation of medieval Christian Nubia's geographical history. Monneret de Villard, historian of medieval Nubia, basing himself on an obscure and dubious passage in Ptolemy, argued<sup>2</sup> that the Triakonteschoinos must have been an extension of the Dodekaschoinos which would have carried it well beyond the Second Cataract. But that is surely untenable. Rome obviously must have been concerned about the stability of the valley immediately adjoining the frontier, the Dodekaschoinos in fact. That too had to be brought under control. Lesquier<sup>3</sup> therefore was probably right in thinking that the Triakonteschoinos included the Dodekaschoinos, and that it should also be measured from Philae, the point from which distances in Roman Nubia were measured as a milestone from Kalābsha shows.<sup>4</sup> Measured in this way the Triakonteschoinos would have extended as far south as Serra, within a few kilometres of latitude 22°N, the line of the international frontier between Egypt and the Sudan established under the Anglo-Egyptian Conventions of 1899. The Triakonteschoinos then would have been roughly the equivalent of pre-High Dam Egyptian Nubia, and regarded as a zone of special significance to Egypt. This was probably the case under the Ptolemies. A Ptolemaic inscription of un-

<sup>1</sup> *CIL* 3, 14147; Cagnat-Jouguet 1293.

<sup>2</sup> In *Storia della Nubia cristiana* (Rome, 1938), 133.

<sup>3</sup> *L'Armée romaine d'Égypte* (Cairo, 1918), 462.

<sup>4</sup> Cairo Museum No. 40286; *CIL* 3, 14148.

known origin records the founding of two Egyptian towns in the Triakonteschoinos late in the second century B.C., named after the reigning sovereigns, Philometoris and Cleopatra. It is dedicated to the gods of the First Cataract.<sup>1</sup>

The man appointed to govern this zone appears to have been Akinidad, Crown Prince of Meroe and in a long Meroitic inscription found near Meroe he carries the title of 'Kharpakh—deputy of the ruler of Cush for Rome',<sup>2</sup> Cush being the Meroitic name for their kingdom. It should be said here that our knowledge of Meroitic, an alphabetic language unlike Egyptian but written in hieroglyphs and an almost cursive script, is still very rudimentary, forty years after F. Ll. Griffith's first breakthrough. It is likely to remain so pending the discovery of another bilingual inscription. If the longer Meroitic texts—one in particular—could be understood, we would learn much about Meroe's relations with Rome.

There was nothing new, of course, in this appointment of a client prince beyond the frontier answerable to Rome. It had been tried long before, on the Eastern Frontier. But it must always have been a risky business and this proved the case in Lower Nubia. There is no need to go into detail. The story has been told many times and Strabo gives a full, virtually a first-hand, account.<sup>3</sup> In 25 B.C., four years after the meeting at Philae, Meroe's warriors—Sudanese and Nubians—swooped down on the Roman frontier. The attack was carefully planned and carefully timed, in the knowledge that the Roman garrisons in Egypt had been heavily depleted to provide troops for Aelius Gallus' ill-conducted campaign in Arabia. The frontier garrisons, three cohorts stationed at Philae, Syene (Aswan) and the neighbouring island of Elephantine, were taken completely by surprise; the towns were ransacked; and statues of Caesar were torn down. The bronze head of one of them, a magnificent portrait head of Augustus now in the British Museum, was found at Meroe early this century during Garstang's excavations. It had been ceremonially and ignominiously buried under the threshold of a temple.<sup>4</sup>

When Roman retribution came in the autumn, it was overwhelming and the campaign, under C. Petronius, second

<sup>1</sup> See Lesquier, *op. cit.*, 414.

<sup>2</sup> B. G. Haycock in *Meroitica*, 2 (Berlin, 1976), 39.

<sup>3</sup> *Geography*, 17, 53-4.

<sup>4</sup> J. Garstang in *Liverpool Annals of Archaeology and Anthropology*, 4, 66-71 and pls. 12-14.

Prefect of Egypt, lasted until the spring of 24 B.C., covering the cool months of the Nubian winter. After a sweeping victory at Pselchis (Ed-Dakka) in the Dodekaschoinos, and the capture of the Meroitic hill-city of Primis (Qaşr Ibrīm) farther up the river, Petronius—using his cavalry, no doubt—set off across the Eastern Desert for Napata where the treacherous Akinidad had taken refuge. This journey of five hundred kilometres across the high desert carried the Roman Army to its farthest south in Africa. After sacking Napata, Petronius returned to Primis, strengthened its defences, and left 400 men there with supplies for two years. But Rome had not finished with this obdurate Sudanese kingdom. Two years later, just as these supplies were running out, he had to rush south again from Alexandria to rescue the garrison. This was Rome's last battle with Meroe. In the winter of 21–20 B.C., envoys from the queen, the Candake, of Meroe had to travel to Samos in the Aegean to submit to Caesar. The tribute, the alleged source of all the trouble, was remitted. It was an indication perhaps of Rome's continuing claims over Meroe.<sup>1</sup>

Thereafter the *Pax Romana* descended on the Nubian Nile. But it was peace backed this time by prudent military insurance. The Dodekaschoinos was incorporated under the civil administration of the Thebaid, possibly as early as the reign of Augustus, certainly by that of Domitian. Augustus built several temples there, one Talmis (Kalābsha) the largest in Lower Nubia after Abu Simbel. It was dedicated to a local god, Mandulis, a god with eastern connections likely also to appeal to the Blemmyes, the Bega, of the Eastern Desert. Such conciliatory gestures were backed by formidable military arrangements. The principal towns were fortified and garrisoned and these military stations, all but one securely identified, are listed in the early third-century *Antonine Itinerary*; a list reasonably well supported for the first two centuries A.D. by military inscriptions and ostraca<sup>2</sup> found in the Dodekaschoinos ranging in date from Tiberius to Caracalla.

Being concerned now with events beyond the new frontier at Hierasykaminos, it is no part of my task to discuss Roman

<sup>1</sup> See S. Jameson, 'Chronology of the campaigns of Aelius Gallus and C. Petronius', in *Journal of Roman Studies*, 58 (1968), 71–84.

<sup>2</sup> See Lesquier, *op. cit.* For ostraca, U. Wilcken, *Die Griechischen ostraca* nos. 1129–46; 1220–3; 1265. Also Evelyn White in *Classical Review*, 33 (1919), 109 ff. Many found by the Survey of Nubia 1907–11 are unpublished and now missing.

Nubia, an extension of the Empire sadly neglected by pre-First World War survey expeditions which were not much interested in 'late' remains. The turreted and bastioned mud-brick forts there, all on the west bank of the Nile with bridge-heads across the river—a precaution probably against surprise attacks by the nomads of the Eastern Desert—were only superficially explored.<sup>1</sup> And of course these Roman sites, farthest north in Lower Nubia and nearest the river, were the first to be damaged and finally be inundated by the old Aswan Dam and its successive heightenings. But I would like to discuss one problem about the frontier. Did it remain at Hierasykaminos, the southernmost station listed in the *Antonine Itinerary*? Or was the frontier pushed still farther south at any time, as far as Qaşr Ibrīm. This has been suggested and the problem is very relevant to the Egypt Exploration Society's very successful excavations at Ibrīm which are to be resumed next year.

Certainly Olympiodorus, that remarkable Egyptian diplomat and historian, who travelled with a highly talkative parrot which could dance and sing, claims<sup>2</sup> that Primis, 'Prima' he calls it, was once Egypt's southernmost city. He was there in A.D. 423. But it seems very improbable. Against it there is not only the evidence of the *Itinerary* but some remarks made by Philostratus. In his *Life of Apollonius Tyana*,<sup>3</sup> written early in the third century, he talks of Hierasykaminos as the frontier town. The strongest evidence, however, in favour of Hierasykaminos, and it spans the whole range of Rome's occupation of the Dodekaschoinos, is archaeological; the very sharp differences in burial customs and pottery to north and south of Hierasykaminos. To the north, both are almost exclusively Romano-Egyptian in character, to the south wholly and markedly Meroitic, with Ba statues, offering tables inscribed in Meroitic, and the elegant, painted Meroitic pottery, African in inspiration though clearly influenced by Hellenistic tradition, which was such a characteristic product of Meroe's northern province. Perhaps Olympiodorus was recalling Strabo and his story of Petronius and his garrison.

It is very likely on the other hand that Primis, Qaşr Ibrīm, was used by the Romans as an outpost, in advance of but in close touch with the frontier rather like one of the forts north of the Antonine Wall in Roman Britain. Qaşr Ibrīm is a barren island

<sup>1</sup> See U. Monneret de Villard, *La Nubia romana* (Rome, 1941).

<sup>2</sup> R. Henry (ed.), *Photius, bibliothèque* (Paris, 1959), i, 180 ff.

<sup>3</sup> 6. 2.

site now, its ruins a haven for snakes and scorpions. But before the High Dam, it rose high and gaunt above the Nile and gave commanding views over both river and desert approaches. Such a strategic position, almost impregnable except from the north, would never have been neglected by the Romans in planning their defences of Roman Nubia. And indeed there is evidence that it was not, though it is insufficient at present to indicate any permanent or lengthy occupation. Fragments of Greek and Latin military papyri recently discovered by Professor J. M. Plumley's expedition<sup>1</sup> could be several decades later in date than 22 B.C., the year when Petronius withdrew his garrison. Then there is Marichal's reinterpretation<sup>2</sup> of the text on the *recto* of an Oxyrhynchus papyrus (No. 1511). This is now seen to have been a letter written from Ibrīm one February not very long before A.D. 247—the date on the *verso* of the papyrus. It mentions several high ranking officers then present at Primis, including the Prefect of the Legion *Trajana Fortis*.

There can be no doubt about Ibrīm's exceptionally close links with Roman (and Christian) Egypt. These are evident in building styles and techniques, in coin finds (first to the fourth century)—and coins are very rare south of Ibrīm—and in discoveries of early Coptic papyri.<sup>3</sup> Gaston Maspero, in a position to know because of his post in the Egyptian Antiquities Service, claimed<sup>4</sup> that one building at Ibrīm could certainly be attributed to Septimius Severus and this was accepted without question by no less an authority than Lesquier. What this was based on, I have not been able to discover; possibly a lost building inscription. This would be worth investigating.

All this assertion of Roman power—the rout of Meroe's 'Dervish' warriors, the grim forts with their garrisons, including camel-borne units for wide-ranging desert operations—was thought by earlier scholars to have precipitated the decline of Meroe; 'the decayed capital of Nubia', as Wheeler called her in his *Rome Beyond the Imperial Frontiers*. But that was far from the case. The *Pax Romana* brought trade and through trade prosperity to the Nile valley south of Egypt, unevenly distributed though it was. And it reopened the ancient Meroitic kingdom

<sup>1</sup> See M. E. Weinstein and E. G. Turner in *JEA* 62 (1976), 115 ff.

<sup>2</sup> R. Marichal in *Bull. de la Soc. Nat. des antiquaires de France*. Séance of 14 October 1964.

<sup>3</sup> J. M. Plumley in *JEA* 56 (1970), 18; and Plumley and W. Y. Adams in *JEA* 60 (1974), 226.

<sup>4</sup> *Égypte* (Coll. *Ars Una*), 251. Lesquier, *op. cit.* 466.



Silver goblet, originally gilded, with scene in relief, Roman work, mid-first century A.D.  
From Royal tomb at Meroe

PLATE II



Silver plate with figures and emblems in relief from Ballana, Lower Nubia,  
fifth century A.D.



Transparent blue glass flutes with polychrome and gilded decoration from Northern Nubia, late third century A.D.



Romano-Meroitic kiosk at Naqa, early first century A.D.

PLATE IV



Plaster statue from bath building at Meroe



Bronze hanging vase from Faras, second to third century A.D.

to a fresh wave of cultural influence from the Graeco-Roman world. Meroe's links with classical civilization had a long history and extended through Egypt to Greece itself. At least one Meroitic ruler had appreciated Greek art. One of the more remarkable discoveries in Meroe's royal cemetery, made by Reisner's Harvard/Boston expedition fifty years ago, was of an elegant Attic rhyton, made by the Athenian potter Sotades.<sup>1</sup> He was at work in the mid-fifth century B.C., about the time when Herodotus, interrogating the mixed and polyglot population of the old frontier town of Elephantine, heard reports of Meroe, 'a big city . . . and the capital city of the Ethiopians', and of the country far beyond; as far indeed as that east-west flowing tributary of the Nile which once connected that river with the Lake Chad region; a connection substantiated by modern biologists.

But trade then, and later when Pliny's Ptolemaic Greeks (or Hellenized Egyptians)—Dalion, Simonides, and others—visited Meroe, lived there and wrote about it, and journeyed into the far south, did not compare in volume or richness with that of Roman times. Silverware, bronze vessels and lamps, glass, the finest pottery including *terra sigillata* and barbotine wares, flowed south from the great industrial centres and ateliers of Egypt; Thebes, Coptos, and above all Alexandria (Plates I and IV*b*). There were other luxury imports too, such as wines and olive oil. Some came from very far afield such as the Pergamine wares of the late first century B.C. found at Napata, and an amphora, once full of olive oil, from Tiklat in Algeria, dated by its stamp to the reign of Diocletian.<sup>2</sup>

Not much is known for certain about Meroe's exports to Roman Egypt, bartered in return for these luxuries, but ivory was undoubtedly among them. Juvenal writes, early in the second century, of ivory brought to Aswan, ivory destined to adorn the dining tables of Rome's affluent society.<sup>3</sup> Indeed he may quite possibly have seen some tusk-laden caravan arriving at 'the portals of Syene'. A French expedition excavating at Wad ben Naga, on the Nile south of Meroe, discovered a great store of ivory and ebony; a depot perhaps for this export trade.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> W. S. Smith, *Ancient Egypt*, 183 and pl. 120. Boston Museum of Fine Arts, 1960.

<sup>2</sup> D. Dunham, *Royal tombs at Meroe and Barkal*, 93, 186. Boston Museum of Fine Arts, 1957.

<sup>3</sup> *Sat.* 11, 120–5.

<sup>4</sup> J. Vercoutter, 'Un palais des "Candaces" contemporain d'Auguste', in *Syria*, 39 (1962), 262 ff.

Then there was gold, Meroitic gold from the Second/Third Cataract region bartered with Rome. Philostratus refers to this in an anecdote about Roman Nubia's frontier market at Hierasykaminos (El-Maḥarraqa). In addition, he says, to ivory, myrrh, spices, and linen 'lying about without anyone to watch them', there was 'uncoined gold'. The Romans never seem to have worked the 'Gold of Wawat', the gold-mines worked by the Pharaohs in the Wādi 'Allāqi, east of Hierasykaminos. But there was ample gold in the Basement Complex in this cataract region. Gold-mining may well account for the wealth of one or two of the Meroitic towns in this eerie and claustrophobic reach of the Nile valley, a tumult of black rocks and rapids and whirlpools; at Sedeinga, for example, the Meroitic Atīye. It was there that the M. S. Giorgini expedition recently discovered the finest glass found south of Egypt; footed flutes of transparent blue glass with polychrome and gilded decoration imported from Alexandria or perhaps made by Egyptian craftsmen working in Nubia.<sup>1</sup> One bears the Greek inscription, 'Drink and may you live', an inscription from a pagan tomb of the late third century which was to be seen often enough in the Christian catacombs of Rome (Plate IIIa).

Gold must have played some part in the greater and more widespread prosperity of this northern part of the Meroitic kingdom compared with the south, beyond the cataracts. There it appears to have been concentrated in the capital and confined to a ruling feudal class. Another, obvious, reason for this widespread distribution was this northern region's accessibility to Egyptian traders. From the third century, and probably before, there was moreover a considerable Egyptian element in Lower Nubia. And the population itself was much Egyptianized. This can be seen in Meroitic funerary inscriptions, from the frequent adoption of Egyptian names.<sup>2</sup> The Triakonteschoinos was, and remained, very much an Egyptian zone, open not only to merchants but to immigrants including craftsmen bringing to cities like Ibrīm the technical skills of Roman Egypt.

Two new technologies, neither specifically Roman in origin, but both introduced beyond the frontier during the early Empire, should be mentioned here. One was the *sāqiya*, the cogged water wheel fitted with scoops (*qādūs*), pottery buckets; Strabo gives what appears to be a description of one which he

<sup>1</sup> J. Leclant in *Journal of Glass Studies*, 15 (1973), 52 ff.

<sup>2</sup> N. B. Millett in *Journées internationales d'études méroïtiques*, July 1973, 18.

saw feeding an irrigation channel near the legionary fortress of Babylon (Old Cairo). The *sāqiya* must have revolutionized the agriculture of Meroitic Lower Nubia. Another was the wine-press, of Graeco-Egyptian type like the one pictured in the tomb of Petosiris.<sup>1</sup>

Roman cultural influence, on art, on architecture, even on manners and customs, was far-reaching and nowhere is it better seen than in the Meroitic sites of the Island of Meroe, between the Atbara and the Nile, including the capital itself. Roman influence on architecture is strikingly illustrated in the little kiosk at Naqa out in the Butana (Plate III*b*), in the bath building at Meroe, and in a *tholos* at Wad ben Naga<sup>2</sup> on the Nile only 100 km. north of Khartoum. A relief of a god at Naqa, portrayed full-face and not in traditional Egyptian profile, must have been due to Roman influence. These temples at Naga date from the end of the first century B.C. or the beginning of the first century A.D., an indication of the rapidity with which these influences from Roman Egypt spread.

The bath building at Meroe was found during Garstang's haphazard and largely unpublished excavations there early this century. It contained several statues. One was of an obese Sudanese reclining on a couch in a Roman manner (Plate IV*a*).<sup>3</sup> Others were of musicians, one of an auletes. Some of these wind instruments, auloi or tibiae, ivory tubes encased in bronze, were found by Reisner in a royal tomb at Meroe of the late first century B.C. They closely resemble some from Pompeii. Like so much else imported from the north they probably came from Alexandria which ranked second only to Corinth as a source of auloi.<sup>4</sup>

Such exotic influences, extending even to Meroitic music, must have been greatly strengthened by travel up and down the Nile between the kingdom of Meroe and Roman Egypt; merchants, officials, private individuals perhaps prepared to venture across the deserts and into the rainlands to the heart of this remote and strange civilization where African gods—elephant gods, lion-headed snake gods—were worshipped side by side with relict deities from the ancient Egyptian pantheon. There are no tourist graffiti at Meroe like those at Thebes; there

<sup>1</sup> U. Monneret de Villard, *La Nubia romana*. Figs. 48 and 50. *Geography*, 17, 1, 30.

<sup>2</sup> J. Vercoutter, loc. cit.

<sup>3</sup> P. Shinnie, *Meroe*, pl. 25.

<sup>4</sup> Nicholas B. Bodley in *American Journal of Archaeology*, 50 (1946), 2; 217–39. Also D. M. Dixon and K. P. Wachsman in *Kush*, 12 (1964), pl. 35.

were none even in the Dodekaschoinos. The Emperor Germanicus' antiquarian tour in A.D. 19 reached no farther south than the First Cataract. However, there are several graffiti, in Greek, Meroitic, Demotic, and Latin from Philae and farther south left by travellers on official missions to Roman Egypt and even to Rome itself. The earliest, from Dakka dated 13 B.C., is in Greek; an unpublished column drum from Meroe with the Greek alphabet inscribed on it shows that Greek was taught there. The Latin inscription, identified by Mommsen as more likely to be Meroitic than Roman in origin, was removed by Lepsius from the great Meroitic religious centre at Messarawat es Sufra, south of Meroe, and taken to Berlin where it was destroyed during the Second World War. However, his paper squeeze has been preserved. The inscription commemorates a visit to Rome by an emissary from the queen of Meroe with a scarcely legible Latin name.<sup>1</sup> The only comparable record of a mission in the opposite direction is the graffito left by one Klados, 'ambassador to Ethiopia', in the tomb of Ramses V at Thebes.

Most of these graffiti date from the late third century when Meroe's contacts with Rome seem to have been exceptionally close, possibly because of mutual concern about the safety of the frontier zone and of the Dodekaschoinos at a time when Blemmyan raids had reached their climax. There is no evidence of Roman official activity in the Dodekaschoinos after about the middle of the third century. From then on Meroe's fortunes were on the wane. But this decline was confined almost wholly to the southern parts of the kingdom. In the north, commercial relations with Roman Egypt flourished through the fourth and even more so during the fifth century as the rich finds from the royal cemetery at Ballana in Lower Nubia showed. These tombs, of Nubian kings, discovered by the late W. B. Emery and myself in 1931, contained some fine examples of the art of Alexandria (Plate II).

One reason for Meroe's economic decline, evident in the latest royal tombs at Meroe, may have been Rome's decreasing use of the Nile valley trade route to the far south, a laborious, costly and hazardous route as I have already pointed out. An attempt to exploit this route more profitably may have been one motive behind Nero's well-known exploring expedition to the southern Sudan which Seneca, Nero's tutor, describes.

<sup>1</sup> See F. Hintze's study of Lepsius' paper squeeze in *Kush*, 12 (1964), 296 ff. and pl. 56.

He interviewed the explorers, two centurions, on their return to Rome. The king of Meroe had provided them with an escort and with introductions to friendly tribes beyond his borders. It is clear enough that they reached the Sudd, that vast and restless mass of floating vegetation which spreads across the Albert Nile. They also heard of cataracts far to the south; the Beddan Rapids perhaps, the first cataract met with south of the junction of the Niles. Seneca maintains that geographical exploration was the object, a search for the sources of the Nile. But discovery could have been linked with hopes of commercial exploitation as was to happen so often in African history. This certainly seems a more likely combination of motives than Pliny's highly improbable, and geographically unjustifiable, suggestion that the expedition was a military reconnaissance because Nero was contemplating a war against 'Ethiopia' at the time.<sup>1</sup>

Whatever the immediate outcome of this journey may have been, a journey of discovery unequalled by Europeans until the nineteenth century, Rome was soon to open up an easier route to the resources of the southern Sudan; by way of the Red Sea and the kingdom of Aksum. This brings me to the final part of this lecture.

The *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, a report by a Roman trader or more probably a Roman trade official, provides the evidence for this alternative route to the Southern Sudan. It is now no longer to be dated to the late first century but to the early second or possibly even the third century, on Indian and Arabian grounds.<sup>2</sup> According to *The Periplus*, 'all the ivory from beyond the Nile', here the Blue Nile, came from Kueneion (or Sueneion), possibly Sennar. From there it was carried eastwards to Aksum, and thence by way of Coloe (Kohaito), on the eastern edge of the Abyssinian plateau, down through the passes to Adulis. It was a route more likely to have profited Aksum than Meroe. Its use marked a step, the first step perhaps, towards Aksum's domination over Meroe, finally achieved, as we know from two mid fourth-century inscriptions of the Aksumite king Ezana, when Aksum's armies swept across the grassy plain of the Butana and up and down the Nile valley, south to the Blue Nile junction,

<sup>1</sup> Seneca, *Nat. Qu.* 6, 8, 3-5; Pliny, *HN* 6, 181-5.

<sup>2</sup> Gervase Mathew, 'The dating and the significance of the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*', in *East Africa and the Orient* (ed. H. N. Chittick and R. I. Rotberg), 147 ff. Africana Publishing Company, New York, 1975.

north to the Fourth, possibly the Third Cataract, in a savage campaign of systematic burning, pillage, and destruction.<sup>1</sup> The burnt shells of temples and other buildings on the latest levels at Meroe provide abundant confirmation of this.

I managed to visit Adulis in 1972, in between the curfews which had been clamped on Massawa and Asmara because of guerrilla activities. It is a most impressive site, 20 hectares in area and only marginally explored. Adulis is inaccessible now. In Roman times it traded with Egypt and Arabia, imported wine from Syria and Italy, iron and cotton from India, and exported ivory, tortoise shell, and rhinoceros horn. Its excavation, if that is ever possible, would add immensely to our knowledge of the ramifications of Rome's sea-borne trade.

*The Periplus* lists several other marts along this coast, south of Adulis, and east beyond the Bab el Mandeb, 'far-side' marts trading with Egypt, Arabia, and India, some exporting slaves and ivory and thus competing with the Nile Valley trade. Evidence of Roman activity has been found at two of them. G. Révoil, the French traveller who visited Haïs (Mosylum or possibly Mundus) late in the nineteenth century, dug up sherds from a red gloss *terra sigillata* bowl; 'poteries rouges vernies, communément appellées poteries de Samos'.<sup>2</sup> From his drawing and description they closely resemble Hayes's Qandarli ware, common in the first half of the second century. Révoil also found a large fragment of a ribbed blue glass bowl, of a type popular during the first century and found at Pompeii and, among other places, at Sir Mortimer Wheeler's celebrated site at Arikamedu, South India. One of the most important of these marts was Opone, Ras Hafūn, in the Horn of Africa, south of Cape Guardafui. According to *The Periplus* it had an expanding slave trade with Egypt. Roman sherds and fragments of amphorae handles have recently been found there by Neville Chittick's survey expedition from the British Institute in eastern Africa, working with Somali colleagues.<sup>3</sup>

Whether there were other ports, south of Opone, trading with Egypt, or possibly even a Roman trading settlement, an East African 'Arikamedu', was a question which much exercised

<sup>1</sup> L. P. Kirwan, 'An Ethiopian-Sudanese frontier zone in ancient history', in *Geogr. Jnl.* 138 (1972), 457 ff.

<sup>2</sup> G. Révoil, *La Vallée du Darror* (Paris, 1882), 290 and pl. 19. See J. W. Hayes, *Late Roman Pottery*, 318 and fig. 63b.

<sup>3</sup> H. N. Chittick, 'An archaeological reconnaissance in the Horn; the British Somali Expedition 1975', *Azania II* (1976), 121 and 118 fig. 1.

Sir Mortimer Wheeler. According to *The Periplus*, trade along this coast, the coast of 'Azania' stretching south to Tanzania, was chiefly in Arab hands, in the hands of middlemen, immigrants who remained subject to the south-west Arabian kingdom of Himyar. They spoke the local language and married African wives. But these men traded in Arab ships through Mocha, and not directly with Roman Egypt.

There were several voyagers of Greek or Graeco-Egyptian origin who landed on this Azanian coast, probably during the early Empire; Ptolemy's Diogenes who was blown off course by the north-east monsoon and landed and heard of (or maybe even saw) the snow-capped mountains of East Africa and the great lakes which fed the Nile; and Sarapion and Nikon who are commemorated in *The Periplus* as the first to navigate 'the courses of Azania'. Two hoards including Roman coins moreover have been found on this coast, one in the 1890s by a German engineer working on a sisal plantation near Tanga in northern Tanzania, one in 1912 by a Captain C. W. Haywood at Bur Gavo (Port Durnford), in southern Somalia. But both hoards contained Islamic coins ranging in date from the eighth to the eighteenth century.<sup>1</sup> They must have been buried long after Roman times.

Sir Mortimer Wheeler, naturally, was not at all discouraged by this inescapable conclusion. 'There can be no doubt', he declared, 'that fully authentic deposits of the kind await discovery.' He may well turn out to be right, as he so often was. Meanwhile, the case is not proven. That being so, Ras Hafūn (like the Sudd in the southern Sudan) is as far south as one can go in this pursuit of Rome beyond the southern Egyptian frontier.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See H. N. Chittick, 'Six early coins from near Tanga', in *Azania I* (1966), 156 ff. And H. Mattingly, 'Coins from a site find in British East Africa', in *Numismatic Chronicle*, 42 (1932), 175.

<sup>2</sup> *Rome Beyond the Imperial Frontiers* (Harmondsworth, 1955), 140.

*Acknowledgements.* I am indebted for permission to reproduce illustrations as follows: Messrs. Thames & Hudson: Plates I, IIIb, IVa and b from their publication *Meroe* by P. L. Shinnie (1967); Messrs. Methuen: Plate II from their publication *Nubian Treasure* by Walter B. Emery (1948); Madam M. Schiff-Giorgini: Plate IIIa.