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Pioneers of Sudanese Nubia

Even before Egyptology was born it was indebted to a few pioneers who, following the Nile to south Egypt, discovered most of the major antiquities sites of Nubia and North Sudan. Moted by greed and fame to be the first Europeans to describe the unknown land of Kush and write its history from original sources, they opened the doors to a new world that remains today one of the most fascinating places on earth to do archaeology.

Beginning in 1820, the military expedition to Sudan led by Ismail Pasha created an opportunity to safely investigate the Nubian territory. Among the first foreigners to make a stop in Soleb was an American officer named George Bethune English who made a description of the ruins, its architecture and hieroglyphic inscriptions. But his story was almost immediately forgotten, overshadowed by the major publication in 1826 of Frederic Cailliaud’s travel to Sudan, which is now often seen as the “first” archaeological description of the site. As indicated by a graffito left by Pierre Constant Letorzer, he and Cailliaud arrived in Soleb in January, 1821. Spending three days working on the site, measuring the temple, copying inscriptions and reliefs, Cailliaud also delivered an epic story of their camp including being threatened at night by hippos and enduring the howl of hyenas.

View of the Soleb temple with a hippopotamus
2. منظر من معبد صولب ويوجد به فرس النهر
In 1826, a second trip to Nubia brought Linant de Bellefonds to Soleb where he completed some drawings and noted the quick degradation of the temple. Most dramatically a column had fallen down since his first visit.

In 1829, Lord Prudhoe and Major Felix visited Soleb. They made thorough copies of some of the inscriptions, including the list of prisoners from the hypostyle hall. With gentle diplomacy, they sent a copy to J.-F. Champollion, who already knew from documents received from Cailliaud years before that the temple belonged to the Eighteenth Dynasty. Jean-François Champollion could now ascertain it was built under the reign of Amenhotep III.

Nineteenth century visitors

On January 22, 1821, George Waddington and Barnard Hanbury, two Englishmen, inspired to go to Nubia after reading Burckhardt’s account, arrived in Soleb quite irritated to have been preceded by two weeks by the French Cailliaud and Letorzec. But because the report of their expedition was promptly published in 1822, while Cailliaud’s book was not out until 1826, they were the first to offer a general audience an extensive description of the temple and the remains of Soleb.

On his way back to Egypt after having failed to reach the oasis of Selima, Cailliaud made a second stop in Soleb where he met with Louis Maurice Adolphe Linant de Bellefonds. Despite the famous rivalry between the two Frenchmen in their quests to discover Meroe and other prestigious sites lost in Sudan, they had dinner together that night on the site. Cailliaud, who couldn’t bear the fact that Linant de Bellefonds was working for the rich English gentleman-traveller William John Bankes, was at the same time eager to see the exceptional documentation gathered by Linant de Bellefonds and particularly his skilled drawings. Unfortunately, most of it was never published, either by Linant de Bellefonds or by Bankes who had to leave his collection behind in England and flee for exile in Venice.
Nineteenth century visitors

Earning a reputation in the erudite circles of Europe, Soleb became a must-see for every new traveller crossing the second cataract of the Nile and venturing deep into Nubia. One in particular, John Gardner Wilkinson, visited the site several times, first meeting with Prudence and Felix to copy some of their notes and sketches then completing the documentation on the spot. He was the first scholar to enter the temple with a good knowledge of hieroglyphic epigraphy and, as such, the first able to "read" the site and point out many of its mysteries.

After 1830, other travellers reached Soleb, among whom were the French Edmond de Cadélavèn and Jules Xavier Saguez de Breuvety, the British George Alexander Hoskins and Arthur Todd Holroyd, the Swiss painter Charles-Gabriel Gleyre, and the renowned prince Alexander Hoskins and Arthur Todd Holroyd, the Swiss painter Charles-Gabriel Gleyre, and the renowned prince

First photography of Soleb

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the dark chamber photographic camera was, for the first time, introduced in Sudanese Nuba. Francis Frith, an English explorer who travelled in Egypt, Nubia and Palestine was, in 1857, the first to take a picture of Soleb. But the new Visitors who followed did not contribute to the understanding of the site, most of them repeating and proliferating mistakes incurred decades ago. Reported by Colonel William Francis Butler in a book illustrated by his wife, the British Khartoum relief military expedition of 1884–1885 insisted on the near isolation of the site with no modern constructions permitted in the temple, contrary to common practice in Egypt. A camp was set up in Soleb, but, as if in a campaign, many soldiers left their names on the walls of the temple, among which Tap, Hill, Lloyd, Black, Bedson and Olsen are still visible on the pylon and some columns.

Early in the twentieth century, Ernest Alfred Thomson Wallis Budge published new photos from Soleb, taken by John Winter Crowfoot during his inspection of Sudanese antiquities. But it was in 1907, when the American James Henry Breasted came to Soleb, that the first real photographic coverage of the site was completed with dozens of pictures now in the collections of the Oriental Institute of Chicago.

5. The first picture of Soleb taken by Francis Frith
First archaeological mission
During the first half of the twentieth century, Soleb remained one of the renowned temples of Nubia, but welcomed only rare visitors. As it became easier to travel in Egypt, costly and long-term expeditions to enter the Middle Nile valley were not often launched. Soleb, though appearing in a number of publications discussing the reign of Amenhotep III, or the question of the Heb-Sed festival, paradoxically became a forgotten gem of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan.

After independence, the first archaeological mission to explore the region finally arrived, starting work on the temple on November 4, 1957. Led by Michela Schiff Giorgini, its first task was to disentangle the truth from all the sources gathered by travellers in order to build an accurate plan of the edifice. The first months in the field were also dedicated to logistics with the inauguration of construction of a dig house with storage facilities and the protection of the site by relocating the road between the nearby villages that originally went through the site and the dromos. After a general cleaning of the temple and the exploration of the surrounding areas, the first season ended on February 2, 1958, after the New Kingdom necropolis had been discovered.

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Michela Schiff Giorgini

Michela Beomonte, an Italian born in Padua on October 30, 1923, did classical studies in her early life before turning to arts and music. Becoming Michela Schiff Giorgini after marrying a rich banker in 1946, she first enjoyed worldly life in Paris before traveling around the world, admiring ancient cultures and seeking historical sites.

Falling in love with Ancient Egypt and particularly the architecture of the New Kingdom period marked by the remarkable reign of Amenhotep III, she went there several times, meeting with scientists and dreaming of being involved in some fieldwork.

With the financial support of her husband and the institutional recognition of Pisa University, she organized and led the archaeological mission to Soleb where, from 1957 to 1977, she spent up to six months per year dedicating her time and energy to the construction and the study of one of the most beautiful Egyptian temples of Nubia.

Frequently presenting the results of her researches through articles written both in French and Italian, a first volume dedicated to the temple’s earliest visitors (Soleb I) was published in 1962. In 1971, a second volume came out, but in 1978, while preparing the core part of the temple study, she suddenly died in Spain from meningitis and volumes III, IV and V, edited by Nathalie Beaux, would not be published until 1998, 2002 and 2003. In 2013, a final volume of homage (Soleb VI) was edited by Nathalie Beaux and Nicola Grimal, closing the series. Seen as a model of commitment, the spirit of her work at Soleb was carried on by the Giorgini Foundation, established to support Egyptologists around the world in their research and publication projects.

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From Soleb...

From the beginning, the work at Soleb was divided between study, restoration and survey. While the first pylon of the temple was being consolidated, the team installed a lifting system allowing a closer look at the texts and decoration of the walls. Loose architectural blocks were removed from the temple, described and organized on the floor to facilitate a possible reconstruction. To find the original location of hundreds of these decorated fragments, the team needed to understand all the different construction phases of the building, and continued with a number of test excavations inside and outside the temple. Extending the plan of the site, they also explored the relation between the main construction and its immediate environment including a system of docks, basins, alleys and fortifications.

While foundations were carefully studied, previous occupations of the site were also documented through burial grounds with the excavation of a few graves from the Bronze Age. Later phases are recorded too, in particular, remains of the Meroitic period. Surveys in the nearby desert led to other discoveries, among which were a royal game reserve, an antique track between Soleb and the temple of Sezib, a petrified wood forest and some rock art in the vicinity of the Gorgod mountains.

The archaeological team

With little experience in archaeological fieldwork, Giorgini built a team of skilled scientists ready to accompany her for many seasons in Nubia. First in line was Clement Robichon, Architect-Archaeologist and Director of Research at the CNRS, who spent several years working on Amenhotep III edifices in Egypt with the IFAO. Second was Jozef Janssen, professor at Amsterdam University and epigraphist. In 1960, his work was taken over by Jean Leclant, professor of Egyptology at the Sorbonne University. The latter became an important asset for the team as, for decades, he led the rise of Nubian Studies in Europe and opened the work of the mission to a broader scale, including Kushite archaeology.

In 1964, the mission was reinforced by the arrival of Denise Girardin as a secretary. During the twenty years of fieldwork at Soleb, many colleagues and visitors brought their support and expertise to the team, such as the Egyptologist Jean Vercoutter, the historian Giovanni Vantini and the photographer Ugo Reitano.
The Tiyi temple at Sedeinga

Because of its proximity to the majestic temple of Soleb, little attention has been paid over time to the sanctuary of Tiyi at Sedeinga, the most recent plan available dating back to Lepsius in the mid-nineteenth century. From what appeared to be a mountain of scattered blocks mostly upside down, only one column still stood in the twentieth century. Crowned with a typical Hathoric capital, the column was poorly preserved and the first task of the team that arrived in 1963 was to consolidate its base. A short section of a wall near the column was also reinforced, marking the original level of the floor and pointing at the huge deflation of the surrounding site. During this first assessment, two hundred thirty-three blocks were identified in the ruins, which included a monumental fragment of a lintel depicting Tiyi as a sphinx wearing a flat-topped headdress. Most of the relief decoration is related to the figure of Amenhotep III, clearly establishing a link with the main temple at Soleb.
Jean Leclant

If Giorgini was the heart of the mission with her passionate temper and true love for fieldwork in Nubia, Jean Leclant was a visionary who early on understood the importance of conducting research in the regions to the south of Egypt, places such as Soleb and Sedeinga. With his insatiable curiosity for ancient history and geography, he was perfectly suited to explore the world of Ancient Egypt and advance Nubian studies. Trained as a philologist, he never underestimated the complementary aspects of archaeology and was always willing to participate in fieldwork. From Egypt to Ethiopia, the young scholar led along the singular path that would take him to the summit of the French academic system. During his long and fruitful career as a professor, he initiated a real dynamic around Meroitic studies, continuing the work at Sedeinga after the death of Giorgini. The scientific production he left behind is a priceless source of inspiration for scholars, and a genuine contribution to the history of Sudan.

The West Cemetery at Sedeinga

During the first archaeological survey carried out in 1963, several burial areas were located at Sedeinga. One of them, lying about five hundred meters to the west of the temple, was the first to be investigated. Beyond what was a vast Napatan and Meroitic necropolis, this small group of only nine graves was undoubtedly reserved for the local elite. The discovery of pyramidal funerary monuments led the team to be convinced that the small hillock would contain the remains of the Egyptians priests' graves. But surface findings were soon to prove them wrong, as they turned out to be mostly from the Kushite period.

The quality of the material recovered, particularly some beautifully carved Meroitic inscriptions and well-decorated blocks from chapels, encouraged the team to continue the dig. Though in their reports it is apparent they didn't properly understand the chronological sequence of the site, the discovery of remarkable grave deposits in the chambers shed light on the extraordinary potential for funerary studies at Sedeinga to the point that the work on the Egyptian temple became secondary.

Jean Leclant

إن كانت جورجيني أساس البعثة بشخصيتها المتحمسة ومنها الطبيعة للعمل الباطني بالنوبة، لكان جان ليكلان شخصاً رؤياً حيث أدرك من البداية أهمية البحث في المناطق التي تقع في المنطقة ما بعد مصر، مثل صولب وصايدنقا ولم تنتهِ قصته إلى أن يستطع التاريخ القديم وإغرافياً مكانة من أبرز الأشخاص في مجال استكشاف حضارة مصر القديمة وفي تقدم الدراسات النوبية. وقد رسم علم اللغة لكنه لم يفقد من قيمة علم الآثار حيث كان موقع أسدى للاشتراك في العمل الميداني على البوابة، ومن مصر إلى الحبشة قد أتخذ العالم الشاب السبيل الوحيد الذي كان سيقوده إلى فقه الآثار المصرية. إبان حياته العملية الطويلة كأستاذ، بدأ بجامعة في الدراسات النوبية واستمر في العمل بصانعة بعد موت جورجيني نارك صاحب علمها عظيماً كان قد في يدنا إلا إلى الباحثين لا يقدر بثمن كما ساهم عمله في تاريخ السودان.

Jean Leclant

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The archaeology of Soleb

Soleb is primarily known for its temple built during the reign of Amenhotep III and named Khuenmaat in ancient Egyptian literature. It is considered to be one of the major expressions of the Egyptian presence in Nubia at the time the region was being integrated into the Egyptian kingdom. Throughout the Eighteenth Dynasty, Soleb was the town from which Kush, one of the two regions composing the Nubian province placed under the authority of a Viceroy of Nubia, the ‘King’s Son of Kush’, was governed. The area was of huge economic value, providing gold as well as access to other goods such as ivory, ebony and incense that were found further south.

The New Kingdom necropolis located a few hundred meters west of the temple accommodated priests, governors and the rich elite who took part in the greatness of Soleb.

Before the Egyptian conquest, Neolithic and Kerma peoples left traces of their activity. Kerma graves have subsequently been unearthed by archaeologists. After the fall of the Egyptian New Kingdom, it appears that the temple had been partially destroyed by a major flood. In all likelihood, it was a similar event that caused significant damage to the Sedeinga temple.

Meroitic people continued to live at Soleb, the front room of the New Kingdom temple becoming a small sanctuary. These individuals were buried in a nearby cemetery. Some Arabic glass vessels that were found within the sakieh dug in the second court of the temple testify that Soleb was occupied at least until the Medieval period.

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12. Soleb temple
Amenhotep III

Amenhotep III (c. 1387-1348 BC) was the ninth king of the Egyptian Eighteenth Dynasty, the son of Thutmose IV and Mutemwiya. He was crowned, while still a child, upon Thutmose IV’s death. He inherited from his predecessors a kingdom stretching from northern Syria to the third Cataract in Sudan. Egypt was wealthy, peaceful and more powerful than during his thirty-eight year reign, Amenhotep III employed his army only once, in Nubia, against rebellious tribes in order to preserve the borders left by his ancestors. Benefiting from his country’s prosperity, this pharaoh enlarged the temple of Karnak, built the temple of Luxor, and erected the colossi of Memnon as well as many other buildings in Egypt and beyond, such as Soleb and Sedeinga in Nubia. Amenhotep III’s reign was also marked by an extraordinary level of artistic production, evidenced by numerous statues, reliefs and other items. Decorations display different styles, showing an evolution throughout his reign from the conservative representation inherited from Thutmose IV to a more naturalistic rendering of human form and, at the end of his life, emphasizing portraits depicting a much younger pharaoh than previously. In the last years of Amenhotep III’s reign, the pharaoh was assimilated with the sun god. This probably influenced the son he had with Queen Tiyi who took the name of Akhenaten and established the worship of Aten in the aspect of a sun disk during the Amarna period.

13. Amenhotep III and Tiyi

14. Statue of Amenhotep III

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Soleb temple

One of the architects of the temple of Soleb was most probably Amenhotep son of Hapu, who is shown repeating the Pharaoh’s gestures during the Sed-Festival depicted in the first courtyard. The temple was built with sandstone from nearby quarries and its plan conforms to the Egyptian tradition with a peristyle court and a hypostyle hall leading to the sanctuaries. But, as in several other temples in Egypt, there is a second peristyle court. Another exterior pylon was added in front of the dromos leading to the sacred area. This was the gate by which one entered the temple, at the time surrounded by a great enclosure wall. The temple was dedicated to the cult of Amun-Re residing in Soleb and to the deified image of Amenhotep III, Nebmaatre Lord of Nubia who bears the throne name of the pharaoh. Subsequently, the succeeding pharaoh Akhenaten changed the dedication to suit his own beliefs and the temple was briefly devoted to the cult of Aten before the restoration of the worship of Amun by Tutankhamun.

سولب

ظهر المهندس المعماري أمنحتب بن حابو وهو

يكاد إلا أن أهداف الفنون تمثل عبد الفتاح الرسم في أول

فناء وغالبًا كان هو أحدهم المدعى عادة للعب في

 Souls وتم تشييد المعبد بالحجر الرملي القادم من

الأجر الفرعونية وكان تصميمه مختلفًا مع التموح

الضري مثل وجود بهو الأمامية والهيبيستيل

الذي يشير إليه الفناء安全事故 وهو地區 أخرى خلصت

كان في بعض المعابد المصرية. تم إضافة جدار

خارجية آخر أمام طريق الدهليز الرئيسي إلى المدخل

وكان هذا هو الدخلي الرئيسي المعبد. والذين كان

محاطًا بصمتية جدارية. وقد كرّس المعبد لعبادة

الانعمز أبوه الفوضى بصمتية كما شيد للعب

خلالًا للصورة الإلهية لامتحب الثالث المعبد.

15. Plan of the Soleb Temple

15. خريطة معبد صولب
From the Nile to the sanctuary

Close to the Soleb temple, along the Nile, docks allowed boats coming from Egypt to anchor although sailing in the region was difficult due to the presence of rocky areas known as cata-raacts. Travelers to Nubia could choose to journey by caravan, following trails in the desert.

From the river to the temple, a short path led to the Exterior Pylon marking the entrance to the sacred area. This access to the temple was probably guarded by a pair of lions whose heads were turned towards visitors. As they were removed to Gebel Barkal, their original location is not known. Only one refers to Amenhotep III, the second being inscribed with the names of Tutankhamun, his successor Ay and later the Meroitic king Amanislo. In the early nineteenth century, Lord Prudhoe removed the lions from Gebel Barkal and brought them to England. In 1835, he offered them to the British Museum. This is why these lions are also known as the “Prudhoe lions”.

After passing between the lions, visitors had then to follow the processional avenue (dromos) preceding the Great Pylon. It was originally lined with forty-four ram-headed granite sphinxes symbolizing the god Amun-Re of Karnak. A small mumiform statue of the king was placed between each sphinx’s paws. It is in the form of the moon god Nebmaatre as confirmed by inscriptions on the bases. Only two fragmentary statues are still visible today on the site. At least six were moved further south to the Amun temple at Gebel Barkal, perhaps by Piankhy, a Kushite king who ruled Egypt and founded the Twenty-fifth Dynasty. One of them was removed by Lepsius and is now exhibited in the Egyptian Museum of Berlin.

16. Prudhoe’s lion
17. Ram statue from the dromos of the Soleb Temple

17. مثال الكبش من دهليز معبد صولب
16. أسد برودو
Past the Great Pylon at the Soleb temple, the walls of the first courtyard display scenes of the Sed-Festival. The Sed-Festival, or jubilee, was intended to renew the king’s royal powers and to reaffirm his divine nature. This ceremony goes back to the first kings of Egypt and was normally celebrated during the thirtieth year of a reign. Three Sed-Festivals were celebrated during Amenhotep III’s reign, in his thirtieth, thirty-fourth and thirty-seventh regnal years. Scenes related to his first jubilee are depicted on the four internal faces of the first courtyard of the temple of Soleb. They illustrate the different rituals performed by the king, processions, and offerings. The most extensive scenes are preserved on the northern wall and on the reverse of the pylon. A sign representing the sky is placed over each panel, while the lower part of the wall features aquatic motives.

The ritual of “striking the doors” is particularly well illustrated on six rows framed by a crenellated enclosure wall symbolizing the wall surrounding the temple. The pharaoh is standing alone, wearing a Khepresh crown and a loincloth, acting as the divine heir of Amun. He is holding a stick in his left hand and the ceremonial Hedj-mace in his right hand. The mace is either held horizontally or strikes the doors in front of him.

On the other side of some of the doors, the royal scribe, Amenhotep son of Hapu, repeats the same gesture. In two scenes, the pharaoh is escorted by Wepwawet, whose name means “the one who opens the ways”, depicted as a wolf or a jackal. Several dignitaries follow in a procession. The pharaoh must pass at least fifteen doors to complete the ritual. Inscriptions at the top of each scene count the number of gates.
19. Soleb Temple
The hypostyle hall

While the second courtyard has been totally destroyed, the hypostyle hall is well preserved and most of the twenty-four columns that were erected still conserve their decoration. As in the first courtyard, columns served as bases for the architraves that supported the roof. On the columns can be seen friezes of foreign captives, kneeling, their arms bound behind their backs, whose names are inscribed in a crenellated cartouche. They represent all the peoples who were subjects of Egypt. Their faces show distinctive traits: details such as a beard, a hairstyle or jewels being representative of various ethnic groups. They are arranged according to a geographical order: to the north, the towns and tribes of Asia, to the south those of Nubia. Though many names like Qadesh and Naharina, are well-known from historical records, many remain unknown.

First and second courtyards

The first courtyard of the Soleb temple was lined with thirty papyrusiform columns supporting an abacus, above which was put an architrave that supported the slabs composing the roof. The only architrave still in situ links the western gate to a column. It is inscribed on three faces, each one showing a different part of the royal titulary. The interior face, visible from underneath, depicts a cartouche containing the throne name of Amenhotep III, Nebmaatre, preceded by two hieroglyphs, a sedge and a bee, symbol of kingship in Upper and Lower Egypt. This name was given to Amenhotep III when he succeeded his father as pharaoh. The northern part of the gate leading to the second courtyard is decorated with various scenes showing Amenhotep III facing the god Aman, offering incense to his divine image and, at the top, the god Nebmaatre, shown with the ram's horn of Aman curling around his ear and crowned with a moon crescent and a moon disk, embracing the pharaoh.

20. Column of the Soleb Temple

20. عمود معبد صولب

21. Architrave with the cartouche Neb-Maat-Re of Amenhotep III

21. رباط الأعمدة بخرطوش نب معات رد امنحتب الثالث

22. Prisoner from the city of Qadesh

22. أسير من مدينة قديش
The New Kingdom necropolis at Soleb

The New Kingdom necropolis is located eight hundred meters west of the Soleb temple. Forty-seven graves were excavated by the team led by Giorgini. The cemetery contained the burials of the elite of Soleb whose titles, sometimes mentioned on funerary inscriptions found on the surface of the graves, refer to religious or civil duties associated with the temple, the town and even with the pharaoh himself. Tombs were composed of two parts, a superstructure and a substructure. First was the monument, which included a pyramid preceded by a chapel, sometimes with an enclosure wall. Second was the funerary chamber, dug into the bedrock, consisting of one or two rooms. All the graves were heavily plundered during Antiquity, some of them even reused during the Meroitic period. Nevertheless, they still contain an important part of the funerary deposit. Most of the graves were collective structures where the dead were generally laid in an extended position, head facing West.

Their bodies were wrapped in strips, reproducing a ritual resembling traditional Egyptian mummification. Some were buried directly in the ground, others in wooden coffins with an anthropomorphic lid and more rarely in a stone sarcophagus. Funerary goods consist of ornaments made of faience, carnelian and ivory, objects from daily life such as needles and boxes, bronze mirrors, and ceramics. A few of the deceased were accompanied by shawabti, small figurines often made of faience, intended to serve them in the afterlife.

23. Plan of a New Kingdom grave at Soleb

24. Lid from a New Kingdom sarcophagus being removed from a grave

25. New Kingdom ceramic representing a sitting monkey

The New Kingdom necropolis at Soleb

The New Kingdom necropolis is located eight hundred meters west of the Soleb temple. Forty-seven graves were excavated by the team led by Giorgini. The cemetery contained the burials of the elite of Soleb whose titles, sometimes mentioned on funerary inscriptions found on the surface of the graves, refer to religious or civil duties associated with the temple, the town and even with the pharaoh himself. Tombs were composed of two parts, a superstructure and a substructure. First was the monument, which included a pyramid preceded by a chapel, sometimes with an enclosure wall. Second was the funerary chamber, dug into the bedrock, consisting of one or two rooms. All the graves were heavily plundered during Antiquity, some of them even reused during the Meroitic period. Nevertheless, they still contain an important part of the funerary deposit. Most of the graves were collective structures where the dead were generally laid in an extended position, head facing West.

Their bodies were wrapped in strips, reproducing a ritual resembling traditional Egyptian mummification. Some were buried directly in the ground, others in wooden coffins with an anthropomorphic lid and more rarely in a stone sarcophagus. Funerary goods consist of ornaments made of faience, carnelian and ivory, objects from daily life such as needles and boxes, bronze mirrors, and ceramics. A few of the deceased were accompanied by shawabti, small figurines often made of faience, intended to serve them in the afterlife.
The Meroitic necropolis at Soleb

Located four hundred meters to the west of the temple, a wide Meroitic necropolis containing about six hundred graves has been investigated by archaeologists. They excavated one hundred two tombs, very similar to those found at Sedeinga. Only one grave was covered with a pyramid superstructure, the base of which was made of schist blocks. There were two different kinds of graves: a vertical shaft leading to a lateral niche chamber, and a sloping descendery giving access to an axial chamber. After the deceased was placed in the funerary chamber, the grave was sealed with a wall built of mud bricks or black schist slabs, and the shaft or the descendery filled with sand. Graves could be individual or collective, the deceased generally placed in an extended position, head facing West. Funerary goods such as pottery and personal ornaments were often placed next to the deceased.

Burials

The New Kingdom necropolis was established on a terrace where some thirty-two older graves were dug. First called "primitive burials", these tombs consisted of a simple pit dug into the bedrock. They were ovoid, rounded or rectangular in shape, mainly oriented east-west. All of them were individual burials, the deceased being placed in a crouched position, lying on their side, head facing East. Their bodies were wrapped in a shroud, in a mat tied with ropes, or in skins soaked in a bath of red ochre. Funerary goods were scarce. Only a few gazelles' horns, necklaces made with carnelian or shell beads, and pottery were found, typical of the Kerma period. As observed at Sai Island, the Kerma population occupied the region prior to the Egyptians and continued to live under their domination.

26. Kerma burial at Soleb

The Meroitic necropolis at Soleb

27. Leather ornament from a Meroitic burial at Soleb
Sedeinga: a new start

Over the last decades, excavations have been conducted at Sedeinga under the direction of Jean Leclant, Audran Labrousse and Catherine Berger, extending the work done by the first mission originating from Soleb and providing us with large series of Kushite funerary artefacts. In 2009, while work in the field had stopped, a new project was launched by Claude Rilly and Vincent Francigny resuming the study on the nécropoles and exploring the surrounding areas. Likewise, a program to collect, digitize and publish the archives was initiated.

One of the first tasks was to create an accurate topographical map of the site using a new grid system, while a complete aerial photographic coverage of the site was also executed. In the Sector II, where large sections of the cemetery were left untouched, an excavation area contiguous with the latest dig conducted by the former team was chosen; a choice also motivated by the high potential for the discovery of new Meroitic texts, as proven in the past.

Nowadays, Sedeinga hosts the largest Kushite burial area of the region since the main Meroitic cemeteries from Lower Nubia have been flooded by the Aswan Lake. Due to its size, many areas have not yet been investigated, which is one of the reasons why a survey took place during the first years of the project in order to map all the other archaeological remains showing, for example, the early occupation of the site during the pre- and proto-historic periods.

While an ambitious project supported by the QSAP currently plans the complete dismantling of the New Kingdom Tiyi temple ruin and the study of its architecture and inscriptions, a lot more needs to be done in the future to fully reveal the long and complex history of this unique site on the West bank of the Nile.

Ample time was given to each of the sectors, and this was the reason why a new grid system was used for the site's survey, allowing a better understanding of the site's layout and its evolution over time. In the Sector II, an area contiguous with the latest dig conducted by the former team was chosen; this was also motivated by the potential for discovering new Meroitic texts, as proven in the past.

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Queen Tiyi was the daughter of Youia and Touia, courtiers who were charged with many royal duties and involved in many religious cults. They were even buried in the Valley of the Kings. This distinct high privilege might be due to the fact that they were related to the royal family via Mutemwiya, Amenhotep III’s mother, and surely because they married their daughter to a magnanimous pharaoh. Tiyi became Amenhotep III’s wife before his accession to the throne when she was still a very young girl. She was the Great Royal Wife and mother of Amenhotep IV, the succeeding pharaoh. Documentation is missing concerning her life but she is considered as the king’s confidant and political adviser so she would have wielded a great deal of power at court. At Amenhotep III’s death, she continued to play an important role, as she is mentioned in letters sent by foreign rulers to the new pharaoh.

Tiyi often appears at Amenhotep III’s side on reliefs and statues and, a privilege rarely granted to a queen in Egypt, has a temple dedicated to herself at Sedeinga. She also assumed the role of the pharaoh’s divine consort in the royal iconography, being identified with Hathor.

When she died, Akhenaten buried her in his own grave at Amarna instead of Amenhotep III’s tomb in the Western Valley. Later, her mummy joined her husband in Amenhotep II’s grave in the Valley of the Kings where other royal mummies were hidden. The mummy cache was discovered in 1898, but the body of Tiyi, then named the “Elder Lady”, was only definitely identified in 2010 by means of DNA analysis.
The temple, dedicated to Queen Tiyi, is the source of one of the modern names of the region, Adaya, which derives from the Meroitic Atiya, itself coming from the Egyptian Hut-Tiyi meaning the “House (Temple) of Tiyi”. Sedeinga was the first example of a temple dedicated to a pharaoh’s wife. Later, Ramses II would use this model for his construction of a temple dedicated to his wife, Nefertari, at Abu Simbel.

Of the temple of Queen Tiyi at Sedeinga nothing remains apart from a unique column with a hathoric capital dominating a heap of sandstone blocks. Lepsius provided us with a plan of the building featuring a colonnade leading to a courtyard and a hypostyle hall. According to him, the unique standing column was placed at the northern edge at the corner of the hypostyle hall. But the column itself provides no proof that this assumption by Lepsius is correct. Though the complete history of the temple remains unclear, it is known that it was founded during the New Kingdom and was used until Napatan times when a massive flood seems to have destroyed it as was the case at Soleb.

The temple is clearly connected to Soleb and was actually built at the same time. Both temples belong to an architectural program in which they had a complementary role. While the divine image of Amenhotep III at Soleb, Nebmaatre Lord of Nubia, was shown as a moon god, Tiyi was depicted as a sphinx and likened to the Solar eye of Re or Tefnut who, according to Egyptian myths, left Egypt in a rage to enter Nubia. Tiyi was also worshiped as a form of the goddess Hathor, the pharaoh’s wife and divine counterpart. Broken statues of the queen were found in the ruins of the temple.
Taharqa

The pharaoh Taharqa, who ruled Egypt and Nubia during the Twenty-fifth Dynasty, probably restored and enlarged the New Kingdom temple, as he did for many temples in Egypt and in Sudan. The reused column drums found in the church at Nilwa might have come from a colonnade or a chapel he erected. A series of decorated blocks in the West Cemetery show Taharqa himself wearing a red crown and holding a staff. His cartouche, partly preserved, confirms that the blocks were once part of such a building. This discovery first led to the hypothesis that Taharqa was buried at Sedeinga instead of in his pyramid at Nuri. However, though no bones were found in his grave at Nuri, funerary material and particularly a series of shawabti discovered there clearly indicate that the funeral took place.

Amenhotep III at Sedeinga

Though the temple was dedicated to Tiyi, Amenhotep III was also present. He is shown receiving life from Isis in a relief described by Lepsius, and offering incense to Amun and to his divine image on a stele found in a Meroitic grave. A recently discovered panel from the temple, reused as a Meroitic funerary bed, shows his cartouche behind a representation of the god Amun. Some of these blocks bear traces both of hammering dating from the reign of Akhenaten and of their later restoration.

36. Facsimile with the figure of Amun. Relief from the Tiyi temple reused in a Meroitic grave (image inverted).

35. Fragments of a stele figuring Amenhotep III and the god Amun.

37. Two blocks from the Tiyi temple representing Taharqa.
The archaeological site of Sedeinga

Though the archaeological area named Sedeinga is far from being completely surveyed, the spatial organization of the site and its chronological frame are well known, thanks to the combined work of the French mission supported by the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums (NCAM), the French Foreign Affairs Ministry, the Sorbonne University and the villagers of Qubbet Selim and Nilwa.

To the east, closer to the Nile and agriculture fields, are the remains of the temple of Tiyi. It seems that the temple was extended during the Twenty-fifth Dynasty by Taharqa, and it is possible that what was left of it was of the Meriotic period became a sanctuary dedicated to the goddess Isis. To the south, at the entrance of Nilwa, medieval buildings with stone and mud brick architecture are still visible near the remains of a church, whose columns were taken from the temple at a later date.

In the middle of the site, divided in three sectors by two main wadis, a vast burial ground has developed over centuries. While Sectors I and II contain the remains of hundreds of pyramidal tombs from the Kushite period, Sector III seems to have been used during the medieval period. To the west of this Sector III, a cemetery dating from the Napatan period presents modest graves that contrast with the noticeable wealth of the population buried in Sector I and II. To the west of the site is an isolated group of tombs, contemporaneous with Sector I and II, but apparently reserved for the burial of the local elite.

Among the missing pieces of the puzzle are the locations of the antique town and the New kingdom necropolis...
Funerary monuments at Sedeinga

On the east side of every funerary pyramid, i.e., the face receiving the light of the holy rising sun, there was a chapel dedicated to the cult of the dead. In the case of small provincial monuments, however, it was often a symbolic addition made of mud bricks and too small to host any ritual. Possibly, it was there that the stele was placed with some other liturgical material. Sometimes a door was added and the passage reinforced with a lintel, a threshold and two doorjambs. The latter could be decorated with the representation of deities pouring a libation for the dead, generally Isis or Nephtys on the left, facing Anubis on the right.

Near the chapel, or maybe above it, was the *Ba*-statue, represented by a bird with anthropomorphic characters. Adapted from the Egyptian symbol of the winged soul leaving the dead body, it is a typical example of religious syncretism in a society constantly reinventing its traditions.

39. Tombs, quarries and funerary pyramids in Sector II

Kushite necropolis

In Sector I and II of the necropolis at Sedeinga, tombs are marked by pyramidal monuments organized in clusters probably corresponding to families or clans. Around the first edifices, usually built at the center of a small hillock, satellite pyramids have slowly developed and occupied all the available space. Secondary burials as well as children's graves are also found around the monuments, creating, over the centuries, an impressive density of burials on relatively small surfaces.

Provincial notables had their pyramids built with mud bricks, while royal monuments generally used stones. By adopting this solar edifice, part of the Kushite population was following royal funerary customs, traditionally influenced by Egyptian culture. But as always with Napatan and Meroitic kingdoms, the monuments present a series of distinctive features such as an internal cupola and a variety of supporting walls.
Inside a Meroitic grave at Sedeinga

Graves were generally reused several times, if not originally planned to host more than one individual. Kushite people were often buried in a protective envelope such as a shroud or a wooden coffin. An extended position with the head placed to the West was common at Sedeinga, following a tradition of Egyptian origin. The dead were dressed, wearing necklaces, bracelets, rings and all kinds of ornaments corresponding to their wealth.

The funerary deposit accompanying the deceased in the grave was divided between objects used during the ceremony such as libation vases or food containers, and personal belongings that could not be used any longer in the living world.

At Sedeinga, as in most Kushite cemeteries of Nubia, graves were heavily plundered during Antiquity, leaving only two percent of the tombs intact when uncovered in modern times.

Cult of the dead

Funerary inscriptions play a key role in the decipherment of the Meroitic language as they represent an important part of the corpus at our disposal that increases every year. Sedeinga has provided us with a lot of these inscriptions so far, written not only on steles and offering tables, but also on lintels and even on one threshold. Though we cannot always translate the entire text as some vocabulary remains uncertain, most of the time it is possible to learn about the names of the deceased, their relatives, as well as their careers in the Meroitic administration. Usually starting with an invocation to Isis and Osiris, a set of classical benedictions such as “May he/she drink plentiful water, May he/she eat plentiful bread, May he/she be served a good meal” ends the text.

In front of the chapel, located on a small platform, the offering table was another important tool supposed to regenerate the deceased by receiving the liquid of the ritual libation.
Funerary deposits
At Sedeinga, in the West Cemetery, an important series of glass objects associated with Late Meroitic burials from the mid-third century AD was found in ancient Napatan vaults reused during Late Antiquity. Among them was a splendid pair of footed blue glasses with the Greek inscription: “Drink and you shall live”, accompanied by painted scenes of offerings to the god Osiris. Metallic vessels (copper alloy, lead, silver and gold) were usually associated with ceremonies such as the libation for the dead. They were placed into the grave as consecrated and magically charged items, often wrapped in fabric. Other religious objects were represented by bronze figurines of Osiris, as well as incense burners used during the funeral and smashed at the entrance of the grave.

Journey to the afterlife
When the funerary deposit is reduced to its minimum, it is often composed only of a ceramic water bottle and its cup. More than a simple reserve placed into the grave to nourish the dead, it should be seen as the deposit helping the regeneration and the transformation of the deceased, water being symbolically associated with the flood and the Osirian resurrection. Long-necked globular bottles, often found in the graves at Sedeinga, correspond to a regional Meroitic production that began around the beginning of our modern era.

During the Napatan period, children were often buried wearing necklaces and amulets, among which the most common were the figure of Isis lactans (Isis giving milk to the Horus child) and the representation of Bes, the protective god.

47. Blue glass from Sedeinga
48. Bronze figurine of Osiris
45. Meroitic ceramics from Sedeinga
46. Bes amulet
Rescue archaeology at Sedeinga

In 2012, during the construction of an asphalt road located 1.5 km west of the necropolis, an unusual isolated tomb was discovered. Dug on the east slope of a sandstone outcrop, the grave has no superstructure but presents a colossal descendary of seven meters deep with finely cut steps (most of them buried under the modern road).

The tomb consists of two chambers supported by square pillars, and a niche corresponding to the entrance of a third unfinished room. With royal architectural standards resembling some graves at Meroe and elements of dating pointing to the second century BC, the tomb was prepared for a high-ranking deceased whose relation with the central power remains unclear.

The discovery illustrates well the exceptional potential of the Soleb and Sedeinga region for future archaeological investigations, and points at the particular story of its people, torn between a powerful Egyptian neighbour and a remote royal power.
List of illustrations

1. Cover: Columns of the temple at Soleb 2005 (© Claude Iverné / Elnour)
2. View of the Tiyi temple with a hippopotamus (after Caillioud 1826, pl. XI)
3. View of Soleb by Louis Maurice Adolphe Linant de Bellefonds (after Usick 2002, p. 142 / Bankes XIV.C.4)
4. View of the Tiyi temple at Sedeinga (Lepsius 1849, Abh. I, Bl. 114)
5. The first picture of Soleb taken by Francis Frith (after Frith 1862, pl. 35)
6. Michela Schiff Giorgini (after Beaus and Grimal 2013, p. 4)
7. Josef Janssen copying inscriptions from the pylon (Soleb Mission, Pisa University Archives, 1958)
8. Workers at the Soleb Temple (Soleb Mission, Pisa University Archives 1961)
9. Restoration of a column at the Sedeinga Temple (Sedeinga Mission, Pisa University Archives 1964)
10. Workers at the Sedeinga West Cemetery (Sedeinga Mission, Pisa University Archives 1963)
11. Jean Leclant (Courtesy of Nicolas Grimal)
12. Soleb temple (© Francigny 2008)
13. Amenhotep III and Tiyi (Caioir Museum)
15. Plan of the Tiyi temple (Romain David after Giorgini 2013, p. 4)
16. Tuat fanum (le Veot, 2010, courtesy of the British Museum, EA 1)
17. Ram statue from the dromos of the Tiyi temple (Ägyptisches Museum & Papyrussammlung, Berlin 2762, 1997)
18. View of the Heb-Sed festival at Soleb (Lepsius 1849, Abh. III, Bl. 83)
19. Soleb Temple (© Francigny 2008)
20. Architrave with the cartouche Neb-Maat-Re of Amenhotep III (© Francigny 2012)
21. Column of the Soleb Temple (© Francigny 2008)
22. Prisoner from the city of Qadesh (© Francigny 2008)
23. Plan of a New Kingdom grave at Soleb (Soleb Mission 1957–1961)
24. Lid from a New Kingdom sarcophagus being removed from a grave (Soleb Mission 1957–1961)
25. New Kingdom ceramic representing a sitting monkey (© Francigny, Sudan National Museum 2007)
27. Leather ornament from a Meroitic coffin at Soleb (Soleb Mission 1965–1966)
28. Plan of Sedeinga (Sedeinga Mission 2009)
29. Aerial view of the Tiyi temple at Sedeinga (© B.N. Chagny, Sedeinga Mission 2012)
30. Queen Tiyi (Louvre Museum, E 25493, 2007)
31. Queen Tiyi (Ägyptisches Museum & Papyrussammlung, Berlin 21834, 2011)
32. Statue of Amenhotep III and the god Amun (Sedeinga Mission, undated)
33. Facsimile with the figure of Amun. Relief from the Tiyi temple reused in a Meroitic grave (© Francigny, Sedeinga Mission 2012)
34. Two blocks from the Tiyi temple representing Taharqa (Sedeinga Mission 1963–1964)
35. Fragments of a stele figuring Amenhotep III and the god Amun (Sedeinga Mission, undated)
36. Facsimile of the statue of Amun. Relief from the Tiyi temple reused in a Meroitic grave (© Francigny, Sedeinga Mission 2012)
37. Two blocks from the Tiyi temple representing Taaqar (Sedeinga Mission 1963–1964)
38. Excavations at Sedeinga Sector II (© B.N. Chagny, Sedeinga Mission 2012)
39. Tombs, quarries and funerary pyramids in Sector II (© Francigny, Sedeinga Mission 2013)
40. Head of a Ba-statue from Sedeinga (© Francigny 2001)
41. Doorjamb of a chapel at Sedeinga (Sudan National Museum, 230660, 1997)
42. Stele of the prince Natafrakhoa (Sedeinga Mission)
43. Napatam offering table (Sedeinga Mission 2013)
44. Intact Meroitic grave at Sedeinga (© Francigny, Sedeinga Mission 2001)
45. Meroitic ceramics from Sedeinga (Carrier, Sedeinga Mission 1996)
46. Bes amulet (© Francigny, Sedeinga Mission 2012)
47. Blue glass from Sedeinga (© Francigny, Sudan National Museum, 24406, 2013)
48. Bronze figurine of Osiris (Sedeinga Mission, Pisa University Archives, undated)
49. Excavation in the descendency of grave IV T 1 (© Francigny, Sedeinga Mission 2012)
50. Anachtemeh of grave IV T 1 (© Francigny, Sedeinga Mission 2012)
51. Back Cover: Column of the Tiyi temple at Sedeinga 2005 (© Claude Iverné / Elnour)
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