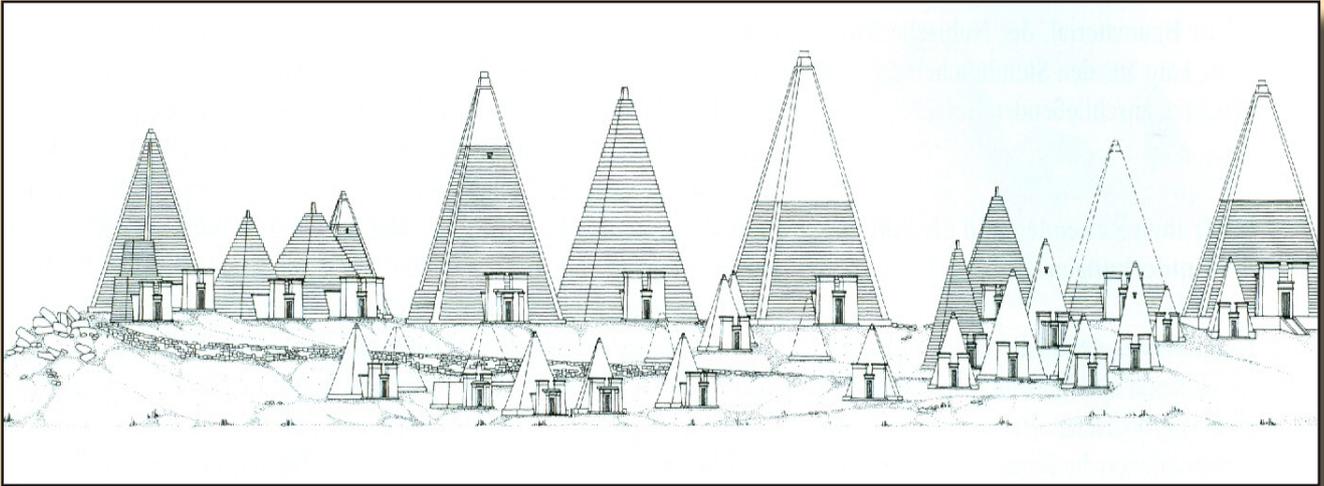


Meroe Kingdom





The Egyptian Empire with its many impressive temple precincts and long list of pharaohs living a lavish lifestyle is well known to most of us. But who has heard of the black pharaohs residing for long on the borders of the Nile in Nubia modern day Sudan? With this second article we want to give you a deeper insight into the Meroe Kingdom with its numerous pyramids and temples erected about 2,500 years ago.

Nubian History

Let's look at the relationship of the two important cultures along the Nile Egypt and Nubia. First the Egyptians moved into Nubia in the area between the 4th and 5th cataract around 1,500 BC. The ancient city of Naqata with holy Jebel Barkal became the most southern Egyptian outpost where they installed a vice king. Nubia lost its independence and had to pay high tributes to Egypt.

But after the collapse of the New Kingdom Egyptians left Nubia. The rulers of Meroe filled the vacuum and moved further north to Naqata and on into Egypt. They conquered Egypt and ruled as 25th dynasty with various Nubian kings in Theben. One of them was Taharqa, he started a similar active construction activity like Ramses II.

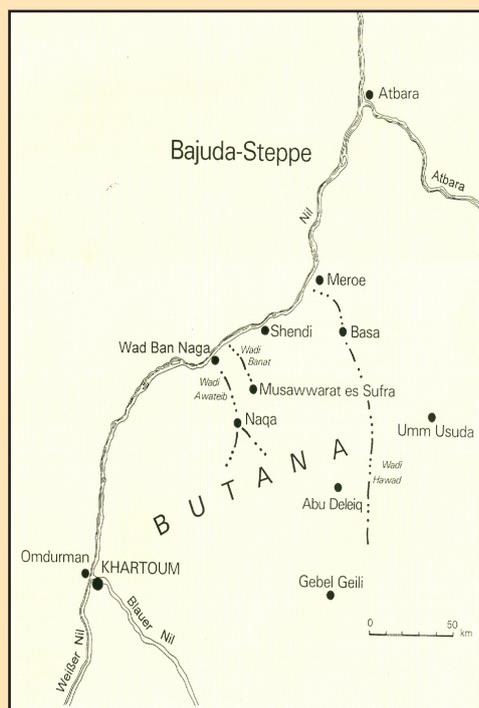
But Assyrians also were interested in the prosperous

Egyptian Empire and pushed Nubians out of Egypt. To be on the save side Meroe rulers moved its capital from Naqata back again further south to Meroe.

Naqata Pyramids

This was the time when first pyramids were built in Nubia. Nevertheless, Egyptian gods like Amun and Isis were still cherished as important deities. Naqata still was used as royal necropolis and the Amun temple as important religious site. Here six necropolises were established during what experts call the Naqata Period which lasted from 750 to 275 BC. Three were situated directly in Naqata with two groups of 25 pyramids in total built near Jebel Barkal.

Nuri on the opposite Nile side was home to another 57 pyramids including the first and with a heights of fifty meters the biggest and tallest of all Nubian pyramids erected for king Taharqa.



Meroe Capital

Meroe is situated 250 kilometers north of modern day Khartoum on the east river bank of the Nile. The move of the capital to Meroe brought about many changes. The kingdom became more African and less Egyptian in its rituals and relief picture

scenes on temple walls. Queens were shown as dominant rulers, possibly indicating a period of matriarchy. This epoch was called the Kandake Period.

It is no surprise that Isis became the main goddess and enjoyed a more important role than previously in Egypt. On the temple wall relief scenes, Isis was depicted to touch the queen at her elbow as sign of the queen representing her on earth. With the same gesture Amun was shown authorizing the king's crowning. Men at the side of queens were shown without insignia and touching the queen's crown as sign of support or submission.

The Meroe Period lasted from 275 BC to 350 AD. Finally, Meroe was conquered and destroyed by Aksumites from Ethiopia. The city layout was divided into three areas, the royal area with walled palaces, a huge Amun temple precinct and finally a residential area. Arkamani-qo was the first king to be buried in Meroe.

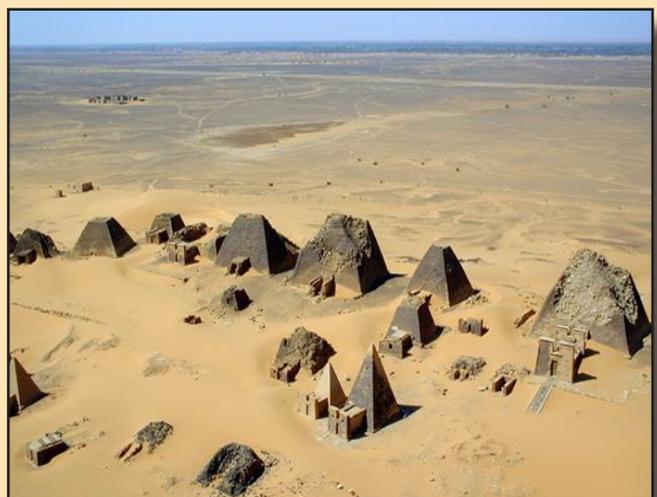
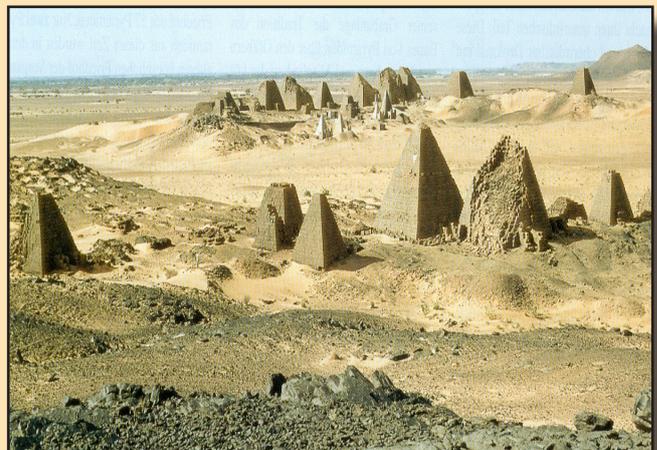
Of interest is the Roman type bath found at Meroe. It was very similar to those found at the Mediterranean coast with sculptures and skillfully painted walls all done in the classical Roman style. Like many places in Egypt also Meroe was listed in 2011 as UNESCO world heritage site.

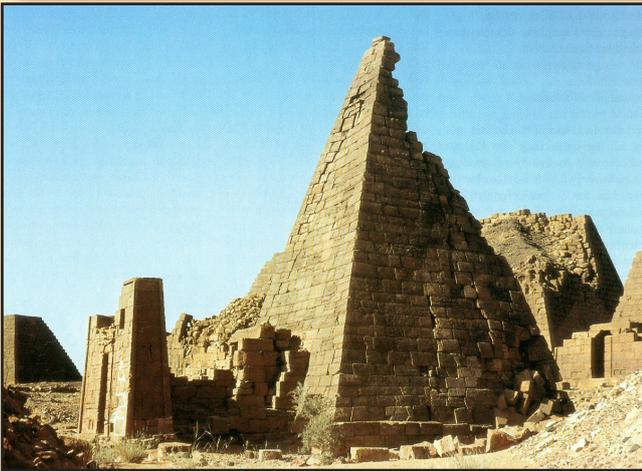
Sun Temple

This was a rather small but important temple. It consisted of a small inner cella with the most holy shrine only to be entered by kings and high priests. The cella was surrounded by columns and an outer wall protected it from public views. These walls were covered entirely with relief scenes depicting the different deities and rulers. This temple was also called the Augustus temple because a bronze head of Roman Emperor Augustus was excavated here. It must have been an important war booty captured by Nubians.

Meroe Pyramids

Could you imagine that there are more pyramids in Nubia than in Egypt? The pyramids here have little in common with Egyptian pyramids in relation to size, way of construction, burial





chamber, sacrifice chapel and entry pylon. When looking at the Meroe pyramids it is obvious their angle is much steeper with up to 73 degrees, Egyptian pyramids are flatter with 50 degrees maximum. As they were smaller a steeper angle was possible and this made them look taller.

In Egypt pyramids were erected on the west border of the Nile with an eastern orientation. In Meroe pyramids were built on the eastern riverside with a northeast to south orientation. The typical Meroe pyramid building plan started with the burial chamber always being built first and completely underground.

Only after the burial ceremonies and sealing off the chamber the pyramid construction started including sacrifice chapel and entry pylon, which was built by his successor. Pyramids for kings had three burial chambers, queens only two, but later all pyramids had only two chambers. Like in the Egyptian Valley of Kings and Queens tomb chamber walls and ceilings were decorated with painted ornaments and the typical funeral picture stories.

Meroe Necropolis

The setup of the Meroe pyramids in its surroundings is the most impressive and give these monuments a special aura. Here three necropolises are situated in close proximity near Begrawiya. The north necropolis consists of 27 pyramids with only kings being buried here between 250 BC to 350 AD.

Royal family members were buried in the west necropolis. Here 80 pyramids were erected plus 800 tombs for royal family members during the same time span. The south necropolis has 24 pyramids plus 220 tombs.

In total there are over 130 pyramids. 40 of them were built for kings and queens including eight pyramids erected for female rulers. In addition, over 1,000 tombs were counted in Meroe. Nubians built pyramids for over 600 years a much longer period than Egyptians.



Pyramid Details

All were small pyramids with an average height of ten to thirty meters equally high as a modern ten floor building. The first pyramids were built with layers of massive sandstone blocks, later sundried bricks were used and the interior was filled with rubble.

Before the pyramid entrance staircase leading underground a sacrifice chapel with two rooms and relief scenes on its walls plus Egyptian style entrance pylons was erected. Experts differentiate three different pyramid types.

At first stone block layers with a slightly stepped structure were the norm. From 185 BC on builders used painted decoration ornaments at the foot of pyramids. Thereafter pyramid surfaces were plastered flat and painted in earth colors like ochre and beige.

Most interesting is an engraved building plan found on the outside wall of a sacrifice chapel. It was exactly reduced in a 10:1 format and

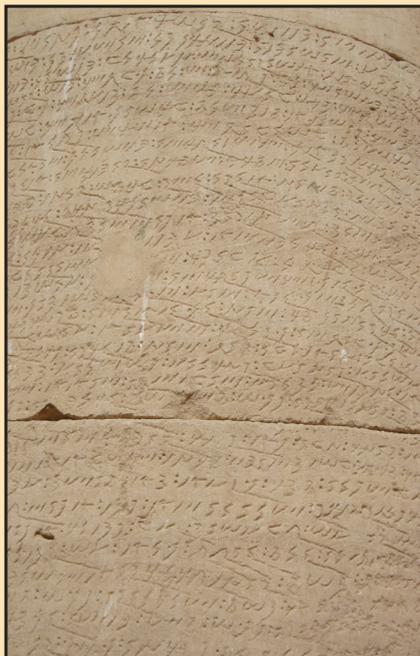
showed that Meroe builders used the so-called Golden Proportions.

Relief Scenes

Archaeologists established three development periods of relief scenes. At first sacrifice scenes were similar to Egyptian examples and hieroglyphs. Thereafter the so-called death court with its ritual of weighing of heart against a feather in front of god Orisis and death book scenes were introduced. With the rule of King Natakamani scenes depicted deceased

together with gods. Relief friezes in temples look very much alike the typical Egyptian iconographic pictures but showed also its own Nubian style for example with elephants and local gods.

In the reconstruction and renovations absent building blocks were copied and repositioned and marked as such. This was possible as the museums overseas where 800 blocks with relief scenes ended up over time for various reasons supplied these copies.



Inscriptions

Inscriptions included over 150 texts of various scripts such as Meroic, Demotic, Greek, Latin, Old Nubian and even Geez from Aksum in Ethiopia. As well as early Ptolemaic which was used in Nubia from 800 to 400 BC. Thereafter the main script was Meroic. Unfortunately, the Meroic script has not yet been fully deciphered.

Meroic Script

The first script was developed

under King Argamani from the Egyptian to document the Meroe language around 300 BC. It is possible to transliterate it but not to understand its meaning as the language has not yet been deciphered.

The fully developed script finally was ready and used under Queen Shanakdakheto. It consisted of 23 letters and word ending sign being two or three vertical points. In addition, it had signs for numbers and symbols for certain measuring units with regards to trading goods.

The last use of it was documented around 500 AD. There are two types the kursive version and the hieroglyphic version. Some experts called its special way of writing parts in letters and syllables devanagari script with reverence to a similar Indian script version.

Meroe Gold Jewelry

This is another interesting story from the beginnings of hobby archaeologists and adventurers.



An Italian medical doctor and adventurer excavated 1834 a north necropolis pyramid and found a huge amount of gold jewelry in the burial chamber of Queen Amanishakheto and removed it to Italy.

Here he tried to sell it, but it was believed to be fake. Nevertheless 70 pieces were bought by King Ludwig I. of Bavaria and the rest in 1845 by Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm IV. At a much later stage the two collections were united in the Egyptian Museum in Berlin. The impressive collection includes heavy pure gold jewelry with multiple inlays such as bracelets, seal rings, shield rings, pendants, necklaces and various

figurines. The design is a mix of Egyptian and Meroe art.

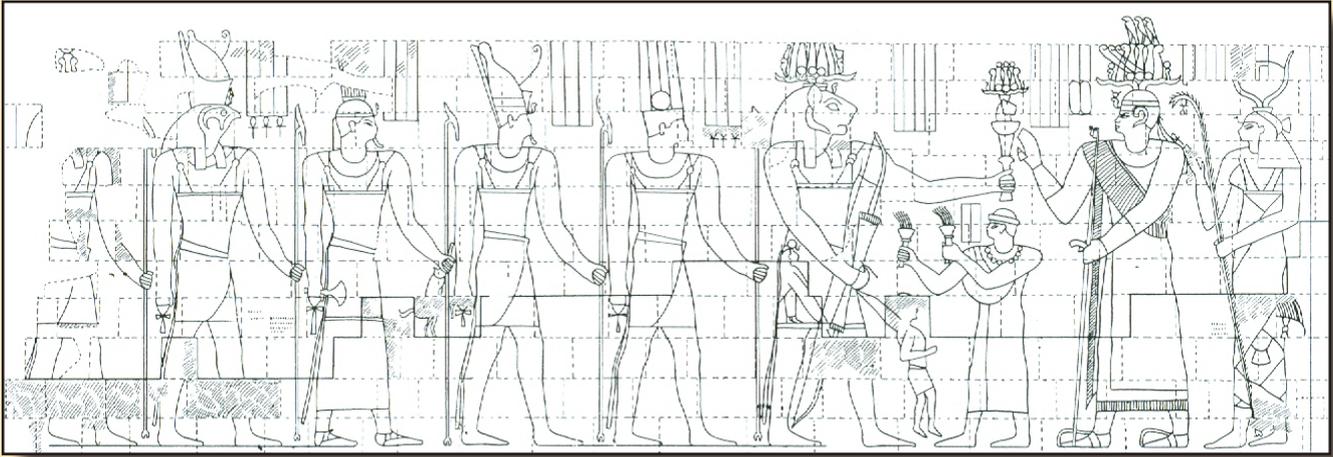
Musawwarat es-Sufra

This important temple site close to Naga and Meroe lies about 150 kilometers north of Khartoum. To find it you have to turn at Wad Ban Naga on Nile eastwards along Wadi Awateb and later branch off to Musawwarat es-Sufra.

It is a huge temple precinct with over 3,000 relief scenes on its long walls erected around 300 BC. The complex size measured about 50,000 meters square. Various buildings have been erected on terraces such as two temples and various chapels all connected via corridors and long ramps.

A third temple was built not on terrace and is surrounded with many rooms. No living quarters and funeral structures found here like in Meroe and Naqa. Archaeologists assume





that it possibly was a holy site or pilgrimage center with only priests living here temporarily. They established that the famous annual holy marriage festival was practiced here.

Excavations

Three excavations took place in 1964, 1966 and 1968. During those many older buildings were found underneath going back to 600 to 500 BC. New excavations took place again since 1995 discovering huge yards with gardens including trees, water basins and an important ceramic production of rather thin-skinned pottery typical for Meroe. We remember the contemporary Nabataean pottery with similar qualities thin and hard.

Lion Temple

It is the most important temple here. King Arnekhamani erected it in 225 BC for local lion god Apedemak. In the beginnings of Meroe history local gods were rare, but Apedemak became one of the most important gods in early Meroe history. The temple was built with double walls and fillings. At some stage walls collapsed because of weak foundations. Therefore 800 building

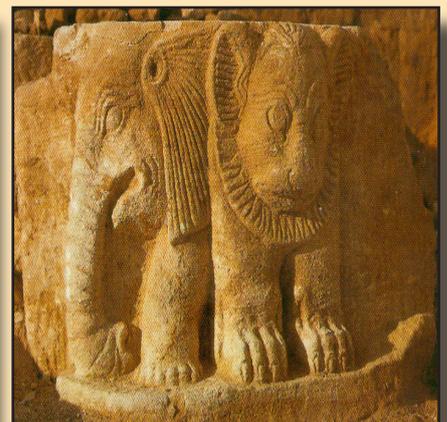
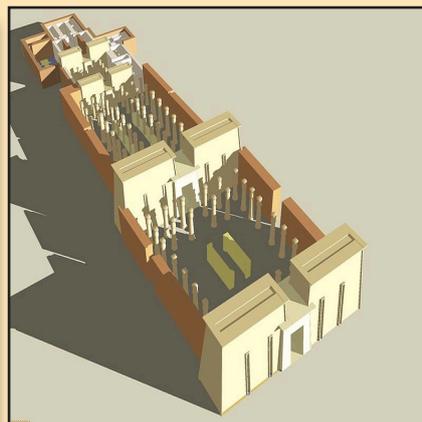
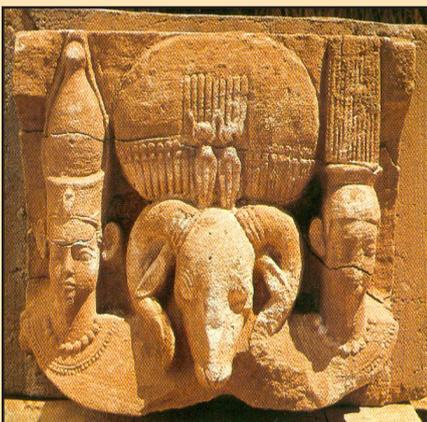
blocks covered with important relief scenes found intact under layers of protecting sand.

The entrance pylon was decorated with a door lintel with three animal heads, in the middle a ram head representing god Amun plus two lion heads for local gods Arensnuphis and Sebiuameker.

The three head panel is typical for Meroe and was not found in Egypt. Similar as the sculptural mix of animal with human heads. Another special feature of Meroe temples is that they were divided into two sides or spheres also attributed to different gods.

Wall Depictions

These different spheres are also found on wall engravings. For example, the north wall shows relief scenes of peace and fertility versus the south wall with war and chaos indications. Other depictions include many elephant sculptures leading to the assumption that possibly this site was an elephant training center. Were Nubians the first to domesticate African elephants? We know they used and traded them as war elephants to Egypt.





Depiction of Deities

Goddesses were depicted with slim long dresses and coats in a static standing pose with feet side by side. Gods were shown barefoot in walking pose and dressed with a shirt in fish skin design, knee long loin cloth and belt attached with an animal tail.

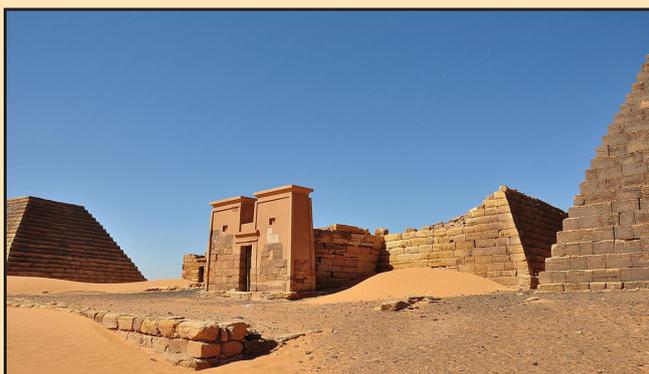
Both were wearing the typical Egyptian wig including crown and Uraeus snake. Royal jewelry was added as well as the typical emblems of a ruler. But the ball like necklaces were typical for Nubia. Their use started already in Kerma about 2,500 BC.

Meroe Pantheon

The most important gods in Meroe were Amun and Isis followed by local god Apedemak. Amun temples were built in Meroe, Naqata, Kawa, Pnubs and Sanam.

In Nubia Amun was represented by a ram with a special round horn form pointing forward parallel to its mouth. Amun's partner was fertility goddess Satet well known from Egypt.

Following the picture galleries from the temple walls in Meroe Amun selected the king and crowned him, thereafter the king visited all



Amun temples in the country for confirmation of his crowning.

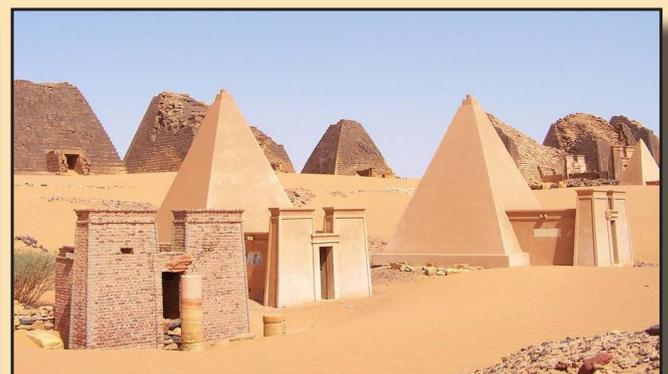
Apedemak is without doubt the most important local god. He was depicted in the typical Egyptian way as human with lion head including the typical Egyptian dress and special hemhem crown. He gave the king power over enemies and to maintain the important balance and order.

Nevertheless, he has a strong war context but was also responsible for health, life and as food provider. Surprisingly his partner Amesemi was not well known.

Isis main temple was situated up north on the small Nile island of Philae. She had a great influence on Meroe as mother and protective goddess. Her husband was Osiris god of death and the underworld and her son was Horus. Therefore, she was the mother of all kings because kings in Meroe were regarded as Horus like.

Naga Site

Situated about thirty kilometers south of Meroe Naga is another ancient site with an



extension of one kilometer square. In 1844 German archaeologist Lepsius visited Naga. But first excavations only started 1994. Naga was inhabited at the same time as Meroe from 200 BC to 300 AD. It belonged to the Meroe Kingdom and became later even capital with palaces and temples being built.

A large Amun temple was erected at Jebel Naga with king statues and an alley flanked by a dozen lying ram figures. Today a large ruin field with Roman style kiosk and small Hathor temple can be seen.

Amun and Apedamak temples were erected by King Natakamani and Queen Amanitore. A second Amun temple was erected later by King Amanichareqerem. In addition, Queen Shanakdakheto constructed 135 BC various temples for gods Amun, Mut, Chons and Apedamak. A unique painted altar was excavated here.

Jebel Barkal

This site at the foot of this as holy regarded mountain played a major role in Meroe culture. Here the most important Amun temple was erected. The alley leading up to it lined with ram sphinxes. Because King Taharqa ruled Egypt during the 25th dynasty the temple granite altar was decorated with the typical image of the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt.

There is much debate amongst archaeologists if four large statues were cut out of Jebel Barkal's rock face, similar to the Abu Simble statues but much larger. The rock face today is so degraded that this assumption has not yet been proved. It is still possible that a reference will be discovered one day in texts or on an unearthed relief block still lying under desert sand.

Summary

A trip to Sudans capital Khartum and further north along the Nile into the ancient Nubian kingdoms of Meroe and even further to Kerma is today possible and an interesting and special experience for those Egyptian culture aficionados. It is better to fly to Khartum than to cross the Egyphian Sudanese border by car.

