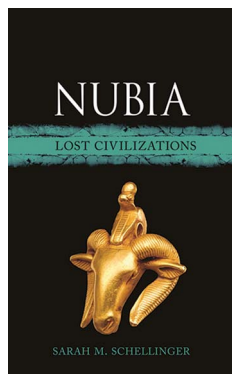


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SARAH M. SCHELLINGER. 2022. *Nubia: lost civilizations*. London: Reaktion Books; 978-17891-465-92 hardback £15.



Thanks to more than a century of large-scale surveys and excavations, the region of Lower Nubia—southern Egypt and northernmost Sudan, on the Middle Nile—is one of the archaeologically best-documented areas of the world. More recently, Upper Nubia (northern Sudan) has also become the focus of a number of major archaeological projects. The results of these investigations are incrementally enlarging our knowledge of the complex socio-cultural dynamics of this region; they provide new grounds on which to challenge deep-rooted—usually colonial—interpretations of the Nubian past.

Monographs focusing specifically on the ancient history and archaeology of the Middle Nile region are rare; exceptions include David Edwards’ seminal book, *The Nubian past* (2004). Any addition to the small corpus of textbooks on ancient Nubia, especially those integrating old and new data, is therefore welcome. *Nubia: lost civilizations* is a trade book aiming to disseminate knowledge about the complex and diverse populations of the Middle Nile, spanning from the Palaeolithic to the recent past. The use of plain language in such volumes should always be praised. The general lack of supporting references and the reproduction of some conventional, and contested, narratives about Nubian history (e.g. the alleged depopulation of Lower Nubia between the Neolithic A-Group and C-Group occupations, p. 39), however, highlight the downsides of this book.

The book is divided into eight chapters. The first offers a general overview of Nubia as a place, while Chapters 2 to 4 follow a chronology course, focusing on narratives related to specific periods. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 are thematic, interrupting the book’s chronological structure, which then resumes in Chapter 8.

Chapter 1, ‘The ‘lost’ land of Nubia’, sets the tone, stating that the book aims “to bring Nubia out of the shadow of Egypt and place it at the forefront as an ancient world power that is certainly not, nor really ever has been, ‘lost’” (p. 14–15). Nonetheless, Egyptocentric interpretations can be found in the text; for example, the division between the places of ‘men’ and ‘women’ in society, which betrays an Egyptian textual bias, seeing men in the army or working in the fields, while women allegedly stayed at home, raising the children and cooking (p. 24). In reality, the archaeological evidence from Nubian settlements typically makes it difficult to address questions of gender and age, hence the shadow of the Egyptian textual sources (Budka 2020: 414).

Chapter 2, ‘From nomads to leaders’, presents a direct line from Palaeolithic hunter-gatherers to state society, based at the site of Kerma. The chapter deploys a useful, straightforward chronological narrative. It falls back, however, on an evolutionist tradition that places Neolithic Nubians below literate Egyptian state society. This is evident when we read that “the Nubians became notable participants in ancient Africa’s development” (p. 29) only

with the establishment of the Kerma state. In contrast, current models of state formation and political economy in Nubia emphasise the role played by earlier pastoral, Neolithic structures in the shaping of more horizontal social interactions between central authority and hinterland communities (Emberling 2014).

The next chapter, ‘Nubia and Egypt’, contributes to further dismantling Egyptianisation perspectives, now focusing on a wider audience. The chapter focuses on Egypto-Nubian interactions through time and relies, especially for the New Kingdom colonisation, on evidence for ‘cultural entanglements’ from sites such as Tombos, which, over the years, have yielded many examples of material culture featuring complex mixtures of ‘Egyptian’ and ‘Nubian’ patterns. Chapter 4, ‘When Nubia ruled the (ancient) world’, offers a broad overview of Nubia in the Napatan and Meroitic periods.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7—respectively, ‘The Nubian pantheon’, ‘Meroe and the Kandakes’ and ‘Moving into the Iron Age’—break with the general chronological narrative. The first provides an overview of Nubian religion in the Napatan and Meroitic periods (evidence for Nubian religion before the New Kingdom colonial period being scarce). Chapter 6, despite its title, discusses royal women from earlier Egyptian historical periods through to the Meroitic period. Both topics are of broad popular appeal, which might explain the editorial choice of dedicating a separate chapter to each. Chapter 7 briefly discusses Nubian metalworking, with a focus on iron production at Meroe.

The final chapter, ‘From Nubia to Sudan’, returns to the book’s overall chronological narrative and connects ancient Nubia to modern-day Sudan. This is a welcome approach, especially as the ancient Nubian past has been traditionally separated from modern Nubian communities in early scholarly narratives (Lemos 2023).

Nubia: lost civilizations presents the history of Nubia using clear language, free of jargon, and this is a strength. The book also helps to raise awareness of Nubia as a ‘civilisation’ in its own right—a praiseworthy attribute. In its overall subscription to traditional evolutionist narratives, however, the book disappoints, missing the opportunity to present the full extent of Nubia’s diversity and alternative complexities that arose from millennia of interactions between different cultural entities and social formations. Nubia as a ‘pastoral state’ (Emberling 2014), or ‘melting pot’ of state and nomadic interactions (Manzo 2017), therefore remains to be explored in a way that illustrates people’s ways in and out of state control and of ‘civilisation’, as brilliantly discussed by Graeber and Wengrow (2022).

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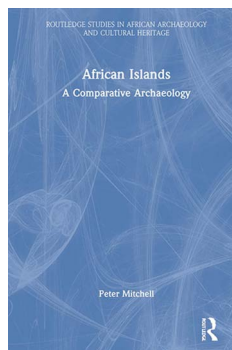
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PETER MITCHELL. 2022. *African islands: a comparative archaeology*. Oxford: Routledge; 978-1-032-15691-0 paperback £35.99.



Although numerous islands exist along the African coastline and across two major oceans, archaeological research on African islands is rarely included in discourse on Island Archaeology. Seeking to illuminate and address this gap, *African islands* provides a significant contribution to both African Archaeology and Island Archaeology. The author, Peter Mitchell, highlights a particular characteristic of African islands overall: despite Africa's massive continental size, its islands are few and widespread compared with other regions (p. 3), while showcasing an impressive diversity of ecologies and histories. The introductory chapter sets the stage for the examples that follow throughout the book, demonstrating not only how African

islands contribute to current theoretical frameworks of island research, but also how African islands can help reshape established frameworks, which have been dominated by research in other regions, such as the Pacific, Caribbean and Mediterranean.

The second chapter takes the reader on a tour of African islands, showcasing the wide range of ecological and geographical features that shape their unique histories. The following four chapters focus on a comparative approach guided by a series of major themes in Island Archaeology: 'Arriving', 'Altering', 'Being' and 'Colonising and resisting'. The richness of the African island archaeological record is evident in many examples, which often combine various forms of evidence, such as biochemical, botanical, faunal, ceramic, lithic and architectural. In many cases, the interpretation of archaeological data is enriched by linguistic, palaeobiological and historical records. Colour images give readers a glimpse of the diverse landscapes and material culture of African islands. Readers are further aided by tables and maps, which summarise the vast amount of information that each chapter presents.

An illustrative example of how all these elements work together is the discussion of the Canary Islands, which claim the longest history of archaeological research among African