

ORIENTAL INSTITUTE MUSEUM

OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

1155 East 58th Street, Chicago, IL

ANCIENT NUBIA

the Robert F. Picken Family Nubia Gallery
and "Lost Nubia: Photographs of Egypt and Sudan, 1905-07" in
The Marshall and Doris Holleb Family Gallery for Special Exhibits



This scene from the tomb of an Egyptian official in Lahun, Egypt (about 1336 BC) shows a delegation from Nubia including a noblewoman in her ox-drawn cart. In this period, Egypt ruled Nubia. Note how the group of four men to the right have adopted very Egyptian-style wigs and linen dresses; yet their connection to Nubia is indicated by the animal motifs that hang from their elbows and the red and yellow color of their hair. In contrast, the men behind them appear much less Egyptian. Their hair is cut short and tightly curled; they wear a feather, an emblem of Nubia, in their hair, and they are dressed in exotic skins. The Egyptian artist was apparently commenting upon ways in which Nubians had adopted Egyptian culture.

New Galleries of Nubian Art and Artifacts at the Oriental Institute Museum

February 25, 2006, marks the opening of the Robert F. Picken Family Nubia Gallery at the Oriental Institute Museum of the University of Chicago. This permanent installation presents more than 600 artifacts from Nubia that date from the Neolithic era (before 3800 BC) through the Christian and Islamic eras (to the 13th century AD). The gallery includes many objects that have never before been exhibited, including brightly painted gazelle skulls, a bronze leg of a bed upon which a Nubian princess was buried, a section of a multi-hued carpet, one of the world's oldest saddles, and a fabulous array of decorated pottery, some of the finest examples from any ancient culture.

The 1,100 square foot gallery is arranged chronologically to give the visitor a sense of the richness of Nubian history, culture, and achievement. The gallery was co-curated by Nubian scholar Bruce B. Williams and Steven P. Harvey, Assistant Professor of Egyptian Art and Archaeology. The installation was overseen by Geoff Emberling, Director of the Oriental Institute Museum, and designed by Markus Dohner and Dianne Hanau-Strain of Hanau-Strain Associates.

The gallery allowed the staff of the Oriental Institute new opportunities to examine how the cultures of Nubia can, and should, be presented. Over the years there has been a tendency to view Nubia through the eyes of its rival, Egypt. The curatorial team committed themselves to presenting Nubia as its own culture, rather than from an Egypto-centric perspective. The artifacts are allowed to document the indigenous African culture in all its diversity, ingenuity, and skill.



The Qustul Incense Burner
From Qustul, A-Group, 3200–3000 BC, OIM 24069.

Among the most fascinating and controversial objects from Nubia is this limestone incense burner from Qustul in northern Nubia. The decoration (see restoration line drawing) shows a procession of three sacred boats with a kneeling prisoner, a figure wearing the White Crown of Egyptian kings, a falcon deity, and the front of an Egyptian-style palace. All symbols are associated with the earliest kings in Egypt, but here they appear on an object that is uniquely Nubian and even bears typically Nubian geometric designs at its top. What does this mean? Some scholars suggest that the Qustul incense burner indicates that evidence for kingship appeared first in Nubia, while others suggest that the symbols of kingship were borrowed by the Nubian kings from their Egyptian neighbors. We still do not know the real answer, but the Qustul incense burner at least indicates that the early Nubian and Egyptians were in close contact.



Ceramic Bowl Decorated with Cattle
From Adindan, C-Group, 1900–1750 BC,
OIM 23452.

The Nubians were herdsmen. Images of cattle appear on pottery and grave markers, suggesting that owning cows was a sign of status.

Did you know?

- There are more pyramids in Nubia than in Egypt.
- Kings of Nubia ruled Egypt for about a century.
- Queens of Meroe (200 BC–AD 200) ruled as kings. They were so powerful that the queen, rather than the king, concluded a major treaty with the Roman emperor Octavian.
- The Oriental Institute Museum has one of the major collections of Nubian artifacts in the United States.

Nubia FAQs

Where is Nubia?

Nubia is a region that is located in today's southern Egypt and northern Sudan, along the Nile Valley and adjacent deserts.

Is Nubia a country?

No. Nubia is a cultural region, not a recognized nation state. However, many people in Egypt and Sudan consider themselves to be Nubian.

What language did the Nubians use?

They apparently spoke "Nubian," a language native to the region. Our knowledge of Nubian is limited because it was not written earlier than the 2nd century BC, more than 3,000 years after Nubian cultures emerged. An additional complication is that for about 1,000 years the Nubians used the Egyptian language written in hieroglyphs.

Who were the Nubians?

The Nubians were indigenous African people who settled along the Nile River by about 4000 BC. According to ancient representations, they had a range of complexions, from brown to black, and tightly curled hair.

What was the wealth of Nubia based upon?

There were major gold mines in Nubia. The Nubians were also great traders, and they served as middlemen for the transfer of precious goods from Sub-Saharan Africa (skins, ivory, semi-precious stone, ebony) to the northern Nile Valley where the goods were purchased by the Egyptians and later the Greeks and Romans.

What does "Nubia" mean?

It is not known for sure. The name may be from "Noba," a tribe that settled in the region in the 4th century AD. Other scholars think Nubia is derived from *nwb* the Egyptian word for gold.

Why are so many of the objects in the gallery from tombs?

The best-preserved structures in the area

excavated by the Oriental Institute were tombs. There were few houses because they were made of perishable materials, like reeds and unfired mud brick, that do not last as long as tombs.

Did the Nubians mummify their dead?

Because there were a number of different cultures in Nubia, there were many styles of burial. Until about 1500 BC, bodies were placed directly in the sand where they were naturally mummified. In the C-Group period (2400–1550 BC), the body was sometimes laid on an animal skin and covered by a round stone tomb. The unmummified bodies of the kings of the Kerma Period (2400–1550 BC) were placed on elaborate beds in round tombs. By about 1500 BC, Nubians adopted artificial mummification from Egypt, removing the internal organs to dry the body, but this practice was abandoned by about 200 BC.

How did the Oriental Institute Museum obtain its collection of Nubian artifacts?

Most of our collection was excavated by Oriental Institute archaeologists in the 1960s during a world-wide campaign to document the region before it was flooded by the creation of a dam at Aswan in Egypt.



Pyramid Tombs of the Meroitic Kings
1st century BC, Gebel Barkal, December 1906.
Photo from exhibit "Lost Egypt."



Limestone Head of a Nubian

From Luxor, Egypt, 1170 BC, OIM 14648.

This fragment of a nearly life-size head of a Nubian came from an Egyptian temple. It shows a Nubian with dark skin, orange curled hair, a large circular earring, and ritual scars on his forehead. It originally decorated a section of a temple where the king displayed himself to his subjects, giving the impression that he was standing upon the back of Nubians as well as on other subjugated peoples.



Bronze Figure of a Nubian King

From Egypt, 747–656 BC, OIM 13954.

Nubian kings of the kingdom of Kush ruled Egypt from about 700 BC. This Kushite king is shown wearing the distinctive Nubian "cap crown" with two uraei (snakes) that may have symbolized the king's rule over Egypt and Nubia. His necklace is decorated with ram heads, a symbol of the god Amun who was a major god of the Nubians. The bronze figure originally held a ritual object, perhaps an offering to the god.



Sandstone Ba (Spirit) Statue

From Ballana, Meroitic Period, AD 225–300, OIM 22487.

The concept of life after death was highly developed in Nubia, and tombs were equipped with food offerings and objects for use in the afterlife. This statue of a man with bird's wings, represents the soul of the deceased. It would have been set up in, or near, the man's tomb.

Nubia: The Land and People



Nubia is located in northeastern Africa, in today's southern Egypt and northern Sudan. In ancient times, like today, most of Nubia was desert and the climate was very harsh. The floodplain of the Nile was narrow, making farming difficult, and there was little rainfall. Most Nubians were herdsman. Nubia was protected from invaders by deserts to the east and west, and rocky outcroppings (called cataracts) on the Nile that prevented invaders from approaching by river.

"Nubian" is the term used to refer to the African people who lived along and near the Nile from the First Cataract of the Nile at Aswan, Egypt, south beyond the Sixth Cataract to Khartoum in today's Sudan. We do not know what the people called themselves, because for most of their history they left no written records. Our records are from the Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans, who presented the Nubians through their own cultural or economic points of view.

Most of our images of Nubians are preserved in Egyptian art where the Nubians are portrayed with a variety of skin tones, from light brown to black. Most are shown with tightly curled hair. Egyptian artists emphasized the "exotic" non-Egyptian characteristics of the Nubians by their distinctive clothing made of animal skins, or by their habit of dying or bleaching their hair yellow or orange.

The Egyptians often had an uneasy relationship with Nubia, viewing them as trade rivals or as conquered people. Many Egyptian images of Nubians symbolize the Egyptian conquest of the south, so the Nubians are shown as bound prisoners. One must be cautious about taking the representations at face value, because they are usually images that symbolize the two people's relationship, not actual images of individuals.

Timeline of Ancient Nubian History

A-Group 3800–3100 BC

4000 BC

3500 BC

3000 BC

C-Group 2400–1550 BC
Kerma Culture 2400–1550 BC

2500 BC

2000 BC

Egyptian Domination
1460–1050 BC

1500 BC

1000 BC

Meroitic Pottery

Some of the finest examples of pottery from any ancient culture were made during the Meroitic Period (250 BC–AD 350). The vessels were created in a wide variety of shapes, and most are painted with scenes drawn from nature—flowers, animals, and fruits, as well as geometric patterns. Some designs are clearly derived from earlier Egyptian art or are inspired by Mediterranean styles, while others are entirely original to Nubia.



Ceramic Pot Painted with Snakes
From Ballana, Meroitic Period, AD 200–250,
OIM 22563.

The rearing cobras hold floral elements derived from Egyptian ankh-signs in their mouths.



Ceramic Vessel Decorated with Crocodiles
From Ballana, Meroitic Period, AD 200–250,
OIM 22631.

The Oriental Institute and Nubia

The University of Chicago has a long and distinguished history in Nubian studies. In 1905, Professor James Henry Breasted led his Egyptian Expedition to southern Egypt and Sudan to document inscriptions on the temples. In the 1906–07 season, the team reached Khartoum. Over two years, the expedition managed to take more than 1,200 photographs of monuments, some of which no longer stand. This valuable documentation is still consulted by scholars and publishers.

The University again became active in Nubia in the 1960s when Egypt decided to build a dam at Aswan that would drown innumerable archaeological sites, as well as scores of modern villages. The Oriental Institute sent a team to excavate sites from between the First Cataract to just beyond the Second Cataract. The work at Qustul and Ballana in particular made important discoveries about the earliest kings in Nubia and the little-known private tombs of the Meroitic Period. Under the agreement signed with the Egyptian government, the Oriental Institute was allowed to retain thousands of objects that today form the basis of the museum's Nubian collection.

Through the late 1980s and 1990s, the Oriental Institute published a series of books to make the excavation results available to scholars. Eight volumes of lavishly illustrated and documented reports were authored by Bruce B. Williams, who served as co-curator of the new gallery.

With the opening of the Robert F. Picken Family Nubia Gallery, the Oriental Institute Museum becomes a major resource for learning about the history and cultures of Nubia.

"Lost Nubia" Exhibit Inaugurates the Marshall and Doris Holleb Family Gallery for Special Exhibits



The first exhibit to be presented in the Marshall and Doris Holleb Family Gallery for Special Exhibits is "Lost Nubia: Photographs of Egypt and Sudan 1905–07." This group of more than 50 black and white photographs was taken during the University of Chicago's Egyptian Expedition led by James Henry Breasted who, in 1919, founded the Oriental Institute.

The expedition traveled along the Nile carrying cumbersome photographic equipment and delicate 8 x 10 inch glass plate negatives. In most cases, the images in the exhibit were printed from the original glass negatives.

Today, these images are truly evidence for a "lost" time, for many of the temples that were recorded have been destroyed or relocated from the rising waters created by the construction of the High Dam at Aswan. So too, the images of camel caravans and scenes of village life along the Nile are now fascinating relics of bygone times.

The exhibit was curated by John A. Larson, Oriental Institute Museum Archivist. A catalogue of the show is available from the Suq, the Oriental Institute's book and gift shop. The exhibit will be on view until May 7, 2006.

Celebrate the History and Cultures of Ancient Nubia: Lectures, Courses, Films, and Teachers' Resources



Sandstone Statue of a Lion
From the ruins of a Nubian church at Qusul, 12th–13th c. AD. OIM 19855.

Nubia Symposium

Sponsored by the Oriental Institute and the Graham School of General Studies of the University of Chicago, co-sponsored by the Chicago Chapter of the Archaeological Institute of America

Ancient Nubia: Glory and Grandeur Along the Nile

Saturday, May 6, 2006
9:30 am – 5 pm
Breasted Hall, Oriental Institute

Hear renowned guest lecturers present the latest research on Nubia's origins, its rivalry with ancient Egypt, and its century-long reign over the land of the pharaohs. Encounter a society of wealth and power that controlled the largest empire ever seen in ancient Africa and struck such awe in the classical world that Greek and Roman authors called the ancient Nubians the "favorites of the gods."

Speakers Include:

Salah Ahmed, Director of Field Work for the Sudan National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums
Stanley M. Burstein, Professor Emeritus of Ancient History, California State University, Los Angeles
Geoff Emberling, Director, Oriental Institute Museum
Brigitte Gratiel, Director, French Archaeological Mission to Gism el Arba in northern Sudan
Stephen Harvey, Assistant Professor of Egyptian Archaeology and Co-Curator of the Oriental Institute's Nubian Gallery
Timothy Kendall, independent scholar

Bruce B. Williams, University of Chicago, Co-Curator of the Nubian Gallery
Derek Welsby, Assistant Keeper, Department of Ancient Egypt and Sudan, British Museum, London

This program provides 6 CPDUs from the Illinois State Board of Education

Fee: \$71 for Oriental Institute and Archaeological Institute of America members; \$79 for non-members. Pre-registration is required

CURATOR TOURS

Free lunchtime tours of the Nubian Gallery. Pre-registration not required. Meet in museum lobby.

Wednesday, April 12, 12:15 pm

"Ancient Nubia"

Stephen Harvey

Wednesday, May 10, 12:15 pm

"Lost Nubia"

John Larson

Guided tours of the Robert F. Picken Nubia Gallery are available by reservation.

Films on Nubia

Oriental Institute, Breasted Hall
Free. Pre-registration not required.

Sunday, April 2, 2 pm

Nubia 64 (1987)

Winner of the Grand Prix at the Cannes film festival, this film highlights the unprecedented international campaign to salvage and reconstruct ancient monuments in Egypt and Sudan that were threatened by the building of the Aswan Dam.

Sunday, April 30, 2 pm

Nubia and the Mysteries of Kush

Judith McCray

Join Emmy-award winning producer, writer, and director Judith McCray for a showing and discussion of her film *Nubia and the Mysteries of Kush*. Funded by a grant from the National Science Foundation, McCray traveled to Egypt and Sudan to document the work of archaeologists in the region.

Adult Education Course

Nubia: Kingdoms and Cultures of Ancient Africa

Instructor: Laura Deneke

Saturdays, June 24 to August 12, 10 am to noon at the Oriental Institute.

Pre-registration is required.

Fee: \$199 for Oriental Institute members; \$229 for non-members

This course explores the history of ancient Nubia, its interaction with ancient Egypt, and the fascinating succession of Nubian cultures from the earliest times to the present day.

This course provides 16 CPDUs from the Illinois State Board of Education



Pottery Head of a Hippopotamus
From Qusul, A-Group, 3200–3000 BC. OIM 23845.

Resources for Teachers

Life in Ancient Nubia Curriculum Guide

Teachers! Bring the power, mystery, and magic of ancient Nubia into your classroom with this award-winning curriculum guide from the Oriental Institute. Produced by the Museum Education Office in partnership with a panel of educators and curriculum specialists, the guide was developed with the support of a major grant from the Polk Bros. Foundation. Available from the Suq, the Oriental Institute Shop.

Classroom Loan Materials

The following materials are available:

- Mini-museums of ancient Nubian reproduction artifacts
- Ancient Nubia slide sets
- Ancient Nubia poster sets

For additional information on all of these programs and resources visit the Oriental Institute web site at oi.uchicago.edu and click on Museum Education. Or contact Museum Education by e-mail oi-education@uchicago.edu or call 773 702 9507.

Recommended Reading

Among many books on ancient Nubia, we recommend the following titles, most of which are available in the Suq gift and bookstore at the Oriental Institute (773 702 9509), or online at oi.uchicago.edu, click "store."

Books for Adults

Joyce Haynes. *Nubia: Ancient Kingdoms of Africa*. The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1992.

John Larson. *Last Nubia: A Centennial Exhibit of Photographs from the 1905–1907 Egyptian Expedition of the University of Chicago*. Oriental Institute, 2006.

Robert Morkot. *The Black Pharaohs: Egypt's Nubian Rulers*. Rubicon Press, 2000.

David O'Connor. *Ancient Nubia: Egypt's Rival in Africa*. University of Pennsylvania, 1993.

Donald Redford. *From Slave to Pharaoh: The Black Experience of Ancient Egypt*. Johns Hopkins Press, 2004.

Derek Welsby. *The Kingdom of Kush: The Napatan and Meroitic Empire*. British Museum, 1996.

Derek Welsby. *Medieval Nubia: Pagans, Christians and Muslims along the Middle Nile*. British Museum, 2002.

Derek Welsby and Julie Anderson (editors). *Sudan: Ancient Treasures*. British Museum, 2004.

Books for Children

Marian Broida. *Ancient Egyptians and Their Neighbors: An Activity Guide*. Chicago Review Press, 1999.

Stanley Burstein. *The Lords of Kush*. Artesian Press, no date.

Pamela Service. *The Ancient African Kingdom of Kush*. Benchmark Books, 1998.

Liz Sonneborn. *The Ancient Kushites*. Franklin Watts, 2005.

Join the Oriental Institute!

Be among the first to learn the latest news about the work of the Oriental Institute! Members receive the most current updates on our research projects and archaeological excavations, advance notice of museum events and travel opportunities, and discounts in the Suq gift shop and on education courses. For information about becoming a member, please call 773 702 9513, or e-mail: oi-membership@uchicago.edu.

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Museum hours
Tuesday, Thursday, Friday,
Saturday: 10 am to 6 pm
Wednesday: 10 am to 8:30 pm
Sunday: noon to 6 pm
Closed Monday and major holidays

Suggested donation for admission: \$ 5 for adults and \$2 for children.

Renovation of the Oriental Institute Museum is now Complete

The Opening of the Robert F. Picken Family Nubia Gallery and the Marshall and Doris Holleb Family Gallery for Special Exhibits marks the last stage in the complete renovation of the Oriental Institute Museum galleries. In 1996, all galleries were closed to install state-of-the-art climate control systems to safeguard the more than 150,000 registered artifacts. The project also included a new 17,000 square-foot wing that housed addition artifact storage, an expanded conservation laboratory, and museum study areas. The entire budget for construction and reinstallation was \$15 million which was raised primarily from public donations and grants from private foundations.

The new galleries opened over several years, first with the Joseph and Mary Grimshaw Egyptian Gallery (1999), followed by the Robert and Deborah Aliber Persian Gallery (2000), The Edgar and Deborah Jannotta Mesopotamian Gallery and Yelda Family Khorsabad Court (2003), and a suite of galleries devoted to the Fertile Crescent named by the Dr. Norman Solikhah Family, Henrietta Herbolsheimer, M.D., and the Haas and Schwartz families (2005).

With the completion of the reinstallation, the museum staff is moving forward to plan and present a series of temporary exhibits. "The Ancient Near East in the Time of Tutankhamun" and "The Discovery of the Tomb of Tutankhamun: Photographs by Harry Burton" will open on May 26, 2006.