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Borders and Frontiers of Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt
The Case of Lower Nubia

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Abstract: Drawing on Egyptian and Meroitic sources, as well as archaeological evidence from the region, this paper offers an overview and a nuanced synthesis of how the frontier was shaped in Lower Nubia during the Ptolemaic and Roman periods, spanning nearly six centuries. The interactions between Egypt, the kingdom of Meroe, and various groups of Nubian people are examined to assess the porosity of this frontier zone. Trade and religion played key roles in the development of Lower Nubia and in the formation of a distinct regional identity. By investigating this region over a long chronological span and in its full historical complexity, the paper supports recent scholarship that has called for moving beyond modern, overly rigid interpretations of ancient frontiers and for challenging asymmetrical models that portray influence as flowing exclusively from Egypt and the Roman Empire toward the kingdom of Meroe.

Keywords: Lower Nubia, Ptolemaic period, Roman period, kingdom of Meroe, Dodekaschoinos

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The frontiers of Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt were shaped by a complex interplay of factors, including geography, imperial priorities, and cultural as well as religious influences. Under the Ptolemies (305–30 BC), Egypt maintained control of the Nile Valley and extended its influence on parts of the eastern Mediterranean and Nubia. After Egypt became a Roman province in 30 BC, its eastern and western limits received comparatively less attention, as they bordered other Roman provinces. Instead, the southern frontier beyond the First Cataract became a priority, both as a potential threat, personified by the kingdom of Meroe, for example, and as a zone of economic opportunity.

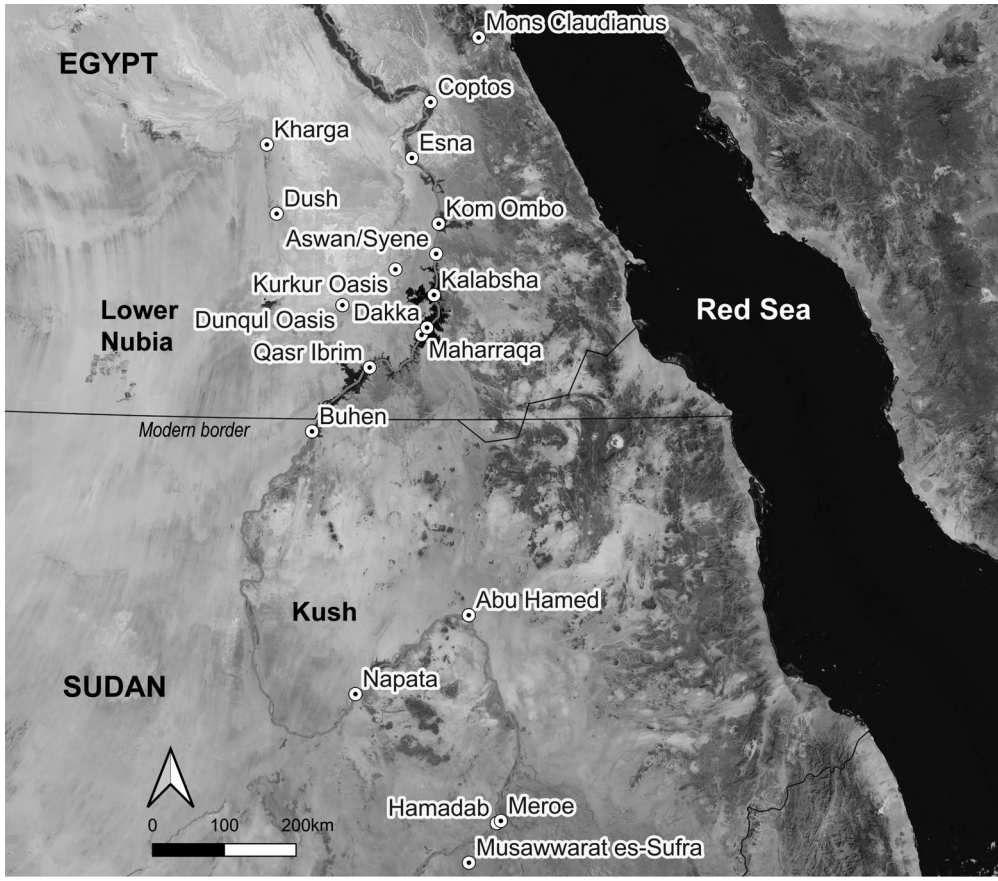
This paper explores Lower Nubia as a borderscape, following the definition of the concept proposed by Chiara Brambilla and adopted by Maria Carmela Gatto and Oren Siegel

in their work on boundary-making practices in ancient Egypt.[1] This approach considers not only the physical location of the border – its landscape – but also how it is shaped by human activity and, in turn, how its structural presence reshapes the lives and social possibilities of those living within its sphere. The goal is to move beyond viewing borders as static lines on a map and instead to understand them as dynamic spaces of transformation. Examining six centuries of interaction between Egypt and the Nubian populations inhabiting the region between the First and Second Cataracts offers a concrete case study for understanding how ancient peoples and states experienced such spaces. It also prompts critical reflection on the applicability of the terms 'borders' and 'frontiers' in the study of the ancient world. The former implies a treaty-based, continuous line typical of modern states. The latter, on the other hand, refers to any discontinuity between differing modes of territorial appropriation, describing areas whose geographical and cultural boundaries are not clearly defined.[2]

The following synthesis draws on the work of numerous scholars over more than half a century. Several studies have already focused on the frontier in Lower Nubia during the Ptolemaic and/or Roman periods. Foundational syntheses by William Adams and László Török remain key reference points in this field.[3] However, recent discoveries that provide new insights into the Nubian populations settled in this region, coupled with new sources, mean that many aspects deserve to be re-examined. Furthermore, it should be noted that scholarly attention on this region has tended to favour the Roman period over the Ptolemaic era, largely due to the nature and availability of sources.[4] Although these are pretty rare for the Ptolemaic period, it is worthwhile revisiting the existing corpus and integrating recent discoveries in order to gain a clearer understanding of the situation at that time. An increasing number of studies underscore the porous nature of the Egyptian-Nubian frontier, reflecting the evolving theoretical frameworks within border studies during Antiquity. Notable examples include Salim Faraji's work on religious interactions during the Roman period and Julia Troche's analysis of archaeology and religion, with a focus on the Augustan era.[5] Finally, the recent work of Stuart Tyson Smith and Henry Cosmo Bishop-Wright, while not centred on border dynamics, underscores the resilience and distinctiveness of Nubian and Meroitic identities in Lower Nubia.[6] Rejecting reductive notions such as Egyptianisation, Romanisation, or acculturation (by Egypt), they advocate instead for the more nuanced framework of cultural interaction, which enriches our understanding of the complex dynamics at play within this frontier zone.

A re-examination of the available sources from the Ptolemaic and Roman periods, considered alongside the results of the research mentioned above and the various studies referenced throughout this paper, allows a critical reassessment of earlier interpretations

[1] Brambilla 2015. See also Siegel 2025 in this issue.
[2] Parker 2006.
[3] Adams 1977: 333–381; Török 1980; 2009: 377–513; 2012.
[4] Desanges 1969; Adams 1983; Török 2012; Burstein 2017; Boozer 2018; Troche 2022.
[5] Faraji 2011; Troche 2022.
[6] Smith 2014; Bishop-Wright 2022.



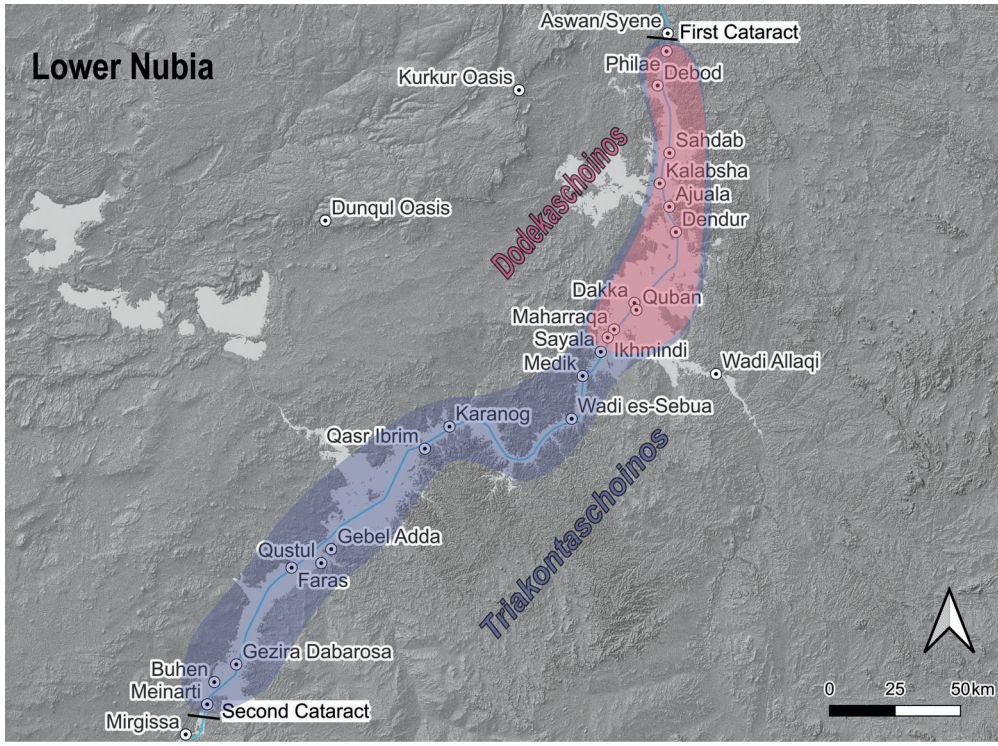
1. General map showing Lower Nubia in a broader context and indicating the locations outside this region mentioned throughout this article (Elaborated: A. Eller; ESRI imagery obtained via QGIS).

and the refinement of existing hypotheses. This synthesis is intended to provide a comprehensive updated overview of the complex issue of the frontier in Lower Nubia and to serve as a foundation for future scholarly inquiry (**Fig. 1**).

LOWER NUBIA AT THE BEGINNING OF THE PTOLEMAIC PERIOD

The Ptolemies and Romans called the stretch from Aswan/Syene to Maharraqa/Hiera Sykaminos the *Dodekaschoinos*[7] (land of twelve *schoinoi*) and the entire area up to the Second Cataract the *Triakontaschoinos* (land of thirty *schoinoi*), Greek translations of earlier Egyptian terms based on the *iteru*, a unit of land measurement.[8] The Meroites referred to the region

[7] Locher 1997: 248; 1999: 259–265; Fantusati 2003.
[8] Sethe 1901; 1904; Locher 1999: 230–256; Török 2012: 750.



2. Map of Lower Nubia during the Ptolemaic and Roman periods (Elaborated: A. Eller; SRTM images obtained via QGIS).

as Akine (**Fig. 2**).[9] Egyptian control in Lower Nubia centred on its northern region, though it occasionally extended farther south. Pinpointing a precise frontier is difficult, as the idea of a fixed, modern-style border does not apply. By the time Ptolemy I became king of Egypt, Lower Nubia had long been outside Egyptian control, with the First Cataract marking Egypt's southern political border. Sources from this period are limited, but the Satrap Stele records a punitive campaign by Ptolemy I around 312–311 BC against the 'people of Irem', likely a Nubian group.[10] Their exact identity is unclear, though they were probably not linked to the Napatan kingdom, whose fourth-century kings, Harsiyotef and Nastasen, also fought rebellious chieftains in the area.[11] Ptolemy's campaign did not shift the border, which remained near Aswan. A third-century BC papyrus from Elephantine reports a siege

[9] Leclant 1977: 160; Rilly 2022: 256.

[10] Burstein 2014. In this later context, the use of the term Irem should be understood as an archaism, detached from the territorial reality it may have reflected in the New Kingdom. This is supported by one key point: although its precise location remains debated (Cooper 2020: 383), scholars generally agree that it lay far to the south, well beyond the reach of any military campaign by Ptolemy I.

[11] Eide *et al*. 1996: 450–451, 485–486; Török 2009: 369–370, 373–375; Rilly 2022: 177–178, 183; Bishop-Wright 2023: 234–235. For the chronology of these kings, see: Kuckertz 2021: 5–6; Rilly 2022: 120.

of the local garrison by 'Aithiopians',[12] certainly Nubians, though their exact identity – whether Meroites/Kushites,[13] or Eastern Desert nomads – remains unclear. Recent research by Bishop-Wright suggests that the Nubians who settled at Faras during this period were originally nomadic groups from the Eastern Desert who established permanent communities, likely due to the thriving trade between Egypt and Kush, which benefited from their desert navigation skills.[14] Meroitic populations, recognisable by their burial customs, only appear to have settled in Lower Nubia by the end of the third century BC.

Persistent unrest along Egypt's southern border likely prompted Ptolemy II's campaign in 275–274 BC.[15] While sources vaguely mention 'Aithiopians', it seems unlikely that the threat came from the Kushites, as Ptolemy was simultaneously seeking war elephants from their kingdom.[16] This suggests no open conflict and supports the view that Lower Nubia at the time was inhabited by non-Meroitic groups outside Kushite control. During Ptolemy II's campaign, Egypt gained control over Lower Nubia, though the extent remains unclear. Greek *graffiti* at Buhen, dating to the third century BC,[17] suggest a Ptolemaic garrison was stationed at the ancient fortress near the Second Cataract.[18]

Returning to Bishop-Wright's theory that Faras, and almost certainly Qustul, were chosen for the settlement of nomadic populations attracted by the opportunities for trade between Egypt and Kush in the third century BC, it seems reasonable to assume that their selection was far from coincidental. Indeed, while the author has already emphasised their strategic location in areas where several wadis provide access to the desert, it can be further noted that both sites lie approximately 50km north of Buhen, a manageable distance for maintaining regular contact. Moreover, Bishop-Wright suggests that the same population probably settled at Gezira Dabarosa, situated just 10km from Buhen.[19] If Ptolemy II did take control of the Second Cataract, the movement of this nomadic Nubian population into southern Lower Nubia may have been motivated by a desire to position themselves closer to a key site under Egyptian authority. Nonetheless, Ptolemaic occupation in the third century BC appears limited, mostly focused on the northern *Dodekaschoinos*, whose revenues supported

[12] SB I 5111 = SB III 6134 (Tm 7199); Eide *et al*. 1996: 536–538; Eller 2022: 36. In classical and Greek sources, the term 'Aithiopian' refers to the Nubian populations inhabiting what is now northern Sudan, up to Khartoum, and southern Egypt. The Greek etymology – meaning 'burnt face' – alludes to the darker skin tone of these populations (Rilly 2022: 167).

[13] The papyrus cannot be dated with any degree of accuracy. Depending on the date of the events to which it refers, if these 'Aithiopians' are Kushites, it could be either the kingdom of Meroe or the kingdom of Napata. The former succeeded the latter around 270 BC and had Arqamani I as its first ruler. See Rilly 2022: 191–194.

[14] Bishop-Wright 2023. Bishop-Wright's conclusions are consistent with Adams' comments (see Adams 2004). The latter had noted the virtual absence of ancient Meroitic sites in Lower Nubia during the third century BC.

[15] Burstein 1993; 2008; Török 2009: 384–387.

[16] Burstein 2008; Rilly 2022: 223–225.

[17] Masson 1976. SB I 302 a (Tm 6478) and SB XIV 40735 (Tm 40735).

[18] Burstein 1993: 43; Török 2009: 387; van der Vliet 2013: 3. At the fortress of Mirgissa, about 20km south of Buhen, a Ptolemaic layer – containing weaponry – has been identified, though its precise dating is debated. It may relate to Ptolemy VI's second-century BC campaign, although the discovery of 36 coins from the reigns of Ptolemy I and II suggests earlier activity at the site (Le Rider 1969; Vercoutter 1970: 23, 171, 189; Burstein 1993).

[19] Bishop-Wright 2023: 241.

the Isis cult at Philae.[20] Control of northern Lower Nubia also provided access to Wadi Allaqi's gold mines.[21] Despite this, few physical traces of occupation remain, and temple construction likely began only in the late third century, with Dakka (Pselchis in Greek) under Ptolemy IV,[22] strategically located near Quban and the Wadi Allaqi. Of course, Ptolemy II, III, or IV may have commissioned other monuments which could have been altered or rebuilt in later periods, leaving little to no trace of their original form. However, since most Lower Nubian temples were dismantled and relocated after the Aswan High Dam's construction, any early building phases would likely have left traces – such as reused blocks in foundations or masonry – discovered during these relocation efforts.

Ptolemaic control of Lower Nubia in the third century BC brought stability to a region likely inhabited by former nomads who had become trade intermediaries between Egypt and Nubia.[23] The kingdom of Meroe, not yet active locally, maintained a distant but profitable trading relationship with the Ptolemies reflected in major construction at the religious complex of Musawwarat es-Sufra, south of Meroe, under King Arnekhamani.[24] The Ptolemies also secured access to the gold mines of Wadi Allaqi and promoted the cult of Isis, whose influence among the Kushites had been growing since the Twenty-fifth Dynasty,[25] making her cult an effective tool of soft power. These benefits were gained with minimal investment in Lower Nubia, until the political instability in Egypt at the turn of the third and second centuries BC led to change.

A PERIOD OF ASSERTION OF POWER BY THE PTOLEMAIC AND MEROITIC KINGDOMS

The Theban revolt (206–186 BC) created a power vacuum in southern Egypt, which the Meroitic kings Arqamani II and Adikhalamani exploited to extend their influence into Lower Nubia, reaching as far as Philae. As Josefine Kuckertz notes, they asserted ritual authority by constructing or expanding temples in the region.[26] This period also saw the emergence of Meroitic settlements and necropolises with Meroitic burial practices,[27] as well as the appearance of the first Meroitic inscriptions in Lower Nubia.[28]

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[20] *Urk*. II: 116, 9–13. A list of 'Nubian nomes' engraved at Philae during Ptolemy II's reign commemorates his annexation of the region and its dedication to Isis (Eide *et al*. 1996: 564–566).

[21] In the second century BC, Agatharchides wrote about the exploitation of the gold mines of Wadi Allaqi. For a new translation of the text in question, see Cuvigny *et al*. 2020.

[22] Winter 1981; Locher 1997.

[23] Bishop-Wright 2023: 240–241.

[24] Rilly 2022: 208–210.

[25] Leclant 1982; Yellin 1995a: 254–255; Baldi 2015; Francigny 2016: 90–93; Ashby 2020.

[26] Kuckertz 2021: 10. Arqamani II continued the construction of the temple of Arensnuphis at Philae, initiated the construction of the temple at Kalabsha, and carried on the work started by Ptolemy IV at Dakka. His successor, Adikhalamani, built the small sanctuary dedicated to Amun at Debod and erected a stele at Philae.

[27] This phase corresponds to Bishop-Wright's Phase 1A at Faras (Bishop-Wright 2022: 94, 96).

[28] REM 0086 (Buhen) and maybe REM 1009 (Faras). Their dating, based on palaeographic criteria (Rilly 2007: 346–351), refers to the period (Archaic A) between the late third and early second centuries BC. Since Meroitic script appeared during the reign of Arnekhamani, the predecessor of Arqamani II, these inscriptions are

By this time, Egypt's southern frontier had returned to Aswan. Ptolemy V initiated efforts to regain territory, which Ptolemy VI expanded by reestablishing control over Lower Nubia up to the Second Cataract.[29] A Greek inscription suggests that Nubian elites may have played a notable administrative role under Egyptian supervision.[30]

The Stele of Boethos, dating from this period, names Boethos – an important figure in the administration of the Ptolemaic dynasty – as the founder of two cities in the *Triakontaschoinos*: Kleopatra and Philometoris, toponyms only attested in this inscription.[31] Much has been written about the location of these two sites.[32] These were likely re-foundations, as no entirely new settlements from the period are known. The focus on the *Triakontaschoinos* suggests that at least one site lies south of Maharraqa, with Qasr Ibrim being a strong candidate due to late Ptolemaic remains.[33] In addition to this site, several arguments have been put forward in support of a possible reoccupation of Buhen and Mirgissa under Ptolemy VI, at the southern end of the *Triakontaschoinos*.[34]

The Ptolemies' reassertion of control was not solely military; they also pursued a policy of temple construction and expansion in the *Dodekaschoinos* during the second and first centuries BC,[35] notably without erasing the cartouches of preceding Meroitic kings. The choice of deities reflects this conciliatory approach. One such god, Mandulis – likely originating among Eastern Desert nomads[36] – illustrates how both Ptolemies and Meroitic rulers used religious cults as tools for negotiation. The Temple of Kalabsha (Talmis in Greek), begun under Arqamani II and dedicated to Mandulis, may have aimed to win over a group whose territory the Meroites had taken during the Theban revolt. Possibly the same nomads settled in the area in the third century BC. Ptolemy VI continued this policy, resuming work at Kalabsha and promoting the cult of Mandulis of Kalabsha at Ajuala, a rare eastern bank site and one vulnerable to desert threats.[37] In addition to serving as intermediaries, the temples built during this period likely played an important administrative role, as they did in Ptolemaic Egypt.

Due to the scarcity of both Egyptian and Meroitic sources, the political situation in Lower Nubia during much of the first century BC remains difficult to determine. It is unclear

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some of the oldest in the currently known corpus. The uncertainty surrounding the Faras inscription arises from the fact that the pottery on which it is engraved was discovered in a tomb probably dated to the late Ptolemaic or early Roman period (pers. comm. Bishop-Wright).

[29] Locher 1999: 238. The *Dodekaschoinos* Stele at Philae, which confirms the donations in Lower Nubia to Isis and Osiris, dates from the reign of Ptolemy VI (Locher 1999: 341–342). Like Ptolemy II before him, he also had a list of 'Nubian nomes' engraved in the temple at Philae (Eide *et al*. 1996: 614–630).

[30] I. Prose 19 (Tm 5950); Török 2009: 406–408.

[31] I. Louvre 14 (Tm 6398).

[32] Haycock 1972: 235; Kirwan 1994; Rose 1996: 156; Heinen 2000; Mueller 2006: 159–165.

[33] Adams 1983; 1985; Alexander 1988: 75–77; Rose 1996: 155–156. The author is not sure of the military status of the settled population at that time and qualifies Adams' remarks.

[34] Le Rider 1969; Adams 1977: 335.

[35] Christophe 1963; Zaki 2009: 253–305.

[36] Griffith 1929; Laskowska-Kusztal 2021.

[37] A stele in the name of the ruler was found on the site, emphasising the worship of Mandulis (Blackman 1911: 66, Pl. CIII).

whether the Ptolemies retained control over the entire region at the time of Egypt's annexation by Rome, or whether their authority was limited to the *Dodekaschoinos*. Scholarly debate continues about the possible Ptolemaic occupation of Qasr Ibrim,[38] as well as its significance and duration. Nevertheless, some evidence supports such an occupation,[39] suggesting that while Ptolemaic control may not have extended to the Second Cataract, it likely reached at least beyond Maharraqa.

ROME JOINS THE DANCE: CLASHES AND COEXISTENCE IN LOWER NUBIA

No sooner had the Romans taken control of Egypt than they had to confront the kingdom of Meroe in 29 BC. Cornelius Gallus led the repression and appointed a Nubian *tyrannos* to govern the *Triakontaschoinos*. Only a few years later, in 25 BC, the Meroites took advantage of the departure of half the legions stationed in Egypt for Arabia to regain a foothold in Lower Nubia, even threatening the Aswan region.[40] The Romans, led by Caius Petronius, fought back vigorously and succeeded in repelling the Meroitic forces. A garrison was subsequently established at Qasr Ibrim, an account confirmed not only by Strabo, but also by unequivocal archaeological evidence.[41] Far from being decisively defeated, the Meroites laid siege to Qasr Ibrim in 22 BC. The fortress garrison was rescued following a second intervention by the prefect, Caius Petronius. In the aftermath, diplomatic negotiations were held between Augustus and the Meroites at Samos during the winter of 21–20 BC. Although Roman sources boast of victories – claiming, improbably, a campaign reaching Napata – the reality appears more complex. The Treaty of Samos shows Augustus making significant concessions, notably ending Meroitic tribute obligations. Two large stelae from Hamadab, near Meroe – commissioned by the rulers Amanirenas and Akinidad – offer a narrative favourable to the Meroites.[42] As Claude Rilly notes, ancient propaganda rarely

[38] Against a Ptolemaic occupation, see Horton 1991.

[39] Brian Muhs argues convincingly, based on Demotic papyri and ostraca from Qasr Ibrim, that oracular practices occurred in an Egyptian-style temple active during the Ptolemaic period (Muhs 2013). Ptolemaic coins, probably left as an offering, may support his claim (Frend 2004). A C-14 analysis of a wooden clamp embedded in the podium of Qasr Ibrim – a structure made of sandstone blocks characteristic of Egyptian architecture – firmly dates it to the Ptolemaic period (Rose 2009). Pamela Rose further supports the hypothesis of an Egyptian presence prior to the Augustan occupation through additional evidence, including a probable Ptolemaic girdle wall, ceramic finds, and the oracular practices mentioned above (Rose 2009). See also the references in footnote 33 which refer to a late Ptolemaic layer identified on the site.

[40] Kuckertz 2021: 14; Rilly 2022: 243–246; Strab., *Geog*. XVII, 53–54; Plin., *Nat*. *Hist*. VI, 35, 181; Dio Cass., *Rom*. *Hist*. LIV, 5, 4–6; Aug., *RG* 26, 5. To these sources can be added the official *graffito* of the temple of Dakka, left by the Meroitic rulers during their presence in the *Dodekaschoinos* around 25 BC (REM 0092). Enclosed in a cartouche, it identifies Teriteqas as *qore* (king), Amanirenas as *kandake* and Akinidad as *pqr* (prince). See Rilly 2022: 248.

[41] Papyri from this period found at the site detail daily life and military logistics for Roman soldiers. Roman artillery balls used during the Meroitic siege, along with identified Roman fortifications such as a girdle wall and bastions, further confirm the military presence (Weinstein, Turner 1976; Anderson, Parsons, Nisbet 1979; Adams 1983: 96–97; 1985; Wilkins, Barnard, Rose 2006; Derda, Łajtar 2012; 2013; 2019).

[42] REM 1003 and 1039. For a presentation of these stelae and an analysis of what can be understood from their texts, see Rilly 2022: 248–252.

records total defeat. Following these events, it appears that Rome retained control over the *Dodekaschoinos*, while the southern two-thirds of Lower Nubia were left to the Meroites, a situation that would last until the end of the third century AD.[43]

This southern frontier, at Maharraqa, has been questioned several times following discoveries made at Qasr Ibrim. Can it be reasonably assumed that the Roman army would have maintained such a remote outpost deep within enemy territory, especially given the absence of any identified forts along the 110km-stretch separating Maharraqa from Qasr Ibrim?[44] Nevertheless, evidence points to a prolonged Roman presence at Qasr Ibrim, possibly lasting until the late first century AD. While some argue for military occupation, others view the Roman role more cautiously.[45] The study of the elements linked to this Roman presence is essential to understanding its nature. These include engraved foot and hand outlines accompanied by Greek inscriptions, which have been found not only in the surrounding hinterland but also on a podium just outside the Meroitic temple at Qasr Ibrim dedicated to Amun of Napata.[46] Some of these inscriptions include dates, although they lack explicit references to ruling kings or emperors. Georges Nachtergael suggested that some of them may have been carved towards the end of Augustus' reign.[47] These feet and hands *graffiti* from Qasr Ibrim form the most substantial corpus of its kind from Nubia. The practice, originating in Egypt and later adopted by the Kushites,[48] serves here as compelling evidence of the passage of pilgrims. While several inscriptions are in Meroitic,[49] the presence of Greek text raises questions about the identity of the individuals who carved them. To this can be added over a hundred Roman coins – from Augustus to Arcadius (early fifth century AD) – discovered at the site.[50] However, the limited discovery context – on the west side of the Meroitic temple of Amun – suggests these were likely offerings left by worshippers or pilgrims.

Among the papyri found since 1963 at Qasr Ibrim, some Greek texts may date to the period after the Rome-Meroe clashes, but unlike previously published examples tied to the Roman

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[43] Locher 1999: 241.

[44] While Roman forts beyond the empire's official frontiers were not uncommon, the significant distance between these two installations seems inconsistent with the Roman army's typical operational and logistical strategies (Breeze 2011: 170).

[45] Desanges 1969; Frend 1980; 2004; Adams 1982; 1983; 1985; Alexander 1988; Horton 1991; Burstein 2017; Boozer 2018; Troche 2022; Bishop-Wright 2022.

[46] Rose 1996: 102–107, Fig. 3.4–7; 2007: 105–120, 133–155. Regarding Amon's form worshiped here, see Rose 2007: 165.

[47] Nachtergael 1997. If some of the Greek *graffiti* date from the Ptolemaic period, they may be connected to consultations of the oracle of Amun in an Egyptian-style temple at Qasr Ibrim, mentioned in some Demotic papyri (Muhs 2013, see footnote 39).

[48] For an overview of engraved foot contours in a votive context, see Ashby 2020: 225–227. In addition to the references mentioned by the author, one can add, for Lower Nubia, feet *graffiti* from Ajuala, including one accompanied by a Greek anthroponym (Žába 1979: 202, Fig. 338; Blackman 1911: Pl. XCVIII).

[49] Some of these – REM 1243 and 1244 – can be dated to the end of the first century BC – beginning of the first century AD, demonstrating that Egyptian and Meroitic pilgrims shared the same religious practices at Qasr Ibrim at the same time.

[50] Frend 2004.

military occupation, these lack clear evidence linking them to a Roman garrison.[51] Finally, pig bones have been found in Meroitic layers dating after 21 BC.[52] Since papyri from 24–21 BC indicate that pigs were supplied to the Roman garrison at Qasr Ibrim,[53] and given that pork was not part of the Meroitic diet, their presence raises questions about who consumed them.

Taken together, these elements point to the presence of a non-Meroitic community at Qasr Ibrim after 20 BC. However, there is no clear evidence that they were part of a Roman military detachment. More likely, they were Hellenised traders and pilgrims[54] from Egypt or northern Lower Nubia – then under Roman control – who came to consult the oracle, attend festivals,[55] or engage in trade. The latter may have played a significant role in the acceptance of a foreign community so soon after the earlier unrest. The large quantity of amphora sherds originating from Egypt and the wider Mediterranean region, dating from the early Roman period to around the end of the first century AD, seems to support this idea.[56] Qasr Ibrim could therefore be regarded as an *emporium* facilitating trade between Roman Egypt and the Meroitic sites of the region and beyond.[57] In this regard, its location was particularly advantageous, at the junction of routes leading north to the oases of Dunqul and Kurkur, and from there to Dush, Kharga or Kom Ombo and Esna, and south to Abu Hamed, between the Fourth and Fifth Cataracts, thus bypassing the great western bend of the Nile.[58]

The sustained presence of a non-military community aligns with early Roman-period Meroitic activity at the site. The temple of Amun, with its typically Meroitic architecture, was likely begun soon after the Roman withdrawal,[59] and a royal stele was erected during the reign of *kandake* Amanishakheto and prince Akinidad.[60] Although not fully understood, the stele clearly names the two rulers, mentions the Romans twice, and refers to Pedeme (Qasr Ibrim), the cults of Amun of Napata and Isis.[61] Rilly suggests that the stele commemorates the (re-)establishment of these cults.[62] It is therefore very tempting to assume that

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[51] Personal communication from Adam Łajtar, whom I thank again.

[52] Derda, Łajtar 2019: 149.

[53] Derda, Łajtar 2019.

[54] Interestingly, the *graffiti* accompanying the engraved hand and foot outlines are not in Demotic, a language whose use here might have obscured the engraver's identity. While the Meroites sometimes used Demotic alongside Meroitic, this does not appear to have been the case with Greek. On the use of Demotic in Lower Nubia, see Muhs 2013: 169–172.

[55] Rose 2007: 165; van der Vliet 2013: 10. A river procession of Isis from Philae may have regularly carried the statue of the goddess to Qasr Ibrim (Ashby 2020: 254–255).

[56] Frend 1980: 928; Adams 1985: 13–14.

[57] Bishop-Wright 2022: 99.

[58] Paprocki 2019: 240–248; Davies, Welsby (Eds) 2020: 85. Land routes were particularly important in Lower and Upper Nubia, where cataracts made the Nile much less navigable than in Egypt. In addition, desert tracks often offered more direct and practical alternatives for travel and trade in the region.

[59] Rose 2007: 165–166.

[60] REM 1141 (BM EA 1836). Akinidad's reign as prince (*pqr* in Meroitic) likely lasted until the end of the first century BC, while Amanishakheto is believed to have ruled from around that time into the early first century AD.

[61] Edwards, Rilly 2007: 82–90; Hallof 2020: 11–21. The Isis cult at Qasr Ibrim dates back to at least the Twenty-fifth Dynasty. See Ashby 2020: 247–248.

[62] Rilly 2022: 253–254.

the stele was erected in connection with the beginning of the construction of the temple.[63] Furthermore, the scholar proposes that the text also refers to an administrative reorganisation of southern Lower Nubia undertaken by the kingdom of Meroe. This aligns well with the presence of the title *peseto* (viceroy) associated with Akinidad in several inscriptions that mention him. This title, attested for the first time in connection with this prominent figure, represents the highest rank in the Meroitic administrative hierarchy. It designates the governor of Lower Nubia (stretching from Maharraqa to the Second Cataract) on behalf of the kingdom of Meroe.[64] If the stele and the construction of the temple are indeed linked, it would be 'a deliberate statement of political control by the Meroitic state of Lower Nubia', as Pamela Rose has suggested,[65] which is at odds with the presence of a Roman garrison at Qasr Ibrim. It should be added that the initial regional capital was Faras, later moved to Karanog, near Qasr Ibrim.[66] The proximity of Roman forces may have been politically sensitive.

It seems, therefore, that the southern frontier of Roman Egypt was set in the vicinity of Maharraqa.[67] Lower Nubia effectively constituted one of the Empire's frontiers against the so-called barbarians and formed part of a defensive line intended to protect Roman territory.[68] While not fully effective in repelling large invasions due to dispersed forces, the frontier proved useful in deterring raids. The Romans constructed forts, fortlets and towers to regulate movement, protect trade routes, and safeguard fertile lands in southern Egypt.[69] To achieve these goals, Rome stationed three auxiliary cohorts in the First Cataract region, with detachments sent to key outposts in Lower Nubia.[70] A camp large enough to accommodate a quingenary cohort was established at Dakka by the early second century AD, underscoring its strategic value compared to smaller sites in the *Dodekaschoinos*.[71] Located opposite the Wadi Allaqi – a key access route for nomads – Dakka's position made it vital for monitoring movements from the Eastern Desert into the Nile Valley.

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[63] The theory that the Meroitic temple of Qasr Ibrim is a monument built by the Romans to develop the site is highly improbable and does not consider the presence of the stele of Akinidad and Amanishakheto. For this theory see: Horton 1991: 272–273; Troche 2022: 11.

[64] Kuckertz, Moje 2022: 105–112; Rilly 2022: 256, 303–304.

[65] Rose 2007: 165. We could also add the fragmentary stele REM 1248 from the end of the first century BC, which mentions Kush (*qes*). This mention may indicate that the stele is either royal or commemorates the career of a high-ranking official (i.e. a funerary stele?), highlighting the prominent position of Qasr Ibrim within the kingdom of Meroe.

[66] Kuckertz, Moje 2022: 107.

[67] This view is supported by archaeology. Sites of Egyptian origin (whether Ptolemaic or Roman) are found almost exclusively north of Maharraqa, while further south Meroitic sites predominate (Trigger 1965: 116).

[68] Breeze 2011: 194–205.

[69] For more on the Roman army's peacetime role in Egypt, see Maxfield 2000: 2.

[70] Speidel 1988; Maxfield 2000; 2009; Breeze, Reddé 2021: 42–43.

[71] Trigger 1965: 125–126; Maxfield 2000: 9–10. A Latin inscription, probably mentioning the prefect of Egypt, Q. Rammius Martialis, who held this office between 117 and 119, provides a terminus *post quem* for the fort's construction (Firth 1915: 32). A famous letter, P. Mich. III 203 (Tm 21342), written by a soldier to his mother during the reign of Trajan also testifies to Dakka's importance as a central military camp from which soldiers were sent on detachments to more modest garrisons.

While it has often been said that the Roman army was a vector of cultural and economic influence in these areas far from Rome, its cultural impact in the *Dodekaschoinos* appears to have been limited. The troops stationed there were primarily auxiliary units, frequently recruited from Egypt or nearby provinces, rather than legionaries, whose presence might have introduced more distinctly Roman cultural elements, especially in the early Empire.[72] The religious practices of soldiers in Lower Nubia reveal nuanced cultural interactions, challenging the idea of a top-down imposition of Roman customs.[73] Jiří Honzl notes the near absence of imperial cult worship in the region: only one known dedication from Dakka exists.[74] In contrast, multiple dedications appear in Syene/Aswan, in what was likely the regional headquarters. Notably, in both locations, these dedications were mostly commissioned by officers – generally from the equestrian class – probably under instructions from the prefect of Egypt. The predominant use of Latin in these inscriptions further sets them apart from the other military cult inscriptions written in Greek. Interestingly, soldiers in Lower Nubia actively engaged with local religious life. At Kalabsha, Mandulis was venerated through numerous *proskynemata*, while in Dakka, Hermes, Mercury, and Thoth-Paotnuphis – local god Thoth's Graeco-Roman counterpart – held key roles in worship. These practices testify to the integration of these soldiers into local religious life, regardless of their sometimes distant origins.[75]

Religious practices in Lower Nubia contributed significantly to shaping a regional identity and were reinforced by major temple construction and renovation efforts, especially under Augustus. At least fifteen temples and chapels were built or restored, underscoring their importance in consolidating Roman control.[76] The clergy of Isis at Philae once again played an active role in strengthening the region's sacred landscape[77] and may have continued to receive a portion of its revenues at the beginning of the Roman period.[78] Alongside Isis, other deities continued to be worshipped, attracting Nubian pilgrims to the sanctuaries of the *Dodekaschoinos*.[79] Solange Ashby identifies three main phases of Nubian *graffiti* in these temples: Phase 1 (*c*. 10 BC – AD 57) saw local Nubian officials active in temple life; Phase 2 (*c*. AD 175–273) features *graffiti* left by members of a Nubian elite associated with the Wayekiye family, also attested at sites south of Maharraqa such as Medik

[72] Fischer-Bovet, Sänger 2019: 171–175.

[73] Faraji 2011.

[74] Honzl 2021.

[75] Stoll 2008: 453–455. Inscriptions reveal that many soldiers stationed in Lower Nubia were not local; one even came from Halicarnassus (Haensch 2012: 77). Greek ostraca from Dakka show that most were Egyptian, and some were probably second-generation soldiers born in the camp (Préaux 1951: 130–131). Incidentally, a Latin birth certificate from AD 138 records the birth of a soldier's son in Dakka (P. Mich. VII 436 = Tm 78521).

[76] Christophe 1963; Török 2009: 448–455; Zaki 2009: 253–305.

[77] About this sacred landscape, where temples subtly blend Nubian and Egyptian gods, see Török 2009: 446–448.

[78] At Dakka and Philae, Augustus and Tiberius are depicted offering the *Dodekaschoinos* to Isis (Hölbl 2004: 49, Figs 60, 106 and 212).

[79] These pilgrims left Demotic and Meroitic *graffiti* behind them at Philae, Kalabsha, Dendur, and Dakka. The use of Greek did not become widespread until the fifth century, when the Blemmyes had replaced the Meroites at Philae. For the study of this corpus, see Ashby 2020.

and Gebel Adda, probably their places of origin; and Phase 3 (AD 408–456), following Meroe's fall, features *graffiti* by priests – Blemmye or Egyptian – serving a Blemmye king at Philae.[80]

Phase 1 is particularly interesting because it shows Nubians directly involved in the temples of the *Dodekaschoinos*. The inscriptions reveal agreements on the distribution of temple revenues with representatives of local communities in the region, showing that Nubian officials from cult associations held positions of authority for decades. This likely continued a Ptolemaic tradition of granting local elites partial governance.[81] In this process, temples played a central role. As Ashby notes, the *Dodekaschoinos* functioned as an estate of the temple of Isis at Philae, through which Nubian elites accessed key administrative roles.[82]

However, this situation was short-lived. In the second half of the first century AD at the latest, the Romans began appointing Hellenised Egyptians to the highest administrative positions and incorporated the *Dodekaschoinos* into the Egyptian administrative region extending from the First Cataract to the Kom Ombo area.[83] This shift likely reflects Augustus's broader policy of gradually restructuring local governance under Roman authority after a transitional phase.[84] It may also stem from growing tensions with Nubian populations,[85] possibly evidenced by a Greek papyrus referencing conflict between Roman forces and the Meroites, potentially allied with the Trogodytes (perhaps the Blemmyes),[86] towards the end of the first century AD.[87] To support the theory of rising tensions, scholars also point to the apparent reinforcement of the Roman military presence in Lower Nubia during this period. The Blemmyes, a nomadic Nubian group from the Eastern Desert near Lower and Upper Nubia, emerged as a lasting threat to Roman control. Whether or not they briefly allied with the Meroites, their growing influence could not be ignored.[88] By the late first century AD, their proximity to the Nile's east bank likely prompted increased Roman military surveillance,[89] a response to a threat that would culminate in the Blemmyes' control of northern Lower Nubia by the fourth century.

It is within this context that we must consider the ostracon found at Mons Claudianus, east of Coptos, dating from the early second century AD, which mentions a particularly

[80] Ashby 2020: 20–22.

[81] See I. Prose 19 (Tm 5950) mentioned above, which refers to a governor of the 'Aithiopians' under Ptolemy VI.

[82] Ashby 2020: 76–77.

[83] Eller 2022: 42.

[84] We are thus well aware of the changes made to the position of *strategoi* of the nomes, which evolved from a potentially lifelong, hereditary office often held by local elites and sometimes linked to religious functions, into a time-limited appointment typically granted to a Hellenised Egyptian from outside the region he was assigned to govern.

[85] Ashby 2020: 91–97.

[86] Cuvigny 2022.

[87] Eide *et al*. 1998: 932–935.

[88] For the history of this ancient population and the developments that took place during the Roman period, see Cooper 2022.

[89] This is particularly evident in the construction of *praesidia* (fortlets) on the routes connecting the Red Sea to the Nile Valley from the time of Vespasian onwards (Cuvigny 2021: 426–427).

noteworthy term in relation to the *Dodekaschoinos*: *ripa*.[90] This term was commonly used by the Romans to denote a boundary marked by a river, such as the Euphrates.[91] The document recounts a typical episode of military surveillance, in which the *curator* of the Parembola camp (likely located at Debod) reports having observed five 'barbarians' accompanied by two camels on the eastern bank of the Nile. The *ripa* of the *Dodekaschoinos*, linked to the hostile presence of the Blemmyes in the Eastern Desert, should be seen, as Hélène Cuvigny notes, as a military defensive line rather than a formal political border. Although the exact date of its establishment is unclear, the document suggests the Romans did not fully control the Nile's eastern bank. Instead, the river acted as a natural barrier, shielding key Roman outposts on the western bank. This context helps explain the reinforcement and expansion of the Dakka camp in the early second century AD.

A late third-century source, the *Itinerarium Antonini*, sheds light on the patchy nature of Roman control in the region due to the Blemmye threat. While most forts were on the Nile's western bank, a few strategic 'bridgeheads' existed on the eastern side – Contra Tafis, Contra Talmis, and Contra Pselchis – controlling access points like the Kalabsha gorge and Wadi Allaqi, a key route for nomads entering the Nile Valley.[92] A similar post may have existed opposite Maharraqa. Although western forts were connected by tracks,[93] the eastern route remains undocumented due to Lake Nasser's flooding. The absence of archaeological remains suggests these eastern sites were late, short-lived, and less developed than their western counterparts.

Amid the rising Blemmye threat, an elite Meroitic group – in particular the notable Wayekiye family, whose members are attested from the early second to the early fourth century AD – played a significant role in the *Dodekaschoinos*.[94] Originating from the southern two-thirds of Lower Nubia, they began as priests linked to the Isis cult at Philae and later became representatives of the Meroitic monarchy, both within the *Dodekaschoinos* and south to the Second Cataract. Due to the importance of trade between Egypt and the Meroitic kingdom, the latter was determined to retain control over the southern part of Lower Nubia and preserve direct territorial contact with Egypt. The settlement of another population in this land – such as the Blemmyes, and later the Nobatae[95] – would have disrupted this direct connection and caused economic damage to Meroe. Moreover, it was crucial for the Meroites to maintain contact with the temples of *Dodekaschoinos*, as this enabled Meroitic priests to perform rituals deemed essential for the legitimacy and continuity of the monarchy, in accordance with Egyptian tradition, which held considerable influence in this regard.[96]

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[90] For publication and commentary on this ostracon, see Cuvigny 2019: 276–284; 2021: 443–451.

[91] Breeze 2011: 5–6.

[92] Trigger 1965: 127.

[93] Paprocki 2019: 240–250.

[94] They correspond to the Phase 2 identified by Ashby and mentioned above (Török 2009: 456–469; Ashby 2020: 117–205; Rilly 2022: 300–303).

[95] The Nobatae were the northernmost group of the Nubas, a people originally from the Kordofan and Darfur regions (Rilly 2022: 314, 379–380).

[96] Ashby 2020: 167–170.

These efforts to maintain control over the region were ultimately thwarted by the advance of the Blemmyes and the Nobatae. In AD 298, Diocletian withdrew troops from the *Dodekaschoinos* and signed a treaty with Meroe's rivals.[97] Egypt's southern border returned to the First Cataract, and Lower Nubia entered a period of instability. The fall of Meroe, between 330 and 350 AD, ushered in a new political and cultural era in Nubia.

The over three centuries of Roman presence in Lower Nubia reveal a complex history of interactions between Egyptians and Meroites. Following a tense beginning, trade and religious exchange gradually intensified. Economic opportunities drew the Meroites closer to the frontier, enriching local elites.[98] This prosperity is reflected in inscribed funerary stelae and offering tables,[99] and monumental tombs such as pyramids,[100] highlighting the status and influence of these individuals. Religion also played a crucial role in shaping a shared identity in Lower Nubia. Common deities and sacred spaces brought Egyptians – both civilians and soldiers – and Nubians together. Meroites and Eastern Desert populations visited temples in the *Dodekaschoinos*, while Egyptians travelled to Amun's temple at Qasr Ibrim, and 'Roman' soldiers paid tribute to local gods.

While Lower Nubia was a zone of interaction, cultural exchange had clear limits. South of Maharraqa, Meroitic funerary customs persisted – emphasising libations[101] and omitting mummification – despite the presence of Osiris in theology. North of Maharraqa, however, mummification was practised, with little focus on libations.[102] No typical Meroitic cemeteries have been found north of Maharraqa, and material culture from either side rarely crossed the frontier, indicating limited mutual borrowing.[103] Funerary stelae and inscribed offering tables, common in cemeteries south of Maharraqa, are extremely rare further north. Only one stele at Dakka and one offering table at Maharraqa have been found,[104] both likely dating to the period after the Roman withdrawal. A few uninscribed, Meroitic-style offering tables from Sayala and Kalabsha also appear to be of a very late date.[105] On the other hand, it should be noted that the typology of Meroitic offering tables continues to reflect developments observed in Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt, where, paradoxically, their use in funerary contexts had declined.[106] While the borrowing is evident, it is limited to form rather than usage. Large basins linked to Meroitic cult practices have been found at sites outside the *Dodekaschoinos*, from Ikhmindi near Sayala to Meinarti near the Second Cataract.[107]

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[97] For a summary of the debates among scholars on the event, see Hendrickx 2014.

[98] As Bishop-Wright (2022: 93) notes, attributing Meroitic development solely to foreign influence is reductive; the Meroites actively shaped and participated in these commercial exchanges.

[99] Francigny 2016: 54–56; Rilly 2022: 305.

[100] Yellin 1995b: 2879; Francigny 2016: 24.

[101] Yellin 1995b; Francigny 2016: 101–105; Bishop-Wright 2022.

[102] Trigger 1965: 124.

[103] Williams 2002: 496.

[104] REM 0130 (Dakka's origin is uncertain); Hallof 2011.

[105] Kromer 1967: Pl. 29; Anonymous 1962: 151, Fig. 5.

[106] Francigny 2016: 48. I would like to thank the reviewer who drew my attention to this point.

[107] Bishop-Wright 2019. These basins have long been interpreted either as tables used for gold extraction or as installations for pressing grapes.

Culturally, the area between Wadi es-Sebua and Medik seems to represent the northernmost limit of substantial Meroitic presence.[108]

The identity of the *Dodekaschoinos*' inhabitants remains unclear. In addition to stationed soldiers, the population likely included Egyptians and various Nubian groups such as the Blemmyes and Meroites.[109] Egyptian cultural influence was clearly felt among these populations, leading Adams to conclude that the cultural frontier between the kingdom of Meroe and Egypt was not at Aswan but at Maharraqa.[110]

LOWER NUBIA DURING THE PTOLEMAIC AND ROMAN PERIODS: A COMPLEX BORDERSCAPE

In Lower Nubia, the frontier was fluid and ever-changing. Control was less about strict territorial claims and more about creating zones of interaction for trade and cultural influence. From the Ptolemaic to Roman periods, Egypt consistently struggled to maintain lasting control south of Maharraqa, with occupation mostly confined to the Nile's west bank.[111] The east bank may have been avoided early on due to its connection to the Eastern Desert via wadis used by nomadic groups. Environmental explanations seem insufficient, as the region – significantly less suited for agriculture than the Egyptian Nile Valley – offers arable lands on either side of the river.[112]

The question of land occupation during the Roman period – particularly considering the ostracon mentioning the term *ripa* in reference to the *Dodekaschoinos* – underscores just how far this region was from resembling a *limes* in the sense of a hermetically sealed frontier that would have been established at Maharraqa.[113] Rather than imagining a rigid line closed off by a continuous chain of military installations, we must adopt a model of fluctuating and at times discontinuous limits. In the *Dodekaschoinos*, although the west bank of the Nile and its hinterland appear to have been more uniformly controlled up to the vicinity of Maharraqa, the same cannot be said for the east bank.

At the start of Roman rule, northern Lower Nubia appears to have been viewed primarily as a zone of outposts beyond a frontier at the First Cataract. This perception is echoed in accounts by Pliny (first century AD), who names Syene as the border with 'Aethiopia', and Aelius Aristides (second century AD), who places Philae between Egypt

[108] Edwards 1996: 75.

[109] Adams 1977: 342–344; Kuckertz 2021: 7.

[110] Adams 1977: 343–344.

[111] Settlements and cemeteries on the east bank of the Nile are extremely rare, with only two small sanctuaries identified: Sahdab (Ptolemaic period) and Ajuala (Ptolemaic and Roman periods); Trigger 1965: 127.

[112] Trigger 1965: 127. Francis Llewellyn Griffith already noted the puzzling scarcity of settlements on the east bank despite its arable potential. He observed that the sandy desert to the west appeared to serve as a natural barrier against Libyan nomads, whereas the eastern landscape – characterised by wadis and hills – was more favourable to vegetation and the presence of animals, making it an attractive zone for the Blemmyes (Griffith 1929: 73).

[113] It was only in the second century AD that the usual meaning of the *limes*, as a military and fortified boundary of the Roman Empire, became relevant (Breeze 2011: 5–6). On the *limes*, see also Guédon 2018: 7–9.

and 'Aethiopia'.[114] Two early Roman-period Greek epigrams at the temple of Isis in Philae further support this interpretation.[115]

Temple construction and expansion in the *Dodekaschoinos* under Augustus and his successors helped integrate the region into Egypt's sphere of influence. This cultural appropriation was later reinforced militarily, notably by a large camp at Dakka, capable of housing an entire cohort, from which detachments were regularly sent to outposts. Direct contact with Egypt greatly benefited the Meroitic kingdom, which became the main conduit for East African trade for centuries. The strategic value of Lower Nubia, especially from the Roman period onward, is evident in the creation of the *peseto* of Akine, an elite office initially reserved for royalty, reflecting the region's importance.

Despite occasional unrest – most notably during the Theban revolt and early Roman rule – relations between Egypt and Meroe were generally peaceful.[116] Even in the final decades of Roman control, the frontier remained calm, as shown by the taverns at Sayala, just south of Maharraqa, where Roman soldiers drank wine.[117] Reflecting Roman-Mediterranean drinking customs, these establishments notably served wine during the last two decades of the third century.[118] Their presence underlines the fact that this frontier was a wide transitional space where interactions took place over several kilometres.[119]

To sum up, several distinct types of boundaries forming the frontier coexisted in Lower Nubia: political, administrative, military, geographical/'natural', ethnic, cultural, and symbolic. The area around Maharraqa served as a political, military, administrative and cultural frontier during parts of the Ptolemaic period and for most of the Roman era. However, this was not an insurmountable barrier, but rather a relatively peaceful zone that facilitated trade and religious interactions. It is therefore best described as a meeting ground, a zone of interaction and interpenetration between different societies. In contrast, the region of the First Cataract appears to have retained its function as a 'natural', ethnic, and symbolic boundary, marking the threshold between Egypt and 'Aithiopia'.

Given the evidence discussed, the term 'frontier', although not perfect, is more appropriate than 'border', as the latter implies a rigid separation between political entities, dividing territories and subjects, whereas the former is more permeable. Indeed, during the Ptolemaic period, porosity was already a defining feature of the southern limit of Egypt – similar to Egypt's relations with Libya and the Levant. That said, a more clearly defined border

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[114] Plin., *Nat. Hist.* V, 10, 59; Ael. Ar., *Egyptian Discourse*, 48.

[115] Eide *et al*. 1996: 709–713. The first, dating from 7 BC, reads: 'Philae calls out: I am the beautiful border of Egypt and the far-off limit of the land of the Aithiopians'. In the second, dating from the beginning of our era, we read: 'Having arrived at the island, the limits of Egypt, most beautiful, holy, (place) of Isis, in the face of Aithiopia […]'.

[116] Fantusati 2003: 44; Troche 2022: 12.

[117] Kromer 1967.

[118] The wine served in these taverns was likely imported from Egypt or the Mediterranean, as there is no solid evidence for local wine production in Lower Nubia before the Christian period. The sole argument – the presumed wine presses – has been convincingly dismissed (see footnote 107).

[119] See the overview of the frontiers and borderlands from the perspective of the Roman Empire in Boozer 2018: 209–211.

did exist at the height of the Lagid Empire's expansion into the northern Levant. As introduced earlier, the concept of borderscape is particularly relevant to what has happened in the unique landscape of Lower Nubia, a narrow strip of land with limited agricultural potential, enclosed by two cataracts and deserts. The perceptions and lived experiences of its inhabitants continuously shaped the region's shifting boundaries, which, in turn, exerted a lasting influence on them. In this context, it is noteworthy that, although mutual influences between groups are evident, they did not fundamentally alter the deeply rooted identities of the populations inhabiting this region.

Rome's annexation of Egypt marked a turning point, formally making Lower Nubia an imperial frontier. Yet, regional dynamics remained largely unchanged and even deepened, reflecting Rome's flexible approach to frontier management,[120] allowing local circumstances and previous relationships to shape the character of these borderlands. Following a brief period of conflict with the Meroites, contact not only resumed but intensified, as trade networks expanded beyond Egypt to encompass the wider Roman world. This consolidation further reinforced Lower Nubia's role as an economic crossroads. It was only with the emergence of new actors – the Blemmyes, the Nobatae, and the rising kingdom of Aksum, which gradually supplanted Meroe as the dominant commercial power in East Africa[121] – that the balance shifted, ultimately pushing Egypt's southern frontier back to Aswan.

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[120] Guédon 2018: 13.
[121] Rilly 2022: 314–318.

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Table of contents