



## **Becoming X-Group**

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**CREATING ETHNICITIES & IDENTITIES  
IN THE ROMAN WORLD**

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**CREATING ETHNICITIES  
& IDENTITIES IN THE  
ROMAN WORLD**

**EDITED BY  
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& KATHRYN LOMAS**

**INSTITUTE OF CLASSICAL STUDIES  
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UNIVERSITY OF LONDON**

**2013**

The cover image shows survivals of the temples at Yanuh in 2005.  
For details, see Kevin Butcher's article in this volume, Figure 10 p. 205.  
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## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This volume arises from two inter-related sessions presented at the 7th Roman Archaeology Conference, held at UCL and Birkbeck College in March 2007. One of these focused exclusively on identity-formation in Italy in the period of Roman conquest and afterwards (*c.*300 BC – AD 100), while the other addressed the processes of creating and maintaining ethnic identities throughout the Roman world. In particular, each panel explored the role of Roman ethnic categorisations in influencing the ethnic identities of groups within the empire. Both panels also sought to facilitate a cross-disciplinary approach to this area of study, by addressing the problems posed by a range of archaeological, visual, epigraphic and literary evidence. For present purposes, the core of papers delivered at the conference has been augmented with additional contributions in order to extend the chronological and geographical coverage of the volume.

The editors would like to thank also the organisers of the 7<sup>th</sup> Roman Archaeology Conference for accepting our panel sessions, and also all the speakers who took part in the conference sessions on which this book is based, and who helped to make these panels a success. We would also like to thank our contributors for their patience during the preparation of this volume. We would also like to acknowledge the support of our respective institutions, the Institute of Archaeology, University College London, and Classics at the National University of Ireland, Galway.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

- ADAJ* *Annual of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan*
- ADelt* *Ἀρχαιολογικόν Δελτίον*
- AE* *L'Année Épigraphique: Revue des publications épigraphiques relatives à l'antiquité Romaine. Paris, 1888-.*
- AION (Ling)* *Annali dell'Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli, Dipartimento di Studi del mondo classico e del Mediterraneo antico, Sezione linguistica*
- AJA* *American Journal of Archaeology*
- AJP* *American Journal of Philology*
- ANRW* H. Temporini (ed.), *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* (Berlin 1972- )
- AntCl* *L'Antiquité Classique*
- ArchCl* *Archeologia classica*
- ArchEph* *Ἀρχαιολογική Εφημερίς*
- AREpLond* *Archaeological Reports*
- ARP* *Accordia Research Papers*
- ASAtene* *Annuario della Scuola Archeologica Italiana d'Atene*
- ASNP* *Annali di Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa, Serie III.. Classe di lettere e Filosofia*
- ASP* *Archivio Storico Pugliese*
- BAR* *British Archaeological Reports*
- BASOR* *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*
- BASP* *Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists*
- BCH* *Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique*
- BICS* *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*
- BMCR* *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*
- BSA* *Annual of the British School at Athens*
- ChrÉg* *Chronique d'Égypte*
- CIL* *Corpus Inscriptorum Latinorum. Consilio et auctoritate Academiae litterarum Regiae Borussicae. Berlin-Brandenburgische: Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1862-.*
- CIS* *Corpus inscriptionum semiticarum*

- CJ* *Classical Journal*
- CP* *Classical Philology*
- CQ* *Classical Quarterly*
- CRAI* *Comptes rendus des séances de l'Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres*
- Ergon* *Τό Έργον τής 'Αρχαιολογικής Έταιρείας*
- EtCret* *Études Crétoises*
- FGrH* F. Jacoby, *Fragmente der griechischen Historiker* (Berlin 1923– )
- FHN* *Fontes Historiae Nubiorum* (Bergen).
- GaR* *Greece and Rome*
- GRBS* *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies*
- HSCP* *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*
- HTR* *Harvard Theological Review*
- I.Lamp* P. von Frisch (ed.), *Inschriften griechischer Städte aus Kleinasien, VI : Die Inschriften von Lampsakos* (Bonn, 1978)
- IANice* G. Laguerre 1975. *Inscriptions antiques de Nice-Cimiez (Cemenelum, Ager Cemenelensis)* (Paris).
- IC* M. Guarducci, *Inscriptiones Creticae I-IV* (Rome 1935-50).
- IGLS* *Inscriptions grecques et latines de la Syrie*
- IK* *Inschriften griechischer Städte aus Kleinasien, 16: Ephesos* (Bonn) 1980.
- ILLRP* H. Degrassi, *Inscriptiones Latinae Liberae Rei Publicae* (Rome 1957–
- Insc. It.* *Inscriptiones Italiae*
- JAnthArch* *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology*
- JAOS* *Journal of the American Oriental Society*
- JEA* *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*
- JJP* *Journal of Juristic Papyrology*
- JRA* *Journal of Roman Archaeology*
- JRAI* *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*
- JRS* *Journal of Roman Studies*
- KE* *Κρητική Εστία*
- KhrChr* *Κρητικά Χρονικά*
- MeditArch* *Mediterranean Archaeology. Australian and New Zealand Journal for the Archaeology of the Mediterranean World*
- MÉFRA* *Mélanges de l'École Française de Rome*
- MHR* *Mediterranean Historical Review*

- NSc* *Notizie degli scavi di antichità*
- OJA* *Oxford Journal of Archaeology*
- PastPres* *Past and Present*
- PBSR* *Papers of the British School at Rome*
- PCPS* *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society*
- PP* *La parola del passato*
- QSAP* *Quaderni della Soprintendenza di Archeologia nella Piemonte*
- RE* *Paulys Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*
- REA* *Revue des études anciennes*
- RÉg* *Revue d'égyptologie*
- RIG II.1* *M. Lejeune 1985. Recueil des Inscriptions Gauloise, vol. II.1. Textes gallo-grecs (Paris).*
- RIG IV* *J.-B. Colbert de Beaulieu and B. Fischer 1998. Recueil des Inscriptions Gauloises, vol. IV. Les légendes monétaires (Paris).*
- RMD I* *M. M. Roxan, Roman military diplomas 1954-1977 (London)*
- RSL* *Rivista di Studi Liguri.*
- ScAnt* *Scienze dell'Antichità: Storia, archeologia, antropologia*
- SCO* *Studi Classici e Orientali*
- SEG* *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum*
- SHAJ* *Studies in the History and Archaeology of Jordan*
- SIG<sup>3</sup>* *W. Dittenberger, Sylloge inscriptionum graecarum (Leipzig 1883–)*
- ST* *H. Rix, Sabellische Texte: die Texte des Oskischen, Umbrischen und Südpikenischen (Heidelberg, 2002).*
- StEtr* *Studi Etruschi*
- TAPA* *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philosophical Association*
- WorldArch* *World Archaeology*
- TMArchives* *Papyrus archives in Graeco-Roman Egypt (Leuven Homepage of Papyrus Archives), online at: <http://www.trismegistos.org/arch/index/php>*
- ZDPV* *Zeitschrift des deutschen Palästina-Vereins*
- ZPE* *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*

The standard abbreviations of papyri are listed in J. D. Sosin *et al.* (edd.), *Checklist of editions of Greek, Latin, Demotic, and Coptic papyri, ostraca and tablets*

[Last updated 11 September 2008], at:

<http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/papyrus/texts/clist.html>



# BECOMING X-GROUP

RACHAEL J. DANN

## *Introduction*

Ethnicity has become an explicit topic for archaeological research in the past twenty years or so. However, in the study of the archaeology of Nubia, it has long been a central concern. Whilst one may trace the burgeoning interest in archaeologies of identity to current social transformations,<sup>1</sup> it can be argued that ethnicity, as an aspect of identity, has been foundational to the archaeological study of the Sudanese past.

With regard to the X-Group of Lower Nubia (*c.* fourth to sixth centuries AD), and more specifically to the royal X-Group tombs at Qustul and Ballana, I suggest that there are three different ways in which X-Group ethnicity has been created: by the Classical authors who wrote about the inhabitants of Lower Nubia in the first few centuries AD, by the archaeologists who excavated remains and designated them 'X-Group', and of course, by the X-Group people, who created a material trace of themselves. The ethnogenesis of the X-Group has therefore had many contributors. An examination of the changing nature of views on X-Group ethnicity and of how the X-Group 'became X-Group' is the aim of the present study. Before entering into such a discussion, we may place the development of the X-Group culture within a broader historical context.

## *Egypt and the Sudan in context*

The first centuries AD in north-east Africa saw the area divided under the control of two major powers. A powerful, centralized Sudanese state was based at Meroe between the Fifth and Sixth Cataracts from the fourth century BC to the fourth century AD, while the Roman Empire had control of Egypt following the death of Cleopatra VII, when Augustus commented laconically 'Egypt I added to the Empire'.<sup>2</sup> During this period, contact between the Roman and Meroitic Empires is well attested both in the textual and archaeological record.

The Roman Egyptian frontier was established at the First Cataract around 29 BC by Cornelius Gallus. Soon after, hostilities broke out, as the Meroites attacked towns in southern Egypt including Philae, Elephantine, and Syene (Aswan). Gaius Petronius retaliated against the Meroites, taking Qasr Ibrim (Primis in the Classical sources), and penetrating as far south as Gebel Barkal and the Fourth Cataract. These campaigns, although

<sup>1</sup> Jones 1997; Moore and Scott 1997; Meskell 1999; 2001; Sofaer-Derevenski 2000; Sørensen 2000; Smith 2003; see especially Diaz-Andreu and Lucy 2005: 11.

<sup>2</sup> *Res Gestae* 27.



the accounts differ in certain aspects, were recorded by both Strabo and Pliny. A peace treaty was agreed at Samos, in which the Roman frontier was drawn at Maharraqa (Hiera Sycaminos).<sup>3</sup> Subsequently, in the first few centuries AD, Roman Egypt and Meroe were involved in a trade relationship, with Roman goods found in Meroitic tombs of this period. An inscription in Meroitic hieroglyphs on a Meroitic pyramid records a visit of Romans to Meroe, who brought gifts from Caesar. The southernmost known inscription in Latin is to be found at Musawwarat es Sufra, and was written by a Roman visitor.<sup>4</sup>

To the north, the mid to late third century AD witnessed a decline in Roman interests in Nubia, not least due to more pressing troubles in other areas of the Empire. According to Procopius, the Romans' southern frontier in Egypt was withdrawn from the area between Maharraqa and Philae to the region of the First Cataract during the reign of Diocletian. This withdrawal of the Roman troops, to seven days journey beyond Elephantine, was said to be due to the expense of maintaining the troops in an impoverished area.<sup>5</sup>

The end of Meroitic power was announced on the victory stele of King Aezana of Axum, erected at Meroe in the mid-fourth century AD, which tells of his invasion from Ethiopia and his destruction of Meroitic lands. The Aezana inscription portrays a ravaging force, destroying Meroe and its environs, but the Empire itself was probably already weakened. Trade between Roman Egypt and Meroe via the Nile Valley had declined in favour of trade conducted through the Red Sea. Such a redirection of trade from the Nile towards Axum and Adulis is recorded in the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*.<sup>6</sup> Problems within Roman Egypt, symptomatic of those in the wider Roman Empire, had economic repercussions at Meroe, as its trading partner to the north experienced continuing difficulties. With the attrition of Roman power in the north, and the destruction of Meroe in the south, the socio-political situation in north-east Africa experienced another major alteration, and the official occupation of Lower Nubia, either Roman or Meroitic, declined.

A decline in the occupation of Lower Nubia may be attested by a lack of monumental building projects, settlements, or graves in Lower Nubia, and it is probable that the physical settlement of the area was difficult due to the aridity and barrenness of the region of the Dodecaschoinos. However, during the late Meroitic period, the presence of many inscriptions, both in the Meroitic script and in Demotic at Lower Nubian sites including Qasr Ibrim, Kalabsha, and the important Temple of Isis at Philae are witness to both a Meroitic and a Roman Egyptian claim in the area. The cordial relationship between Meroe and Rome is neatly demonstrated by the inscription, written in Meroitic by Pasan son of Pasae, which appears on the walls of Philae temple c. AD 253. Pasan acknowledges both the Roman Emperor Trebonianus Gallus, and the Meroitic King Teqerideamani in his writing.<sup>7</sup>

The presence of Meroitic 'officials' is particularly well-attested by the inscriptions of the Wayekiye family<sup>8</sup> at Philae, and suggest that Lower Nubia was considered to be Meroitic

<sup>3</sup> Bagnall and Rathbone 2004: 16-17; Updegraff 1978: 61.

<sup>4</sup> *CIL* III.83.

<sup>5</sup> Procop. Vand. 1.19.29 [H.B. Dewing, Loeb transl. p. 185].

<sup>6</sup> Schoff 1912.

<sup>7</sup> Updegraff 1978: 62.

<sup>8</sup> See for example *FHN* 245, 247, 250, 252.

territory, even if it lay at some distance from the heartland, and was sparsely occupied. The occupation of Lower Nubia following the demise of Meroitic power and the attrition of a Roman presence is the main focus of the rest of this article. The appearance in Lower Nubia of a distinctively different material culture (collectively termed 'X-Group'), most dramatically demonstrated at the sites of Qustul and Ballana by large, rich tumulus burials from the late fourth century AD, offer an opportunity to investigate the identity of the peoples who came to fill the apparent vacuum. The answer to this question is ultimately an elusive one, but answers have been constructed by at least three interested parties. Each has tried to pin down the ethnic identity of the people(s) who appeared in Lower Nubia at this time, by using the evidence in different ways to construct varying narratives of ethnicity. Our first introduction to this discussion comes from written sources, which also advance a further line of evidence regarding Roman difficulties on the Egypt-Nubia frontier, and which also extend a possible reason for Aezana's campaign into Upper Nubia. This concerns the appearance in the textual record of a number of tribal groups, some of whom apparently occupied marginal territory, or who were desert based, and whose presence became increasingly problematic.

#### *The Classical authors*

Classical authors writing about Lower Nubia in the early centuries AD do not identify the X-Group as X-group. Instead they name a number of different tribal groups in the area. Even in the area of Upper Nubia and Ethiopia, the stelae of Aezana<sup>9</sup> record more than ten peoples and/or distinctive regional areas, beyond those state level societies which we know to have existed, namely Meroe and Axum. The sources present a picture of fragmentation and perceived difference. However, the two main groups who appear recurrently were the Blemmye and Nobadae.<sup>10</sup> The ethnic markers perceived by the Classical writers can be grouped by three categories: physical characteristics; subsistence; and character, the latter being the aspect of identity which is most frequently commented upon. It should also be noted that very often, the designations which such authors used are quite generalized, in that they refer to the 'land of the Blemmye'<sup>11</sup> or 'land of the Aithiopians' and indeed in Greek, the term 'Aithiopians' often refers to anyone living in Nubia at the time. Many written texts make general reference to the war-like nature of the Blemmye and Nobadae.<sup>12</sup> Bishop Appion, for example, refers to both the Blemmyes and Annoubades as 'merciless barbarians' who attacked churches under his care in the region of the Upper Thebaid.<sup>13</sup>

Priscus, writing towards the end of the fifth century AD when he served in the Thebaid under Maximinus, gives a first hand account of Maximinus' dealings with the Noubades and Blemmye following their defeat. Both groups are forced to return animals which they had stolen, and to pay expenses as compensation for their actions. Their willingness to

<sup>9</sup> *FHN* 298 and 299.

<sup>10</sup> See tables 1A, 1B, and 1C in Barnard 2005: 25-33.

<sup>11</sup> see *FHN* 304 (land of the Blemmye), *FHN* 303 (land of the Aithiopians). On the use of 'Aithiopian' for all inhabitants of Nubia, see *FHN* 1152.

<sup>12</sup> See *FHN* 301, 308, 314.

<sup>13</sup> *FHN* 314.

enter into a peace treaty with Maximinus and to give a number of children as hostages was rescinded after the death of Maximinus, when they forcibly reclaimed their people and ‘overran the country’<sup>14</sup>: an example of their duplicity and inherently war-like nature.

Strabo, writing in the first century AD, stated that

The Ethiopians at present lead for the most part a wandering life... [they] wander from place to place with their flocks...whether sheep, goats, or oxen...Their largest royal seat is the city of Meroe...The inhabitants are nomads, partly hunters, partly husbandmen...The houses in the cities are formed by interweaving split pieces of palm wood or of bricks.<sup>15</sup>

Strabo describes the Nobadae as a large tribe living on the left bank of the Nile who were sub-divided into separate kingdoms. Strabo referred to them as ‘nomads and brigands’, a term which is later echoed by Ammianus Marcellinus who calls the Blemmye a ‘dangerous tribe’ and states that all the members of the tribe are warriors.<sup>16</sup> However, in the second half of the first century AD Pliny stated that the Nubians inhabit a town on the Nile called Tenupsis.<sup>17</sup>

An account of the subsistence, social organisation, and even the appearance of the Blemmye is recorded by Ammianus Marcellinus in the latter part of the fourth century. The tribe is described as being nomadic, with no permanent base, nor any inclination towards agriculture. Instead the people are said to eat a large amount of game, plants, and fowl and drink lots of milk. Their nomadic existence is aided by the possession of both horses and camels. The people themselves are apparently naked apart from the wearing of a dyed cloak worn down to the waist.<sup>18</sup> The poetic account of ‘The Blemmyan War’, written in Greek and dating from the end of the third century to the middle of the fifth century AD states that an unidentified victor named Germanus attacked the Blemmyes’ tents and fences.<sup>19</sup>

The religious life of the Blemmye and Nobadae is described by Procopius in book seventeen of his *History of the Wars* which he wrote in his position as the historian to Justinian. He details the special position of Philae in the religious life of the Blemmye and Nobadae. Procopius states that both groups worshipped the same gods as the Greeks but that they also worshipped Isis and Osiris, with a particular reverence for Priapus. Furthermore, Procopius records that the Blemmye made human sacrifices to the sun.<sup>20</sup>

These sources give a relatively limited account of Blemmye/Nobadae/X-Group identity, but they generally classify the group as tribal, nomadic, with a religious life which exists in relation to pagan Egyptian deities, a varied diet, and as owning a variety of animals that are important for socio-economic reasons. The people of this group are

<sup>14</sup> *FHN* 318.

<sup>15</sup> Budge 1928: 158 based on Strabo, *Geog.* 17.2.2.

<sup>16</sup> *Amm. Marc.* 14.4.3-7 [J.C. Rolfe, Loeb transl. pp. 27 & 29]

<sup>17</sup> Pliny, *NH* 6.25.

<sup>18</sup> *Amm. Marc.* 14.4.3-7.

<sup>19</sup> *FHN*, 1998, 1183-1184

<sup>20</sup> Procop., *Vand.* 1.19.35-36 [H.B. Dewing, Loeb transl. p. 189].

characterized as violent, pagan, robbers, given to going back on their word. However, there is a difficulty with the various sources (often monastic) which complain of Blemmye and Nobadae hostility, as they are rather unspecific. Certainly, there is no reason to disbelieve that they were under threat from raiders who came from the desert. Yet, given that the sources make no attempt to describe the attackers in any detail (their appearance, their location, the items that they stole, the animals which they used), but instead just name them, it is difficult to have any certainty about which group was actually conducting raids, and whether or not it was always the same two. 'Blemmye' and 'Nobadae' may have become generic terms to the settled populations of Egypt, for any group by whom they were harassed. The possibility that this is generic rather than specific naming is apposite, given the use of the term 'Aithiopians' during this period. We have no idea whether or not these raiders would have self identified as Blemmye or Nobadae, or any other name. Despite this fact, the use of such names in the written record that survives has meant that these are the two tribes who became most visible to later scholars.

### *The archaeologists*

Systematic investigation of the archaeology of the Sudan began in 1907 after the foundation of the Archaeological Survey of Nubia. On the first page of the archaeological report for the first seasons of excavation, which were conducted in 1907, two important statements were made. The first was that the survey was undertaken 'for the purpose of making this [archaeological] material available for the construction of the history of Nubia and its relations to Egypt'.<sup>21</sup> The second statement, foundational to the mission, is that 'The questions on which it is hoped to throw light concern the successive races and racial mixtures, the extent of the population in different periods, the economical basis of the existence of these populations, the character of their industrial products, and the source and the degree of their civilization'.<sup>22</sup> Let us begin with the first statement.

That the discovery of archaeological material during the Survey of Nubia was viewed as shedding light on the relationship between Egypt and Nubia is, to a large extent, a valid aim. The relationship between the two areas has been entwined since prehistory.<sup>23</sup> Yet the sentiment behind Reisner's statement was no doubt more fundamentally motivated by the hope of developing knowledge concerning the sometimes hostile relationship between Egypt and Nubia in the Dynastic period, rather than the then rather obscure Predynastic period. What is clear, however, is that there was little explicit concern in the early days of the Survey, for investigating the archaeological remains in Nubia as the remains of an indigenously developing culture. The purpose of the Survey appears to be basically unconcerned with the characteristics and dynamics of the archaeology and culture of Ancient Nubia in their own right.

The second statement betrays another fundamental concern, especially as it appears first in the list of what the Survey intends to illuminate. A positive identification of the

<sup>21</sup> Reisner 1908: 9.

<sup>22</sup> Reisner 1908: 9.

<sup>23</sup> Edwards 2004; Takamiya 2004; Wengrow 2006.

‘successive races and racial mixtures’<sup>24</sup> in Nubia was viewed as a crucial aim of the archaeological fieldwork. Again, it can be agreed that from a certain perspective, this motivation had some archaeological value. The systematic recovery, recording, and scientific examination of human remains was, in 1908 (the year that the first Survey, including Smith’s anatomical report, was published), an innovative and unusual goal. Other archaeological reports on work in other regions, even when published some time later tend not to include such material.<sup>25</sup> In this sense, the archaeologists and anatomists working in Nubia or on Nubian material, helped to launch an area of study which is now regarded as an integral part of the discipline. However, it is the goal of these studies, and the associated interpretation of the human remains which is highly problematic. Smith’s first objective in examining the human remains from the Survey was the determination of sex, age, anatomical resemblances that may have suggested familial relationships, race, bodily mutilations, and attempts at bodily preservation. His second objective (although already listed as part of his first objective) was to determine the racial characteristics of the remains.<sup>26</sup> Ostensibly, the definition of racial characteristics was deemed important as the means by which to resolve the then current debate concerning who (racially speaking) occupied Nubia, and what their racial relationship was with both the Ancient Egyptians and the modern populations in the area. More than that, such discussions of racial characteristics as defined biologically, would become linked, in Nubian studies, to the interpretation of social characteristics, inevitably in a negative manner.<sup>27</sup> Inherent in Smith and Wood Jones’ arguments concerning the evidence for ancient racial types (Egyptian, Nubian, Barbara, Syrian) and their relationship with modern counterparts, was a slippage between natural biology, lived culture, and the sophistication or lack thereof of that culture.<sup>28</sup>

If we return to part of Reisner’s second statement, which I discussed above, we see that he mentions ‘successive races’ as an object for investigation.<sup>29</sup> We must bear in mind that this statement was written in the context of the very first surveys and small excavations in Nubia, when only a minimal amount of data had been retrieved. However, it was Reisner’s basic assumption that successive races would be visible in the archaeological record: the appearance of successive races in an area would be a driver for archaeologically visible cultural change.

It was in 1907, and against the theoretical backdrop outlined above, that Reisner first identified a new and unfamiliar set of archaeological remains as ‘X-Group’.<sup>30</sup> Rather soon after Reisner’s discovery, the notion of an ‘X-Group Problem’ was explicitly advanced by certain scholars.<sup>31</sup> In essence, scholars saw The Problem as one pertaining to the

<sup>24</sup> Reisner 1908: 9.

<sup>25</sup> see for example Hall 1923; and the negligible study of the remains from the excavation of the royal cemetery at Ur: Woolley 1934.

<sup>26</sup> Smith 1908: 25.

<sup>27</sup> see Dann 2005.

<sup>28</sup> Smith and Wood Jones 1908: 32-36.

<sup>29</sup> Reisner 1908: 9.

<sup>30</sup> Reisner 1908: 9.

<sup>31</sup> Smith 1910; Kirwan 1939.

designation of an apparently distinctive set of material culture and practices in Lower Nubia which appeared to be non-Egyptian, non-Meroitic, and non-Christian in character.<sup>32</sup> Smith, who first named 'The X-Group Problem' in 1910, saw it as one which could be explained by biology (as an indicator of potential, or for the negroid X-Group, a lack of it), his objections having been discussed above.<sup>33</sup>

The racial argument was only one possible solution to The Problem. The distinctive pottery forms and burial practices and other cultural remains might be explained in another way: 'It is clear that the differences, both cultural and physical, differentiating the X-Group from the preceding Meroitic civilization may most probably be attributed to the immigration of numbers of strongly negroid aliens who subsequently settled in Northern Nubia and intermarried with the inhabitants they found there'.<sup>34</sup> In this scenario, a physical change in the inhabitants of Lower Nubia is due to their racial characteristics, and the cultural change is associated with the new arrival of the group in the area. This concept of cultural change caused by immigration seemed to be supported by the stories about Lower Nubia which can be found in the Classical literature, and to which many scholars have made recourse.

The discovery, in 1931, of the royal X-Group tombs at Qustul and Ballana only served to complicate matters. The cemeteries, situated across the Nile from one another, were excavated by Emery and Kirwan,<sup>35</sup> and proved to be remarkable sites. Alongside the monumental constructions of multi-chambered tumuli, the graves contained animal and human sacrifices, and large quantities of grave goods, including a wide range of pottery, bronze vessels, furniture, weaponry, tools, jewellery, and a number of jewel-studded silver crowns. The discovery of such rich interments belonging to the X-Group was unexpected, and the material culture raised another question. Some of the artefacts, including the jewelled crowns, bore motifs (ankh signs, Uadjet eyes, Christian crosses, three dimensional human figures, characters from Classical mythology) that should not have been present in the material culture of a tribal, nomadic, negroid post-Pharaonic, post-Meroitic, pre-Christian group. The Problem now had another dimension: how did the X-Group have access to sophisticated material culture, of complex manufacture, bearing such a variety of designs?

The material culture of Lower Nubia in this period did not comprise a set of evidence that could be easily classified via one of the major, well-defined, and historically attributable cultural groups or civilizations. Not least, this was a problem of naming. The natural recourse for the archaeologists working with this newly discovered archaeological material was to consult a variety of Classical sources in an attempt to find the name of a people who it was recorded, had been present in Lower Nubia at the time. Unfortunately, those sources recorded that numerous tribal groups existed in the Sudan at the time. Yet

<sup>32</sup> Reisner 1910: 345.

<sup>33</sup> But see also Kirwan's article of the same name, 1982.

<sup>34</sup> Kirwan 1939: 36.

<sup>35</sup> Emery and Kirwan 1938a and 1938b.

the names of the Blemmye and the Nobadae recurred most frequently, and have remained the main contenders to be identified with X-Group culture in Lower Nubia.<sup>36</sup>

For example, Kirwan suggested that the X-Group problem might 'to some extent be solved by establishing the identity of the markedly negroid intruders whose contribution to the existing Meroitic culture gave rise to the X-Group civilization'.<sup>37</sup> In order to solve the dilemma, Kirwan discusses the evidence for and against his X-Group material recently excavated at Firka being identified with either the Blemmye or Nobadae, whose modern descendents he believed to be the Beja and Noba respectively. Such a discussion is similar to that found in other archaeological reports.<sup>38</sup> Here Kirwan links the archaeological material, with a racial group, the name for whom can in turn be sought in the Classical sources (Blemmye or Nobadae): for Kirwan, identification lay in the attribution of a name, in a linguistic classification. This attribution also provided an answer for the question of how material of complex design and manufacture and exhibiting 'foreign' motifs had found their way into the Qustul and Ballana tombs. The items had been stolen from Egypt by the raiding Blemmye and/or Nobadae.

In terms of a discussion of archaeology and ethnicity in the early development of Nubian studies, three different but related premises can be identified, each of which have informed interpretation. Firstly, that racial difference, as a biological category, was reliably attributable to human remains and that it could be explicitly associated with material culture. Secondly, that racial difference and cultural change were linked to the arrival of a new group(s) into a given geographical area. Thirdly, that the racial and cultural attributes evident in the archaeological remains in Lower Nubia could be identified with particular historically attested and named people, who had a surviving lineage with peoples living in the Sudan at the current time. Essentially, all of these interpretative paradigms are attempts to deal with and explain change. These points can be linked to a pervasive belief in diffusionism and migration as the reasons for cultural change, coupled with a tendency to see humans as relatively conservative beings, who resisted change in preference for stability and stasis.<sup>39</sup> The figure and influence of Grafton Elliot Smith on both Egyptological and Nubiological thinking should not be overlooked in this development. Smith's later hyper-diffusionist writings<sup>40</sup> which attributed all cultural change (worldwide!) as an effect of diffusion from Egypt, were too fanciful for the majority of serious scholars. Nevertheless, his status as Professor of Human Anatomy at Cairo University and his interest in the past is evidenced in his work on mummification<sup>41</sup> and his status as osteological expert on a number of archaeological excavations.<sup>42</sup> His contributions to the scholarly milieu were, for a time at least, considered to be rigorous and valid.

<sup>36</sup> Junker 1931; Emery and Kirwan 1938a: 18-24; Kirwan 1939; Updegraff 1978; Török 1987.

<sup>37</sup> Kirwan 1939: 39.

<sup>38</sup> See Emery and Kirwan 1938a.

<sup>39</sup> Trigger 1989: 151.

<sup>40</sup> Smith 1923a; 1927; 1930; 1933.

<sup>41</sup> For a bibliography see Ikram and Dodson 1998: 342.

<sup>42</sup> See contributions in Carter and Newberry 1904; Davis 1910; Smith 1908; 1923b; Smith and Wood Jones 1908.

Kirwan's statement which is quoted above is important for another reason. He explicitly states that Meroitic culture in Upper Nubia was a causal factor in the development of X-Group culture in Lower Nubia. Indeed, he explicitly calls for the use of the term 'Nubo-Meroitic' rather than X-Group, in order to make clear the association.<sup>43</sup> In the light of the interpretative paradigms discussed above, which link change to new peoples and racial difference, and in the light of the statement which he earlier made (see above) in the same volume, it must be admitted that the suggestion of a 'Nubo-Meroitic' culture seems rather contradictory. Even so, it marks a new departure in scholarly thought on X-Group ethnicity, as it suggests cultural change within a broader historical and archaeological context, which is not divorced from a preceding cultural manifestation.<sup>44</sup> This is cultural change with roots. Nevertheless, Kirwan viewed the appearance of Meroitic cultural traits in Lower Nubian X-Group material (and especially at Qustul and Ballana) as a legacy of the contact between X-Group people with Meroe, and their (partial) acculturation.

This altered view of X-Group culture as a culture with a history was taken up by Trigger in his study of the royal X-Group tombs at Qustul and Ballana and their relationship with the Meroitic state.<sup>45</sup> A major change was that he argued that it was possible to recognize the development of the royal tombs in relation to Meroe, rather than as evidence for a new ethnic group in Lower Nubia. Meroitic traits in X-Group material culture were viewed as evidence for the survival of Meroitic culture in Lower Nubia.<sup>46</sup> 'This population seems to have been a *mélange* made up of the indigenous Meroitic population and various groups of newcomers, all of whom shared a common material culture'.<sup>47</sup> In attempting to interpret the Qustul and Ballana tombs within a longer diachronic dynamic, Trigger was able to raise questions about the socio-political organisation of the X-Group, and longer term cultural developments. The emphasis on the racial and the ethnic had been refocused on different questions.

Nevertheless, studies of X-Group ethnicity have not explicitly progressed much further. Török's<sup>48</sup> influential study of the royal tombs at Qustul and Ballana, the only major interpretative work on the material, was little influenced by anthropological or archaeological developments in the study of ethnic identity. Concerned with developing a meaningful chronology of the royal tombs at Qustul and Ballana, which had not thus far been attempted in any serious way, he undertook a thorough examination of the artefacts in the tombs, with particular emphasis on the metalwork. Using this material he sought art historical comparators in order to establish a chronological framework for the tombs. Ethnicity was not an explicit concern in Török's research, and it is perhaps for this reason

<sup>43</sup> Kirwan 1939: 44.

<sup>44</sup> Junker (1925) had already pointed out the continuity between Meroitic and X-Group material and suggested that they should be viewed as a single culture, but his view did not gain approbation; cf. el-Batrawi 1946 for a similar point of view, but from the perspective of the analysis of human remains.

<sup>45</sup> Trigger 1969.

<sup>46</sup> Trigger 1969: 118.

<sup>47</sup> Trigger 1969: 119.

<sup>48</sup> Török 1987.



that his discussions of ethnic identity return to the historical source material which the archaeological remains are seen to largely confirm.

*The X-Group*

Finally, we can turn to the X-Group themselves and to the material culture and material remains which they used to create their identity. It may seem to the reader rather odd to turn to the group in question at this stage, however any view of the X-Group is one which is couched within, or perhaps in opposition to, but certainly never without, the intellectual traditions and positions outlined above. We might also add that there has been another player in the creation of the X-Group: the taphonomic processes involved in the creation of the material record which remains to be excavated and recorded. The contention that the X-Group made themselves via their material remains is in fact disingenuous. Now, the X-Group can only be created through our gaze.

Following his investigation of a number of anthropological and archaeological case studies on the subject of ethnicity, Emberling suggested that it is helpful to begin any consideration of ethnicity from a detailed understanding of 'contexts of production, distribution, and use'.<sup>49</sup> The first of this list, 'contexts of production' is not an easy question to settle with regard to the X-Group, and especially with regard to the royal tombs. As I have already stated, a number of the artefacts from the royal tombs (often those that Török used as a basis for art-historical comparisons) such as the silver crowns at Ballana, bronze lamps, and some other items of furniture, are decorated with motifs that appear to be recognizably Egyptian, Kushitic, Classical, or Christian. Such items may, according to Trigger,<sup>50</sup> be heirlooms of preceding Meroitic state culture. Alternatively, according to Török,<sup>51</sup> they may be the proceeds of the raids undertaken by the Blemmye and Nobadae, of which we (apparently) have testimony from Classical authors. His other contention is that certain items, especially the folding chairs, can be viewed as diplomatic gifts from the Empire.<sup>52</sup> Other items were certainly indigenously manufactured, such as particular pottery types that are ubiquitous finds in the settlement and cemetery sites of X-Group period in Lower Nubia. These (plus the superstructures and substructures of the royal tombs) are the material traces of the X-Group. What artefacts may tell us about ethnic identity is bound up with how these myriad objects were used and perceived. Other artefacts, especially the more mundane finds which have often been overlooked, may also have something to say.

Imported items may have held a certain value due to their exoticism in terms of material, mode of manufacture, or design. Frequently, artefacts exhibiting ostensibly 'foreign' motifs have been assumed to retain their ethnic identity.<sup>53</sup> The finds of artefacts with Classical, Kushitic, and Egyptian motifs at the sites may represent the continued popularity of artistic styles (particularly in terms of the Kushitic and Egyptianizing motifs)

<sup>49</sup> Emberling 1997: 325.

<sup>50</sup> Trigger 1969.

<sup>51</sup> Török 1987.

<sup>52</sup> Török 1987: 81

<sup>53</sup> Emberling 1997: 317. See Török 1987.

that were well established in the preceding Meroitic period. This popularity may be based on the motifs being particularly powerful or meaningful designs, or on their being aesthetically pleasing, although we should not consider these positions to be mutually exclusive. The artefacts may have been construed as important heirlooms that were a material link with the past. Such artefacts may therefore have accrued particular life histories. They may have been artefacts central to the telling of stories concerning group origins, and perhaps a heroic, mythical past. In this sense, such objects may have represented a locus for both a past and a place which had become distant. Objects construed as such represent loci of spatio-temporal meanings. This is a form of presencing,<sup>54</sup> of bringing the past into the present. The artefacts with Kushitic motifs presence and recall a past that was more distant both in terms of time and place.

Although the X-Group may have been familiar with aspects of Meroitic iconography and ritual practice, as seen further south in the continued Kushite funerary practices at el-Hobagi,<sup>55</sup> we must consider that certain artefacts, even if they contained an Eye of Horus design or a representation of Amun, were totally 'unreadable' to the group that acquired them. The figure of Amun may have been figurally recognizable as a ram, but not as a supreme god previously worshipped in complex civilizations in Egypt and the Sudan. The embossed silver casket from BT03 may not have been a piece of furniture with illustrations representing the apostles, but an elaborately produced box with pictures of men engraved on it.

Even if we were to accept that all of the material culture was acquired from outside the group, the manner in which it was re-made as X-Group material culture needs to be considered. What does the church silver in tomb BT03 come to mean in a non-Christian context, or the (possibly) Meroitic crown in a non-Meroitic context, or the bronzes with Classical designs in a non-Classical context? And do they tell us anything about ethnogenesis or ethnic identity?

However unreadable items came to be in the possession of the X-Group, or particular members of the culture, we should not presume that their response to and classification of the artefacts and their designs were the same as those in the culture from which they came, or that they are the same as those produced by the art-historically aware archaeologist. Instead, we should see the artefacts as being transformed within this new cultural milieu. The artefacts were incorporated into existing schemes of power, domination and resistance across individual and group identities. Through the use of the artefacts, they became embodied features of the landscape of material culture. We could suggest that 'new' items may be particularly appropriate artefacts with which to challenge or expand current meanings and uses of objects within the group due to their novelty. Whilst this may be the case, it is also the fact that the artefacts must be actively incorporated into cultural practice, and so may come to fulfil alternative roles, and thereby alternative identities. New meanings are invested in the objects. This is not a matter of meaning being layered on top of a pre-existing essential artefact. In its incorporation in culture, the artefact is effectively re-made. It is re-manufactured with different

<sup>54</sup> Chapman 2000: 30.

<sup>55</sup> Lenoble 1994 and 1997.

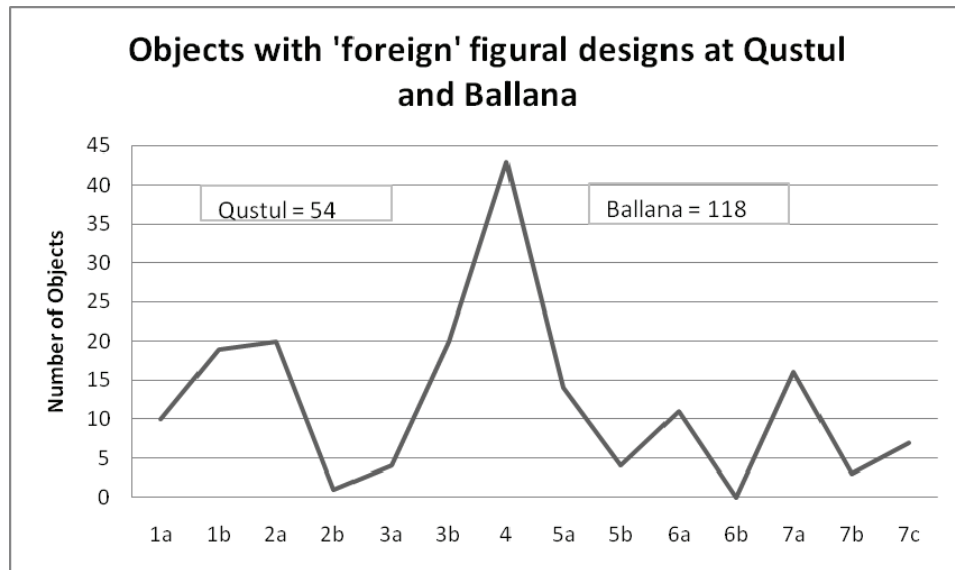


Figure 1

significance and different purpose. As Dobres puts it '[m]eaning does not miraculously hover above everyday material practices any more than it exists as some intangible substrate structuring action from below'.<sup>56</sup> Through use, an artefact creates and gains meaning, and so does the subject or subjects using and viewing the object. Such a model stresses the changing nature of the subject and culture, and whilst the two are distinct, they are also bound together within this reflexive, creative condition. This is altogether a more dynamic view of people and their material culture.

What is certainly obvious is that the context of the deposition of such 'foreign' artefacts was distinctive in Lower Nubia. These are not objects that have been discovered at many sites. They are largely confined to the Qustul and Ballana cemeteries. The élite that were buried in the royal cemeteries made relatively consistent use of objects with designs that could be identified as Kushitic/Classical/Pharaonic (see Figure 1), as objects with such designs are found throughout the period that the cemeteries were in use, albeit in differing quantities. If ethnicity can be viewed as a process of identification, it is unlikely, given the highly restricted recovery of this material culture, that it was a major aspect of X-Group self-definition as such, although as we have seen, their possession of it has been an aspect of X-Group definition by outsiders. As Classical writers almost unanimously agree that the Blemmye and Nobadae (whom archaeologists have most frequently identified as X-Group) were war-like raiders who stole material from Egypt, the deposition of material with Classical motifs at the Qustul and Ballana cemeteries would be exactly the thing to identify the graves as the remains of Blemmye and Nobadae, despite the relatively small quantities of such finds.

There are surviving written sources in Lower Nubia that do self-identify their writers as Nobadae or Blemmye. Some of these sources are inscriptions written on temple walls

<sup>56</sup> Dobres 2000: 131.

at Kalabsha, and others are papyrus finds from Qasr Ibrim, in the form of letters that were exchanged. However, a number of the sources are simply ascribed to Blemmye writers, rather than that identity being stated in the text (see for example the inscriptions of King Kharamdoye, King Tamal, King Isemne, and the inscription regarding ‘Blemmyan cult societies’ at Kalabsha<sup>57</sup>), although this ascription may be suggested on the basis of personal names.<sup>58</sup>

The first inscription which does contain a relevant self-identification is the Silko inscription written in Greek on the walls of Kalabsha temple. The inscription begins ‘I, Silko, King of the Noubades and all the Aithiopians, came to Talmis [Kalabsha] and Taphis. I fought with the Blemmyes; and God gave me victory’.<sup>59</sup> Dating of such material is difficult, but this inscription is thought to date to just before AD 450 (by which point the Qustul cemetery has gone out of use and Török’s generation six or seven was buried at Ballana). One may wonder whether or not this change in designation was in part the result of the categorization by outside observers ultimately influencing the construction of ethnicity.<sup>60</sup> In her study of African kingship, Blier gives a pertinent example. After a hundred years of western observers describing and compartmentalizing their groups into neat packages, certain African rulers in particular seemed to have been directly influenced by this classificatory process: ‘Yoruba kings looked more ‘Yoruba’, Asante rulers looked more ‘Asante’, and Dahomey monarchs looked more ‘Dahomey’ – like’.<sup>61</sup>

A bundle of texts written on papyrus, and discovered in a cache at Qasr Ibrim<sup>62</sup> provide some examples of self-identification of the authors as Blemmye or Nobadae either in an explicit statement, or by addressing such an individual using the term ‘brother’. Of the self-identifying texts, it is significant that these Blemmye and Nobadae writings record within-group and between-group squabbling,<sup>63</sup> or altogether more mundane matters. They do not mention successful campaigns in which Egypt is ravaged and hauls of booty are carried off. If this was a particular pastime of the Blemmye and Nobadae, it does not appear to have been one which they considered important enough to discuss in personal letters, or to refer to in triumphal inscriptions. It is also interesting to note the linguistic variety of these texts, some of which were written in Greek, whilst others were written in Coptic.<sup>64</sup> It is unclear which language that the Blemmye or Nobadae spoke<sup>65</sup> and it is possible that they used a different language to perform written transactions from that which was commonly spoken, but this linguistic fluidity may further suggest the situational aspect of X-Group ethnicity.

<sup>57</sup> *FHN* 300 (King Kharamdoye ); *FHN* 310 (King Tamal); *FHN* 311 (King Isemne); *FHN* 313 (Kalabsha).

<sup>58</sup> *FHN* 1138, 1143.

<sup>59</sup> *FHN* 317.

<sup>60</sup> *Cf.* Lucy 2005: 96.

<sup>61</sup> Blier 1998: 39.

<sup>62</sup> *FHN* 319, 320-322.

<sup>63</sup> Notably the extended description in *FHN* 319.

<sup>64</sup> *FHN* 319 (Greek), *FHN* 321-322 (Coptic).

<sup>65</sup> For further discussion see Zaborski 1989.

Whilst X-Group ethnicity was fundamentally situational, and whilst (in a high status context, in the performances of the royal burials) it was also concerned with the construction of a real or imagined heroic past connected with the South, it may also be considered from a broader group perspective. Numerically, pottery is the most frequently occurring class of material culture in Lower Nubia, and that is also the case at the royal tombs, where the number of pottery vessels found runs into the thousands. The most distinctive pottery vessels are the small goblet type drinking cups, which were indigenously manufactured. The goblets, bowls, and other such forms<sup>66</sup> are found in different contexts, at both settlement and mortuary sites. These vessels have been found at numerous Lower Nubian sites including Qustul and Ballana. Indeed, indigenously manufactured pottery remains a consistent feature of the burials at the royal tombs, despite these individuals' access to exotic items and their importation of foreign pottery. It is this aspect of the material culture of Lower Nubia in the period which may really be marking ethnicity. Although stages in the development of the basic Lower Nubian pottery repertoire are also evident,<sup>67</sup> pottery was a form of material culture that cross-cut status divisions, and was a basic marker which is suggestive of some level of group cohesiveness, expressed materially.

### *Conclusion*

This article has sought to trace the ethnogenesis of the X-Group through time, and from at least three distinct perspectives. I cannot pretend to claim that this survey has been exhaustive, but the main moments of formation and alteration in X-Group ethnogenesis have been discussed. I must also admit my own role in continued X-Group ethnogenesis, especially terminologically, as many other scholars have, over the years, called for the term X-Group to be abandoned in favour of another name: Kirwan preferred the term 'Nubo-Meroitic'; Trigger preferred 'Ballana culture'; Williams argues for the use of the term 'Noubadian culture' and Edwards tends to prefer 'post-Meroitic'.<sup>68</sup> Of these alternative propositions, 'post-Meroitic' is the most attractive as it does not privilege a link to a particular site (as 'Ballana culture' does), or people (as 'Noubadian culture' does), whilst it simultaneously acknowledges a link back to Meroe.

The eternal difficulty in interpreting the material culture of the X-Group resides in the co-occurrence of cultural markers in one locality (really two places, Qustul and Ballana) which apparently mark those objects belonging to cultures other than those in which they are actually found. The objects look like ethnic migrants. Or at least that is the way in which they have often been treated. And perhaps to some extent they were: some ghost of their former identity may still have been attendant and recognizable.

X-Group ethnic identity must be viewed as a changing and dynamic aspect of identity which could cross-cut with other identities. At Qustul and Ballana ethnic identity was not the major aspect of identity to be marked out in the material remains. As royal tombs, their construction and furnishing is more about explicit statements of power and the right

<sup>66</sup> See Edwards 2004: 199 fig. 7.7.

<sup>67</sup> Edwards 2004: 199.

<sup>68</sup> Kirwan 1939: 44; Trigger 1969; Williams 1991: 3, 158; Edwards 2004.

to rule, than about X-Group ethnicity. However, certain aspects of the material culture are suggestive of the cultivation of a mythical heritage in connection to the royal burials at Meroe. Even more than this, X-Group ethnicity at Qustul and Ballana may have been constructed as an explicit form of resistance versus an encroaching Christian state in the north. Egypt may not have been actively intending to extend its southern border to incorporate Lower Nubia, and in this period quite the opposite is the case. Nevertheless the Lower Nubian X-Group may have perceived a cultural encroachment that threatened their identity. In Egypt, adherence to pagan cults and the practice of sacrifice had been banned by Theodosius in AD 392.<sup>69</sup> This decree was issued only a few years after the cemetery at Qustul was established, and where the dramatized practice of human and animal sacrifices<sup>70</sup> was an integral aspect of a proper royal burial. The rulers of the X-Group may have felt the potential implications of such a ban acutely, especially following the closure of the pagan temples in AD 389, and their subsequent need to negotiate access to the temple at Philae.<sup>71</sup> Such decisions made in Egypt, whilst not aimed at the X-Group themselves, were good reason to mark out strongly aspects of their cultural practice in order to maintain their independence and difference. These were aspects of identity that were both ethnic and religious.

The continued use of material culture exhibiting Kushitic motifs can be linked to a concern with maintaining a link to a Meroitic past. This link may be entirely culturally constructed, and have little or no basis in biological continuity. This aspect of ethnic identity was almost exclusively emphasized at the royal cemeteries of Qustul and Ballana, and as such may really be about the legitimization of contemporary rule, rather than a genuine ambition to recreate a glorious heritage now passed.

The creation of a more normative (or everyday) X-Group ethnicity can be attributed to the widespread use of similar, indigenously manufactured pottery items, which were encountered on a daily basis. That this type of material culture was a measure of group cohesion is evidenced by its widespread geographical occurrence, its discovery in a wide variety of contexts, and its appearance in contexts which cut across status boundaries. The extent to which this aspect of mundane material life was actively considered as constructing a common ethnic identity by the X-Group themselves is debateable. Such material was perhaps so quotidian that it often ‘disappeared’ from active view.

The ethnogenesis of the X-Group has been multiply authored and has taken shape a number of times: it has been created by Classical writers, by modern scholars, and by the X-Group as they lived and died. For the ancient writers and the modern scholars, X-Group ethnicity has never been lost sight of. For the X-Group, their ethnic identity and its active perception, marking, and maintenance, was not always a driving concern.

<sup>69</sup> *FHN* 1123.

<sup>70</sup> See Dann 2007 and 2008.

<sup>71</sup> Priscus 27.1 (*Exc. De Leg. Gent.* 11) [transl. Blockley 1983, 323].

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