

*Eide* (T.), Hägg (T.), *Pierce* (R.H.), *Török* (L.) (eds) *Fontes Historiae Nubiorum: Textual sources for the history of the Middle Nile region between the eighth century BC and the sixth century AD. Vol. III From the first to the sixth century AD.* Pp. 751-1216. Bergen: University of Bergen, 1998. ISBN: 82 91626 07 3.

This third volume of FHN continues in much the same careful and meticulous fashion as the two earlier volumes and the collection shows every sign of becoming a standard work for many years to come.

This volume contains previously unpublished Coptic material from Qasr Ibrim relating to the fifth century and a number of Meroitic inscriptions, but a large proportion of the volume is literary material drawn from the Graeco-Roman world. Not only is this material familiar, and perhaps less interesting in the context of this collection, but also presents considerable difficulties of interpretation. Firstly, and a minor quibble, the editors have adopted a policy of grouping material either by the date of the source, or sometimes the source's source, or, if these dates are unknown, by the date of events referred to. This creates minor anomalies in, for example, the dispersal of texts relating to events in the third century across the latter half of the volume. The editors' careful and scholarly introductions tend to the philological rather than the historical and offer little coherent guidance as to how to treat this material, though their reluctance is understandable. What, for instance, should happen to Heliodoros' *Aithiopia* [274]. The editors reprint three passages with elaborate warnings as to their historicity, but the fact that some 'notions may be regarded as authentic' (p. 1048) should not distract from the essentially fantastic nature of the tale. This is a relatively clear case, but in reprinting the so-called *Blemmyomachia* [326] attempts to relate this fragment of epic poetry to historical events are surely misconceived. And then there are the panegyrics [278-80]. Having Blemmyes quake before the emperor or comparing their ferocity to the cultured values of an emperor are obvious rhetorical *topoi* and, as when Augustan poets had Britons and Scythians fear Augustus' imperialistic designs, tell us nothing of the peoples beyond the frontier, beyond the fact that they are remote. Even 'respectable' historical

sources may be caught in the fog of this rhetoric. To return to events of the late third century, Egypt underwent a certain political and economic dislocation c. 250, in the Palmyrene episode (AD 267-72), and in the 290s. This period also sees a number of literary references to Blemmyes and warfare in Upper Egypt. The editors regard the Historia Augusta on Firmus and Aurelian [283] as 'probably largely fictitious', whereas the story of the Blemmyes' seizure of Koptos and Ptolemais [284 and 323] is taken seriously. The period of disruption culminates in two revolts and Diocletian's reorganisation of the frontier and the settlement of Nubians in key areas (beyond the frontier?) to restore security. The coincidence of domestic political disruption and Blemmyes' assaults gives pause for thought. How much of this is internal violence blamed on outsiders or opportunistic barbarians helping themselves during the empire's troubles?

The value of this collection lies not, however, in its literary material but in the documentary evidence. The Dodecashaenus was a zone of interaction between North and South and it is often argued that the continuation of pagan worship (until the eventual sixth-century conversion of the area which is attested in various inscriptions noting the Christianisation of temples) results from a desire to retain institutions which encouraged communication between North and South, though, on reflection, this seems a rather unlikely explanation. Pragmatism is not normally seen as characteristic of the religious authorities of fourth- and fifth-century Egypt. The level of interaction between North and South may perhaps somewhat underplayed since, for instance, many Roman soldiers worshipped at the temple of Mandoulis at Talmis and their inscriptions (not in this collection) stood alongside those attesting a Meroitic presence. Nevertheless, it is not respect for tradition that emerges from perhaps the most quoted of texts concerning Talmis; an order from the strategos to drive pigs from the temple complex [248]. This is seen as evidence of an 'appalling' and 'scandalous neglect' and much is made of the Egyptian elements in the name of the strategos (p. 978), though the order is to drive the

pigs from the village, not just the temple, perhaps suggesting a greater complexity to the situation than has hitherto been assumed.

Most of the texts are generated by North-South interaction along the Nile and although this was certainly an important aspect of Nubian culture, there is little material to illuminate internal developments or other influences. Yet, this is a period of some importance. Meroe disappears and the Blemmyes and Nubians emerge as competing powers. A victory inscription of Aeizanas [298] shows distinct similarities with other and much earlier celebrations of Meroitic victories by enumerating the livestock seized from presumably a pastoralist tribe in the region. Yet instead of using hieroglyphics, the text is in Greek. It suggests both unsurprising economic continuity (given the harsh environment of the area) and cultural change. The texts again frequently hint at the involvement of the Blemmyes in trade with Arabia, but Arabian cultural influence is not represented in the textual material.

Reconstructing the history of Nubia from these texts is almost impossible. King Silko's inscription [317] is probably the best illustration of relations between Nubians and Blemmyes but no narrative history of Nubia emerges. For that, we have to return to the archaeology.

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