

Lecture Transcript:

**New Perspectives on Ancient Nubia at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston:
Lecture 2 of the Africa Interconnected Series**

By Denise Doxey

Saturday, January 23, 2021

Louise Bertini:

Hello, everyone, and good afternoon or good evening depending on where you are joining us from. I'm Dr. Louise Bertini, the executive director of ARCE, and I want to welcome you to the second of our four-part lecture series called "Africa Interconnected: Ancient Egypt and Nubia." This virtual lecture series will delve into the history and interconnections of ancient Egypt and Nubia, the study of which has been largely marginalized by Western scholarship. This series will address the biases behind this lack of attention and examine how Egyptology, Nubiology and other disciplines have intersected. Today's lecture with Dr. Denise Doxey is "New Perspectives on Ancient Nubia at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston." Before I introduce Dr. Doxey, for those of you who are new to ARCE, we are a private organization whose mission is to support research on all aspects of Egyptian history and culture, foster broader knowledge about Egypt among the general public and support American-Egyptian cultural ties. As a nonprofit, we rely on ARCE's members to support our work, so I want to first give a special welcome to our ARCE members who are joining us today. If you're not already a member and are interested in joining, I invite you to visit our website, arce.org, to join online and learn more. We provide a suite of benefits to our members, including our private, member-only lecture series, and our next members-only lecture is on February 6th at 1 p.m. Eastern Time with Dr. Mohamed Kenawi of University of Leicester and Dr. Cristina Mondin of Padova University will be presenting on "The Rosetta Project: Change in Action at Amasili House." Our next public lecture is on January 31st at 1 p.m. Eastern Time with Dr. Kent Weeks, professional emeritus of the American University in Cairo, and is titled "Does the Past Have a Future? The Work of the Theban Mapping Project." So with that, I'm now going to introduce you to our speaker. Dr. Denise Doxey is curator of ancient Egyptian, Nubian and Middle Eastern art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Previously, she was keeper of the Egyptian section at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. She completed her MPhil at Oxford University and her PhD at University of Pennsylvania. She is the author and coauthor of numerous publications on Egyptian and Nubian art, archaeology and civilization. She has excavated in Egypt and Greece and has taught Egyptology at the University of Pennsylvania and Harvard University. She is currently on the board of ARCE and on ICOM's International Committee for Egyptology and is president of the New England chapter of ARCE. Welcome, Dr. Doxey.

Denise Doxey:

Thank you, Louise, for that introduction, and it's a pleasure to have been asked. Thank you to ARCE for the invitation and thank you to all of you how are on the call for sharing a piece of your Saturday with me. Today, as Louise said, I'm going to be discussing how we have reinterpreted our ancient Nubian collection in Boston over the years. One thing I have learned from a quarter century of working with Egyptian material both at Penn and at Boston is that most people in the world, through no fault of their own, know very, very little about Nubia, and this is something that we in Boston feel a real responsibility for correcting because we're in a unique position to do it, as I've bragged to anyone whoever wants to hear it, that we have the largest and most important collection of Nubian art outside Sudan with some 25,000 objects, but as I said, I know most people aren't really familiar with it, so with apologies to those of you who are full-time Nubiologists. I hope you'll bear with me while I just put Nubia on the map for those of you who aren't. Oops. Okay, my slide are not even ready to go. So literally putting Nubia on the map, Nubia is a bit of a misnomer, really, because there was never a country called Nubia. In antiquity, it was not even called Nubia. It was called Kush, later Ethiopia by the Greeks and Romans, and that stuck up until the early 20th century, but basically we're talking about the Nile Valley from about Aswan in Southern Egypt in the north down to below Khartoum in the south and probably farther south than that. There just haven't been excavations. Now, in antiquity, Nubia's economy was really based largely on two principal aspects, one of which was trade because being located where a number of trade routes from Central Africa, Western Africa and the Red Sea coast joined the Nile Valley, they were uniquely in a position to bring objects from elsewhere in Africa to the Nile Valley, the river, where they could proceed northward. But the other major linchpin of their economy was gold, and their gold supply was the envy of the ancient world. In these scene from the reign of Tutankhamun, a time when Egypt was in control of most of Nubia, we see a group of people bringing tribute to the king, and the man in center who looks like he's holding onto a tray of bagels is actually carrying a tray of gold ingots. This is the way that gold was transported, in these circular shapes. Now, the reason the MFA has such a fine Nubian collection is thanks almost entirely to the work of this man, Dr. George Andrew Reisner, who was both the curator at the MFA and a professor at Harvard, and he was a real pioneer. He set the bar for archaeology in Egypt. He was a meticulous note keeper and recordkeeper, and he was on the cutting edge of new technologies, like photography, for use in Egyptology, and we'll come back to George a little bit later. He was not only a very skillful archaeologist, he was also a very lucky archaeologist because when he worked in Nubia for some 20 years, he succeeded in excavating the cemeteries of the capital cities during the greatest phases of Nubian history, and you know a site is important when it gets a whole era named after it. So he first excavated at Kerma, the capital of the Kerma period from about 2400 to 1550 BCE. Then he moved south to Napata, the capital of the Napatan period, where he excavated both the Great Sanctuary of Amun-Re at Gebel Barkal, and both royal cemeteries adjacent to the site, the earlier at El Kurru and then later at Nuri. He then moved south

to Meroe, which was the capital of Nubia during the Meroitic period from about 332 BCE to 364 CE. And then finally, he moved up to the north where he excavated a series of Egyptian fortresses dating from both the Middle Kingdom and the New Kingdom. So why don't we know more about Nubia than we do? And there are many reasons, I think. One of them is that people didn't travel there as much as they do to Egypt, although in our next lecture in this series, you will hear about some who did. It's not taught in schools, but I think if I can steal the words of Lin-Manuel Miranda, its "Who tells your story" and in the case of the ancient Nubians, they did not do themselves any favors in that regard. If you look at the time line here from about 3000 BCE up until the 4th century CE, you'll notice that entire area that's surrounded in red, the Nubians left virtually no written records. In the green section, the Napatan period, the kings and other high officials left records in Egyptian language and in the Egyptian hieroglyphic script, and that we can read. So for the first time, it's like someone flashes a light on the subject, and we can see or hear Nubians talking about their deeds in their own perspective. And then finally, in the Meroitic period, they began writing in their own script and their own language. And while the script has been deciphered, the language has not been translated. So we can recognize personal names, nouns, place names, but we don't know what's actually going on with them. Meanwhile, in Egypt, they were writing all over everything from about 3000 BC onward, and the relationship between the Egyptians and the Nubians was always a fraught one throughout this period. They could be peaceful trade partners sometime. They could be sort of frenemies at other times, and much of the time they were out-and-out enemies. So the viewpoint of the Egyptians is never a positive one toward the Nubians. In fact, the Egyptian text very frequently follow the name of Kush with the adjective hesi, which means something like, "Vile, wretched, pathetic," but it's certainly not a compliment in any case. So the Nubians ... The Egyptians did not do a good job of telling Nubia's story. Neither, unfortunately, did George Reisner. Reisner was born 2 years after the Civil War and grew up in a time when racism in the US was particularly virulent and deadly, even more so than today. In addition, coming from a background in Egyptology, he could read the Egyptian and took them at their face value, in part because their opinions pretty much matched his. This is also an era in Egyptology when people studying Egyptology generally came from a background in ancient Near East and Egypt, and they would tend to take Egypt out of Africa and put it into the Southwest Asia-Mediterranean sphere while not doing the same with Nubia. So by today's standards, Reisner was both egregiously racist and egregiously sexist, and you will hear more about that in a future lecture in this series, so I won't go into it more. Some of what he wrote was absolutely cringe-inducing, and it also caused him to misinterpret some of his finds in rather egregious ways. So to talk about how we've interpreted Nubia over the years at the MFA, when the material first came over from the excavations, it was exhibited sort of randomly mixed in with Egyptian material as though it was all one civilization. So in this gallery from 1931, you see, on the left-hand photo, this big stele of King Tanyidemani, which is the longest inscription in Meroitic in the world, and it's mixed in randomly with Greek, Greco-Roman, late-period Egyptian material. And in the picture on the right, you

can see the back the funerary figurines known as shawbties from the Napatan period, again mixed in with both Meroitic and Egyptian material. That changed in 1992 with the installation of the MFA's first Nubian gallery, and at the time, this was a matter of great celebration and pride because it was the only art museum in the country to have a dedicated Nubian gallery. Just to give you some pictures of the installation, it was a very sort of Spartan or very early '90s installation, probably not what we would do today, but nevertheless, it was a Nubian gallery. And here is that stele I just showed you. It has a place of honor in the gallery, and here it is in 1995 with Edmund Barry Gaither from the Museum of the National Center for Afro-American Artists and Malcolm Rogers, who had just at that point taken over as the director of the MFA. Another point of pride with this exhibition was that right from the beginning, Boston's Black community was involved in planning, and this is just a couple of scenes from the opening, and Boston ... The Museum of Fine Arts is actually located in a majority-minority part of Boston, and that was never reflected in our interpretation prior to this. But this is all well and good, but there were a few things that were maybe not so great. If you look at the top picture here, the gallery that would become the Nubian gallery had previously been the bookshop. And despite the best efforts of people in the department at the time, the museum decided to sort of do this on the cheap. So if you notice, on the left, the woman in the black coat, she's perusing postcards in a case. That very same case, which was designed for postcards, was recycled for art. For 3,000 years' worth of art, as a matter of fact, spanning from the Neolithic to the Napatan period, and I used to joke when I came to the MFA back in 1999, "How many MFA staffers does it take to change a light bulb?" Because in the case of this case, it took about 12 because they never changed the fluorescent lighting inside the cases, so we had a utility crew to take the big glass doors off. Then we had art handlers to remove the art. The electrician would climb inside and lift up the panel and change the light bulb and then put it all back again. I should also [Indistinct] in 1993, the interpretation of this material was cutting edge because we were very rich in Egyptological knowledge on the staff, but in the years that followed, the excavation to Nubia increased exponentially, in part because of a series of dams. So what was thought to be true in 1993 has often been replaced by new ways of thinking and new information, so the interpretation was a little bit in need of refreshing, and the gallery was certainly in need of refreshing. But it did not end up happening exactly as planned because in 2006, the gallery was closed and transformed into ticketing, which is what it looks like today. So the plan had been to reinstall Nubia fairly quickly thereafter with plans to reinstall Nubia in 2008, as a matter of fact, but for various reasons, those kept getting pushed back. So the collection sort of languished until 2015 when Yvonne Markowitz, our curator of jewelry and also an expert in Nubian jewelry in particular, and I put together this small exhibition of Nubian jewelry called "Gold and the Gods: Jewels of Ancient Nubia." As you see, it was a relatively small installation, but it gave us a chance to really reflect and reinterpret the material based on all of these new excavations and new ways of thinking, and it also gave us a chance to experiment with what we might do in a longtime permanent gallery, ways we might present things. So fast-forward to 2019, and something I never thought I would live to see happened, when

our Nubian collection was showcased in our Ann and Graham Gund Gallery, which is our sexy, big, 10,000-square-foot special exhibition space, and this really gave us an opportunity to reinterpret things in a number of ways. Now, one of the things that we wanted to address was the issue of colonialism because the excavations, all of our excavations, took place at a time when the Sudan was under the control of the so-called Anglo-Egyptian Condominium. And what this meant in practical purpose is that the people who signed off on Reisner's permits to excavate and dividing the finds with the National Museum in Khartoum were not Sudanese people, but they were British people. So at the instigation of Rita Freed, who was at that point our chair until she retired this past year, Rita reached out to the local Sudanese community in Boston, which is actually a very large group, and she brought them in for a series of presentations and meetings. And on the right you see Rita in the front in the blue dress, and on the left in the gray dress is Makeeba McCreary who is our head of learning and community engagement meeting with another group. And beside Rita is Professional Abdel-Rahman Mohamad, who contributed a text panel to our introductory section of the exhibition about what this collection means to the Sudanese community in the US, and this actually led to a ripple effect in which we ended up having many, many Sudanese and Sudanese-American visitors from through the country and Canada as well. Another reinterpretation at this time was, we finally made the jump away from BC and AD. You'll see, I'm using BCE and CE now, and this is the first exhibition in which we did that. We are currently replacing labels elsewhere in our galleries appropriately. So the first section ... One more thing I should say: Another thing we decided to do in terms of the interpretation was instead of having a traditional audio guide, to invite people from other fields and other specialties, like arts and sciences and literature, to come in and give brief interviews on-screen in the galleries that talked about ways in which either Nubia resonates with them or making contributions to the study of Nubia from outside of Egyptology. So Kerma, as I mentioned, is a site where Reisner most got it wrong. The tombs at Kerma are nothing like the tombs in Egypt. The kings and elite were buried in these mounded tumulae, and often accompanied by the bodies of people who either were killed or killed themselves to accompany them. Reisner had never seen anything like this. The burials themselves were also unlike anything seen in Egypt. Where Egyptians at this time period were being buried in coffins, in Kerma they were buried either on a, if you're wealthy enough to afford it, a bed like this one. This is a reproduction made in 1940 of one of the beds with footboards and laid with these ivory figures of either real animals or mythical animals, like the Taweret figure you see here. Other people were buried and generally have animal skins. Their pottery was unlike anything you see in Egypt. It was beautiful, handmade, highly glazed pottery that Reisner rightly called, "The finest pottery ever produced in the Nile Valley." But, of course, being Reisner, he assumed it was made by Egyptians. The temples are nothing like the Egyptian temples. This mortuary temple at the Cemetery of Kerma, which now looks like a big pile of mud brick, was originally decorated with this glittering bright blue glazed decoration, including a pair of lions that flanked the entryway. And this brings up another interesting point about Kerma, which is that unlike Egypt, Kerma

does not ever have representations of kings and gods in human form, but we do have a number of examples of representations of powerful animals, like lions, bulls, hippos, rams that must have had some association with kingship, but in the absence of any texts, it's only speculation. But Reisner also found in these tombs of the last kind of of the Kerma period a number of Egyptian statues and inscriptions, including this very famous statue of Lady Sennuwy of the Early Middle Kingdom. Now, Lady Sennuwy ... He was also a base of a statue of her husband, Djefaihapi, and Djefaihapi and Sennuwy are known from their tomb in Egypt, and Reisner took this, despite all of the other archaeological material that looked nothing like Egypt, he jumped to the conclusion that this was an Egypt outpost that Djefaihapi was the governor and that the only reason they were buried in this barbaric manner was that Black-African women who were part of his harem influenced him to be buried this way. Turns out, he had it completely backwards, and almost as soon as the ink was dry, people began to take issue with this. The excavations of Charles Bonnet and Dominique Valbelle beginning in the 1970s and continuing until today have shown that Kerma was, in fact, the center of a very important and influential kingdom, and he also had the chronology backwards, that this statue was in fact buried at Kerma some 400 years after it was created. In 2003, Vivian Davies published a text from an Egyptian tomb at the site of El Kab in which the tomb owner actually fought back during a raid on El Kab by people from Kerma. And El Kab was not at the very southern border, so this was evidence that the Kerma people actually got quite far into Egypt with their military activities and most likely brought all these Egyptian objects back to Kerma as trophies of war. [Indistinct] we were bringing in outside voices, and for Kerma, we invited Dr. Shomarka Keita of the Smithsonian Institution, and he is a geneticist by training and has done a lot of work with ancient DNA, and he spoke about Egypt, Nubia and the concept of race and comparing DNA from ancient Egyptians and ancient Nubians, lo and behold, there is no difference. So the entire concept of race, when applied to the Egyptians and the Nubians, is really a modern construction, not something that the Egyptians or Nubians themselves would have identified. Eventually, the Egyptians conquered Kerma, destroyed the city and took over its territory, and they ruled for some 500 years, and that's the next part of our exhibition. One of the things that we wanted to point out in this gallery was that despite the royal propaganda of the Egyptian kings, the reality on the ground was somewhat different, and here for example, we have two reliefs from the tomb built at the fortress of [foreign] by Thutmose III, and under Thutmose III, Egypt's empire reached its greatest extent. And here he is worshipping the god Khnum, the ram-headed god Khnum, who is called the one who smites the bowmen, the bowmen being the Nubians because they were always famous as archers. But meanwhile, this enigmatic- looking object on the right is a gazelle-skin loincloth that belonged to a Nubian named Maiherperi. Maiherperi's tomb was not found in Nubia, but rather it was found in Egypt, and in the Valley of the Kings no less. He was not a king, but he was an important official under this very king, Thutmose III, and he was buried in a traditional Egyptian burial with a traditional Egyptian Book of the Dead. And this demonstrates that while Thutmose III may denigrate all Nubians as a group, an individual Nubian, like Maiherperi, probably

knew him personally, served in his administration and was given the extraordinarily rare opportunity to be buried in the Valley of the Kings. We also have This is a much earlier stele of a Nubian who lived in Egypt by the name of Nennu, and you can see him there. He's dressed in Nubian-style clothing. He's holding onto his bow and quiver, showing that he's a bowman and archer. But he's married to an Egyptian woman, who is wearing Egyptian attire, and the children are dressed like Nubians. The girl in the center is wearing a long leather kilt, which is typical of women found at Kerma. So the actual reality is that things were much more complicated than reading Egyptian inscriptions would let you believe. those of you who watched last week's panel will recognize Dr. Vanessa Davies from Bryn Mawr College, who discussed how Egyptologist removed Egypt from Africa. She has done extensive work on the history of Egyptology and the effects of racism on early Egyptology, and you will, if you watched last week's panel with her, what she had to say. The bulk of our exhibition was dedicated to the Napatan period, and the reason for that is twofold. One, that the Napatan period was the greatest period in Nubian history, when they conquered Egypt under the reign of King Piankhi in the mid-8th century BC and ruled an empire that was actually a greater stretch of the Nile Valley than the Egyptians themselves ever did, from Khartoum all the way to the Mediterranean. And we have three galleries dedicated to Napata. The first one focused on the sanctuary Gebel Barkal with produced a number of statues of Nubian kings, such as this one of Senkamanisken. And Senkamanisken, you'll notice, was portrayed, in many ways, in a very Egyptian style the pose, the type of kilt, but he's wearing distinctive Nubian headgear and jewelry. Also in this gallery, we have material from the early Napatan royal cemetery at El-Kurru including the spectacular jewelry of the wives of King Piankhi, of which there were several. And some of them, such as the two on the left here, actually looked very Egyptian in style and could easily be mistaken for Egyptian. But the one on the right, certainly not so, of this nude, winged goddess. We don't know who this goddess is, but the solar disc on her head suggests she has something to do with solar religion. Another thing I wanted to point out here is that as I said earlier, in the Kerma period, animals seemed to have played a very important role in Nubian religion, and even after a number of Egyptian gods, most notably Amun-Ra, were adopted in Nubia, animal-headed gods and gods in animal form, including Amun-Rap in the form of a ram, continue throughout the rest of Nubian history. And in this gallery, we introduce Lana Bashir, who at that time was a senior in high school. She's now at the University of Massachusetts, and she was born in Khartoum, grew up in Boston and spoke about seeing these objects for the first time in her life because they have been off-view for most of her life. The next gallery was dedicated to the shawabties of kings Taharqa and his successors, predecessors and successors. His are by far the most numerous. He had over 1,000 of them in his tomb made of various materials, and you saw those in that wall case in 1931. They had a wonderful glorious display of their own. The final gallery of Napata featured material from the cemetery at Nuri, and this example here is a portion of the so-called Treasure of King Aspelta, which survived only because a piece of the ceiling in his pyramid had fallen in, and the grave robbers missed it, so it gives you just this little tease about how opulent these tombs most have been

when they were intact. And, of course, the poster child for the exhibition, identity graphics, this winged pectoral of the goddess Isis. And in this gallery, Chester Higgins spoke, and Chester, who I believe might be listening, is a photographer who worked for many years for The New York Times where he photographed all manner of rich, famous, influential people and celebrities, but in his spare time, he made numerous trips to Egypt and Sudan and Ethiopia where he's taken really breathtakingly beautiful photographs, some of which we included in the exhibition. And finally, we move onto Meroe, which is the latest of our galleries, and this is a period in which Egypt was now under control of first the Ptolemies and then the Romans, and Nubian art looks far less Egyptian during this period. Pottery, once again, becomes one of the medium of great creativity and expression for artists, and in Napatan or in Meroitic times, the pottery is decorated with painted scenes, and sometimes they're quite whimsical. In this case, these crocodiles, the local motif, biting each others tails, and underneath is a series of grapevines, which is a motif that was borrowed from the Greek and Roman world. And in fact, wine was one of the major imports from the Mediterranean into Meroe. Meroitic jewelry is among the finest ever produced in Nubia, and in particular, the use of enameling which you see on this bracelet on the right. The Meroitic jewelers made use of at least seven different kinds of enamel, some of which were thought to have been invented in medieval Europe prior to their most recent analysis here. The stele of King Tanyidemani, which you saw a couple of times already, is prominently featured in this gallery, and it's a two-sided stele. Actually, four-sided, inscribed all the way around with a text that describes temple offerings being made after a military victory, but because the language has not been fully deciphered, translated, nobody knows exactly what it says yet. Now, unlike the Egyptians, who portrayed the ancient Nubians as inferior, the classical authors on whom we rely to some extent for information on Meroe, saw Meroe as a center of great culture and learning, and Herodotus called the Nubians the tallest and most beautiful people in the world, and there's considerable evidence of trade with the Mediterranean at Meroe. We know that classical scholars visited it. It must have been a very cosmopolitan place where people from around Africa and the Mediterranean were all intermingling. And some examples that we have of imports from the Greek world are this head of Dionysus, which is one of a pair found in the same tomb, and a rhyton by Sotades, who is a well known Greek, Attic vase painter who was particularly known for these three-dimensional sculptural figurative vessels. In the Meroitic gallery, we invited Professor Nicole Aljoe from Northeastern University to speak, and she is a professor of literature and the head of the Africana-studies program, but she specializes, among other things, in the writings of early 20th century Black authors in the Boston area, including an author named Pauline Hopkins who wrote a book called "Of One Blood." She also published numerous other things, but in the story "Of One Blood," a pale-skinned African-American man who has been passing as White travels to Meroe for an excavation and ends up discovering this fantastic, powerful, mystical civilization that he ultimately ... Well, I won't spoil the story for you, but what's remarkable about this is that the author lived, actually ... The story was published in 1905, so this was before any of our excavations even took place, which shows how much of a place Meroe and Nubia

held in the minds of Black Americans even at the turn of the 20th century, and next month you will hear more about that from Jeremy Pope. If you want to see any of the videos that we included, as well as a sort of 3-D walk-through of the exhibition, they are all available on our website, www.mfa.org.