

# TOMBOS

## A NEW SOCIETY ON THE EGYPTIAN FRONTIER



PHOTO: STUART TYSON SMITH

*In 2016 the Tombos Project discovered the intact New Kingdom shaft tomb of an elderly woman named Weret. To ensure that her heart would not betray her during the Netherworld's final judgment (and reveal any less-than-pure activity from her life), Weret was buried with an expensive artefact: a heart scarab. This example was unusual, however, as it came with a human head.*

Located on the southern frontier of the ancient Egyptian empire, a New Kingdom-era cemetery provides valuable new insights into the region's funeral customs.

Recent discoveries at Tombos in northern Sudan may change the way we think about the relationship and interactions between ancient Egypt and its Nubian neighbours.

The Tombos Project is also finding evidence of the long history of entanglement that began in the New Kingdom and led to the largest empire ancient Egypt had ever known.

Jeff Burzacott



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“He has overthrown the chief of the Kushites”  
 (Tombos Stela, reign of Thutmose I, ca. 1502 B.C.)

**I**T MAY HAVE BEEN with a fair degree of trepidation that the native inhabitants of Tombos watched the Egyptian colonists arrive. And with good reason. The Egyptians had been here before, and it had often not ended well. Around 50 years earlier, the New Kingdom’s Thutmose I (ca. 1504–1492 B.C.) had a commemorative stela inscribed into a large boulder on the bank of the Nile. Today known as the Tombos Stela, it records his brutal slaying of the Kushite leadership and the capture of their people. In the text, Thutmose I proclaims Egypt’s supremacy over Nubia and calls on his successors to preserve the boundary.

Now, five decades later, the Egyptian troops were back at Tombos—no doubt sensing a great deal of mistrust from the locals as they moved through the streets. The colonists, also, may have felt a little uneasy—they were a long way from home. From the Egyptians’ point of view, the Third Cataract was the frontier land—the effective border of physical control. No Egyptian settlements have ever been found beyond the Fourth Cataract further south.

The Egyptians were there to control the lucrative trade traffic along the Nile, and, no doubt as a show of force to the rulers at Kerma, just a few kilometres to the south, at the 3rd Cataract of the Nile. Kerma was the capital of the Kushite Kingdom, and had thrived for millennia. In its heyday, the kingdom’s territory extended all the way from the 1st to the 5th Cataracts.

Since the Old Kingdom, however, the Egyptians had placed great importance on Nubia and its trade routes—and had experienced a long, rocky relationship. The conquest of Nubia was a crowning achievement for the early 12th-Dynasty pharaoh Amenemhat I and his son, Senusret I. Their Middle Kingdom successors built forts along the Nile to protect the waterway from nomadic tribes and to facilitate the flow of Nubian goods into Egypt. As American Egyptologist George Reisner once noted, “the southern products, the ebony, the ivory, the pelts, the incense and resin, the ostrich feathers, the black slaves, were as much desired by the kings of the Middle Kingdom as by their forebears” (*Bulletin of the Museum of Fine Arts*, 1929).

And this is the well-worn tale of Nubian-Egyptian relations. Mysterious Nubia, with overtones of “dark Africa”, served to supply a hungry Egyptian state with exotic treasures and all the gold needed to run the empire. When Nubian resentment over military trespass or forced servitude inevitably grew into revolt, violent subjugation was the pharaonic order of the day.

It certainly fits with the ancient Egyptian narrative; every good pharaoh was duty-bound to exercise more control over territory and resources—by force if need be. In this regard, it helped to portray the unfortunate inhabitants of foreign lands as vividly un-Egyptian, and therefore, wretched; classic “them and us”.

Dr. Stuart Tyson Smith, anthropology professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara, calls it “cultural chauvinism”—government-sanctioned prejudice.

There was more to it than just military conquest,



A colourful “smiting of the enemies” from Abu Simbel, as interpreted by Italian painter Giuseppe Angelelli in 1832.

Many temples are decorated with bold images of the “smiting scene”, showing the mighty pharaoh standing over the traditional enemies of Egypt, who kneel in submission at his feet. The pharaoh clutches the enemies’ hair, poised to strike down with a mace.

Scenes like this were designed to symbolically defeat Egypt’s enemies who threaten the cosmic order of *ma’at*. The foreigners embody *isfet*, the chaotic disorder that threatens to unravel creation.

By carving this action into stone, the king was forever proclaiming that he had delivered his obligation to the Egyptian people and the gods.



however. As Dr. Smith told *NILE Magazine*, “these negative ethnic stereotypes had an ideological function as the symbolic forces of *isfet* [chaos] that the king defeated/tamed in order to establish *ma’at* [the eternal order of things]. Egyptian temples are decorated with great scenes of pharaoh pounding in the heads of cowering foreigners—including Nubians (see above).

Yet at the same time that Ramesses was vividly establishing *ma’at* on the walls of Abu Simbel, further south at Tombos, in the borderlands of Egypt and Nubia, the locals and the Egyptian colonists were quietly getting on with the job of getting along.

### THE TOMBOS PROJECT

Stuart Tyson Smith and Dr. Michele Buzon, a professor of anthropology at Purdue University, Indiana, have been excavating at Tombos since 2000, investigating the cemetery used by the elite and middle-class townsfolk during the New Kingdom colonisation of Tombos.

Far from a picture of oppression, excavations are suggesting that when it came to designing the way in which

they would equip themselves for the afterlife, the inhabitants of Tombos enjoyed a powerful freedom: choice.

How you choose to appear as you face eternity says a lot about the hopes and values you hold, as well as the trappings you admire in life. At Tombos the researchers are finding that burial customs were very much a “mix’n’match” between traditional Nubian and new-style Egyptian. Stuart Tyson Smith explains that “you get this really interesting entangled culture blending different elements in really different ways, but also there seems to be a lot of individual choice involved. . . .”

A prime example is a tomb discovered in 2002. Inside the burial vault was a group of intact burials of men and women. The men were laid out in the extended (i.e. mummified) Egyptian fashion, while the women were flexed in traditional Nubian style and resting on beds. Included with one of the Nubian-style burials were amulets of the household dwarf god Bes.

It appears that the woman had sought to be buried in a traditional manner (or had that decision made for her by relatives who were asserting her Nubian heritage). At the



The foundations of Siamun's pyramid; one of ten in the elite Tombos cemetery.



A rectangular funerary "cone" belonging to the Tombos official, Siamun.

As soon as pyramids fell out of royal favour (at the start of the New Kingdom, around 1550 B.C.), wealthy nobles began to include mud brick pyramids as a part of their tombs. The practice quickly spread to Nubia as colonies were established, further and further south. The first pyramids at Tombos were built in the mid-18th Dynasty when the colony was founded, around the reign of Thutmose III.

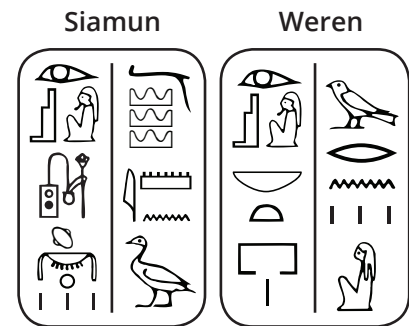
In 2000 an expedition led by Stuart Tyson Smith uncovered the 3,500-year-old pyramid tomb and chapel of an Egyptian colonial administrator named Siamun, and his mother, "the Lady of the House", Weren.

Although the mudbrick superstructure has mostly disappeared, the pyramid once stood around ten-metres-high—equal to the largest private pyramids in Nubia. "Our tomb owners," Stuart Tyson Smith states, "were important players in colonial society."

Smith says that "Siamun's pyramid is particularly interesting with its Theban style T-shaped chapel and full complement of funerary cones, including rectangular ones [left]... for himself and his mother Weren.

"These are almost exclusively Theban, which really suggests our guy was sent to Nubia from Thebes."

Funerary cones were set into plaster in a decorative frieze over the entrance to the tomb. The text on Siamun's (left) and Weren's cones read:



"Osiris, Scribe and Reckoner of the Gold of Kush, Siamun"

"Osiris, mistress of the house, Weren"

Both the size of his tomb and Siamun's titles reflect his importance in the Tombos bureaucracy. His title, "Reckoner of the Gold of Kush" meant that he was probably in charge of the collection of tribute from the rulers of the still-powerful city of Kerma, just a few kilometres to the south.

Private pyramids continued to be built through the end of the New Kingdom and into the Third Intermediate Period (at least one from the 25th Dynasty). Stuart Tyson Smith believes that it was these smaller, private pyramids that inspired the later Kushite slender-sided royal tombs, and not the Egyptian royal pyramids.

same time, she carried with her something with a distinctly Egyptian flavour: an amulet of the Egyptian household deity who scared away both evil spirits and physical dangers. Smith writes that “She was particularly fond of a rare dancing Bes amulet that had been broken in antiquity, yet was saved and included in her burial.”

Near the body of another Nubian woman was a faience scarab carrying the name of Amenhotep III (ca. 1350 B.C.), and a scaraboid plaque featuring a scarab beetle beneath a sun disk, probably representing the Egyptian god of the rising sun (and hence rebirth) Khepri. Smith’s conclusion was that “the care taken with her burial suggests she was not a slave, or even a servant, but rather a Nubian woman who had become a vital member of the colonial community through marriage with one of the colonists.”

The Nubian-style burials mixed in with Egyptian-style reveal a much closer connection between the two societies than was previously suspected.

### SPOILT FOR CHOICE

As they expected for a colonial town, Smith and Buzon encountered fully Egyptian burials with canopic jars, wooden coffins, and bodies wrapped in Egyptian style. They have also found evidence of Egyptian funerary rituals, such as broken red pots. These represented *isfet* (chaos), and ritually smashing the pot or jar had the effect of expelling any evil spirits that might threaten the deceased.

Alternatively, the researchers also found contemporary Nubians buried in Nubian style with no Egyptian influence whatsoever.

What has surprised the Tombos Project team is the extraordinary variety of cultural influences within burials at Tombos. Stuart Tyson Smith explains that “it’s not just a matter of the two cultures mash up and then you get this new hybrid thing that’s consistent. There seems to be a lot of individual choice— whether or not you want a Nubian bed and/or an Egyptian coffin and/or to be wrapped like a mummy or whether or not you want an Egyptian-style amulet and/or Nubian ivory jewellery.”

They call it “cultural entanglement”: the process by which colonising powers and indigenous people influence one another and change over time.

It is here that we find that out on the frontier, far from pharaoh’s political and religious rhetoric, the Egyptians and the “wretched Kush” were getting on just fine.

**(RIGHT)** The timelines of the Egyptian and Nubian royal houses intersect at the 25th Dynasty, where the Nubian Kings, from Napata (between the 3rd and 4th Cataracts), ruled over Egypt as well.

Egyptian arrivals at Tombos appear to have largely stopped by the end of the New Kingdom, around 1070 B.C., and the area enters what has been referred to as a “Nubian Dark Age”, of which little has previously been known. Over the next 350 years the Napatan kings slowly grow in power and become a regional political and military force. Within a century they had pushed north and conquered Egypt, establishing the 25th Dynasty.

Perhaps its no surprise that the Napatan kings saw themselves as the true heirs to the Egyptian throne: they were, after all, probably part Egyptian.

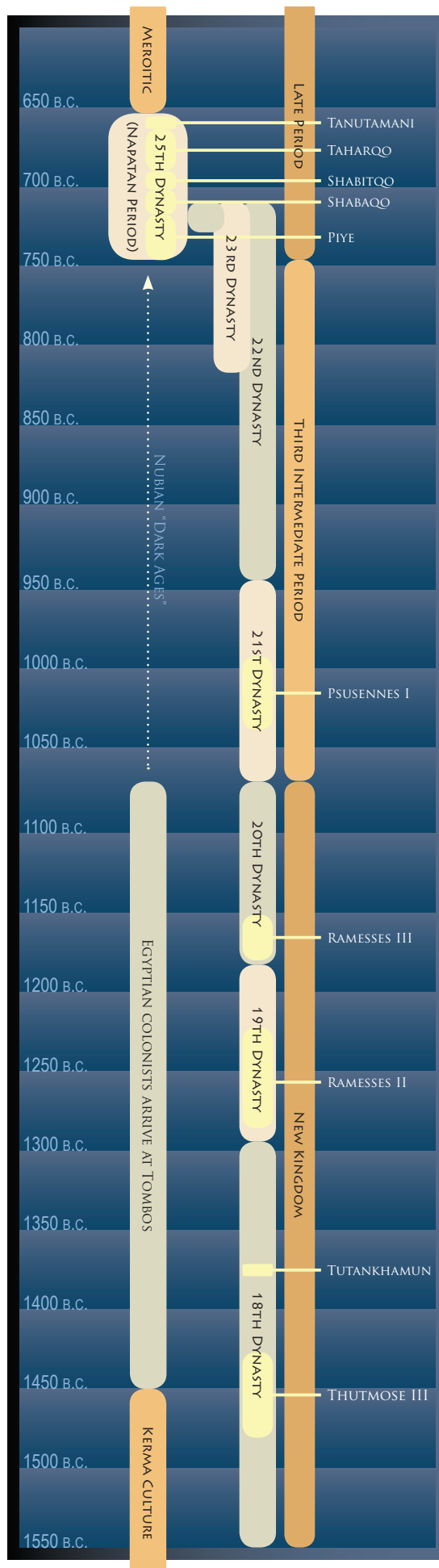




PHOTO: STUART TYSON SMITH

Discarded by thieves in their search for valuables, this ceramic canopic jar lid was discovered in January 2017 at the back of an 18th-Dynasty tomb chamber.

Each of the four canopic jar lids found in the tomb was decorated with human faces, as was the practice in the Middle and early New Kingdoms. The inscription on each vessel invoked the protection and blessing of one of the four Sons of Horus. From the 19th Dynasty canopic jar lids would take on their appearance.

While ceramic canopic jars could be produced more quickly and cheaply than the high-class alabaster versions,

Michele Buzon writes that “the appearance of canopic jars at all indicates the high status of the primary tomb owner in Tombos’ society.”

From the 21st Dynasty (ca. 1069 B.C.) the mummified organs were usually wrapped and put back inside the body cavity, although canopic jars, sometimes solid “dummy” jars, were still included in the burial equipment.

The “proper” use of canopic jars, as embraced by the New Kingdom Tombos settlement, was revived briefly during 25th Dynasty Nubian rule over Egypt. The Napatan kings, it seems, were sticklers for the “proper way” of doing things.

## A CHANGE OF PLAN?

The successful integration between the locals and the newcomers may have had something to do with a new strategy on the part of the Egyptians. Previous forays into Nubia seem to be dominated by violence and suppression.

Examination of skeletal remains by Michele Buzon, however, has shown a far lesser degree of violence at Tombos compared to other colonial sites. The Egyptians were there to impose control, there is no doubt about that, but this time they may have arrived with a diplomatic, rather than purely military plan in mind.

Whether the relative peace at Tombos was by design or accident (i.e. the locals didn’t put up a fight), it appears the Egyptians ended up working *with* the local people, rather than *against* them.

For all the “cultural entanglement”, however, one thing the researchers haven’t seen at all, however, is Egyptians buried in Nubian style. It seems clear that the Egyptians arrived from a dominant political position, and quickly impressed on the local population their customs and religion. And the elite Tombos cemetery *would* have been impressive, with as many as ten large mud-brick pyramids built for the upper-class bureaucrats stationed there.

## THE PYRAMIDS OF TOMBOS

In 2000 Stuart Tyson Smith led a mission to Tombos and discovered an impressive private pyramid that would have once stood around 10-metres-tall. Only the foundations or one or two courses of the pyramids remain today.

Thanks to the extremely rare occurrence of Theban-style funerary cones, which, prior to this discovery, were unheard of this far south into Nubia, we know who commissioned such an impressive tomb. The cones were inscribed with the names and titles of an Egyptian colonial administrator, “the Scribe and Reckoner of the Gold of Kush”, Siamun, and his mother, “the Mistress of the House”, Weren. The funerary cones and the Theban-style T-shaped chapel suggest that Siamun and Weren originally came from Thebes, and wished to enter the afterlife in the same manner as their countrymen back home.

Siamun’s titles tell us that he was an important official in the Nubian colonial administration. Smith suggests that he was “probably in charge of tribute coming from the former kingdom of Kush, still based at Kerma, a mere 10km to the south.” That such a high-ranking official was based at Tombos demonstrates the importance of the town as an administrative centre and hub to control the trade corridors.

PHOTO: MICHELE BUZON



January 2017 was an exciting time for discoveries at Tombos. Found within a mudbrick-lined burial shaft, likely dating to the Third Intermediate Period (ca. 1069–747 B.C.), was a woman buried in the Nubian flexed position on top of a large woven basket with a dog at her feet. This was the first animal burial directly associated with a person at Tombos.

The discovery follows one made a year earlier by Dr. Sarah Schrader who has been co-directing with Stuart Tyson Smith a project at the Kerma Period cemetery at Abu Fatima. This site is around 10 km north of the ancient city of Kerma. In 2016 Dr. Schrader found an intentionally buried dog

with a leather collar, buried with a young adult male. Both individuals were placed on top of cowhide.

A Swiss team has spent more than 30 years excavating the Kerma capital itself and has found a number of dogs buried at the feet of individuals at the royal burial site.

Although no cause of death has yet been established for the Tombos canine, it would have been an unlikely coincidence for both the woman and the dog to have passed away naturally around the same time. The unfortunate pooch was more probably despatched to join its sentimental owner for companionship in the afterlife.

### THE 25TH DYNASTY

George Reisner, Director of the Harvard University-Museum of Fine Arts Egyptian Expedition, believed that rather than a treasure-hunt for trinkets, the prime objective of excavating a site was “to untangle the series of human actions which have left their mark on the place.” In other words, to tell the story of the people who once lived there. In this fashion, the excavations at Tombos are providing intriguing evidence of the “back story” of the eventual rise of the Napatan kings of the 25th Dynasty.

The contemporary tale goes that during Ramesses III’s reign in Dynasty 20 (ca. 1184–1153 B.C.), Lower Egypt came under pressure from invasions of Libyans and the “Sea Peoples”, who had previously swept through—and devastated—the mighty Hittite empire. They now had their sights on Egypt. The forces throughout Nubia were recalled for more

pressing military action in the north, and soon towns like Tombos were set adrift to follow their own path. This part of Nubia’s story then went cold—for almost 500 years—

before an Egyptianized ruling class from Napata (modern Karima) near the 4th Cataract sailed into the heart of Thebes and claimed Egypt.

The Napatan kings—Egypt’s 25th Dynasty—are recognised as having sponsored a renaissance of Egyptian art and culture, and created a massive empire that stretched from the 6th Cataract to the Mediterranean Sea.

So where did these Napatan kings come from? It seems likely that local Nubians had married into the Egyptian colonial community, and the people at Tombos at the end of the New Kingdom

were the descendants of these Egyptian-Nubian families. Preliminary evidence from three seasons of excavation indicates that a multicultural community—with kinship



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The ancient name for Tombos may have been Taroy. Stuart Tyson Smith explains that the name Taroy was mentioned on a stela of the Viceroy of Kush, Merymose 𓆎𓆏𓆑𓆒𓆓, who served under Amenhotep III. The stela was discovered at Semna, north of Tombos and is now in the British Museum.

The stela describes the campaign of Merymose against bands of rebellious Nubian militias. “Merymose talks about recruiting soldiers from the region between the fortresses of Baki (Kubban in Lower Nubia) and Taroy for a campaign against a place called Ibhēt (perhaps near the Wadi Allaqi). The distance mentioned places Taroy at the Third Cataract and Tombos always seemed the most likely candidate, but the absence of a fortification created problems—until we found [a] massive fortified wall and ditch enclosure.”

Dr. Mohamed Faroug Ali (standing, above) of the University of California, Santa Barbara, has been excavating under the modern village at Tombos—the site of the ancient town. He has been following a large wall running parallel to a two-metre-deep trench, lined with mud brick walls and with a mud plaster floor. This was a massive construction, running east-west for around 100 meters.

In 2016, with the assistance of Musaab Awad Allah (Shendi Antiquities Office and University of Shendi), Mohamed uncovered a corner (above), where the trench and walls make a right angle turn to the south. Large deposits of ceramics suggest a date starting from the mid-to-late 18th Dynasty. Is this the enclosure wall and trench of the Egyptian fortification? Excavations continue.

on both sides of the border—continued to flourish at Tombos beyond the New Kingdom. In fact, the Tombos cemetery shows continued use well into the Napatan Period.

Strontium isotope analysis conducted by Buzon, which reveals where you are located when your teeth are forming, suggests that following the troops’ withdrawal, more of the cemetery’s tenants were born locally, however elements of Egyptian cultural practices continued.

Rather than having been “set adrift”, it’s more likely that the Nubian/Egyptian population of Tombos continued to forge a new society that shared elements of both cultures. Indeed, images of the 25th-Dynasty Napatan pharaohs, carved during their Egyptian takeover, feature a synthesis of Nubian and Egyptian features. Reliefs show a distinctly Nubian face beneath the Kushite cap that replaces

the white crown, and two royal cobras on the king’s brow instead of the usual single uraeus.

Stuart Tyson Smith proudly sums their work at Tombos as “documenting how Egyptians and Nubians, living and buried together side by side, forged a new society that transformed Nubian culture and may have contributed to the rise of one of the greatest and longest enduring kingdoms in African history.”

Previous narratives relegated the role of the Nubians to that of the oppressed and exploited. The discoveries and interpretations being made by the Tombos Project, however, are having an unexpected side effect upon the attitude of the modern local

Sudanese towards their cultural heritage. They look back at their ancestors who thrived with and without Egyptian occupation with a new sense of pride.



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