

Buhen in the New Kingdom

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Background - Buhen and Lower Nubia before the New Kingdom

Traditionally ancient Egypt ended at the First Cataract of the Nile at Elephantine (modern Aswan). Beyond this lay Lower Nubia (Wawat), and beyond the Dal Cataract, Upper Nubia (Kush). Buhen sits just below the Second Cataract, on the west bank of the Nile, opposite modern Wadi Halfa, at what would have been a good location for ships to carry goods to the First Cataract. The resources that flowed from Nubia included gold, ivory, and ebony (Randall-MacIver and Woolley 1911a: vii, Trigger 1976: 46, Baines and Málek 1996: 20, Smith, ST 2004: 4).

Egyptian operations in Nubia date back to the **Early Dynastic Period**. Contact during the 1st Dynasty is linked to the end of the indigenous A-Group. The earliest Egyptian presence at Buhen may have been as early as the 2nd Dynasty, with a settlement by the 3rd Dynasty. This seems to have been replaced with a new town in the 4th Dynasty, apparently fortified with stone walls and a dry moat, somewhat to the north of the later Middle Kingdom fort. The settlement seems to have served as a base for trade and mining, and royal seals from the 4th and 5th Dynasties indicate regular communications with Egypt (Trigger 1976: 46-47, Baines and Málek 1996: 33, Bard 2000: 77, Arnold 2003: 40, Kemp 2004: 168, Bard 2015: 175).

The latest **Old Kingdom** royal seal found was that of Nyusera, with no archaeological evidence of an Egyptian settlement after the reign of Djedkara. Later trading expeditions into Nubia, such as those of Harkhuf during the reigns of Merenra and Pepy II, seem to have been carried out without a Nubian base (Trigger 1976: 48 and 57, Baines and Málek 1996: 19, 34).

The Egyptians returned in force during the **Middle Kingdom**. Senusret I twice sent armies into Nubia, going beyond the Second Cataract, and he built a string of fortresses south to Semna. The earliest mentions of Buhen found so far are on stelae of Senusret I in the northern of the two temples there (Randall-MacIver and Woolley 1911a: 3, Callender 2000: 161).

The new Middle Kingdom fortress had outer fortifications over an area of 420 x 150 meters, 1712 meters around, featuring a brick wall 5-5.5 meters thick, with rectangular salients and 32 semi-circular towers, a rock-cut dry moat, and what Callender calls an “enormous” gateway on the west side. Inside was a citadel 150 x 138 meters, with walls 5 meters thick, estimated to have been 8-11 meters tall, with rectangular towers, running along the river with two gates to the waterfront, and what Callender terms a “massive” gate, flanked by two towers, to the west. Inside the citadel were rectangular brick buildings arranged around a grid of streets, including what seems to have been the commander’s quarters and a temple, as well as housing, workshops, or storage blocks, while the space between the citadel and the outer fortifications seems to have been little used, except for a cemetery along the western side of the enclosure. The foundations of an apparent platform 64.25 x 31.25 meters, with walls up to 1.5 meters high, was just beyond the north side of the citadel (Callender 2000: 166, 168-172, Arnold 2004: 39, Kemp 2004:168, Bard 2015: 208-210).

There is disagreement regarding the end of the Middle Kingdom presence. The garrisons seem to have been functioning into the 13th Dynasty, with a plaque with the name of Neferhotep found at Buhen. But the official Egyptian presence seems to have disappeared during the Second Intermediate Period. Troops may have been left behind to fend for

themselves, with some form of cooperation with the rulers of Kush at Kerma, and the soldiers' families continuing to inhabit the town. The many Egyptian-style graves in the area during the Second Intermediate Period may have been for descendants of the soldiers. Inscriptions left by a Buhen family over five generations show the last two served the king of Kush, while according to an inscription, the fortress commander Sepedher built "the temple of Horus, Lord of Buhen, in the days of the King of Kush" (Trigger 1976: 84-86, Bourriau 2000: 206-207, Redford 2001: 554, Edwards 2004: 97).

A major fire at Buhen has been variously attributed to an accident sparked by metal smelters, an uprising by the local C-group, an invasion from Kerma, destruction by withdrawing Egyptians, or a sack by the re-invading Egyptians under Kamose on the eve of the New Kingdom (Trigger 1976: 84-86, Bourriau 2000: 206-207, Edwards 2004: 97). Lawrence (1965: 72) comments that the delay before the damage was repaired would not be consistent with the New Kingdom renovations, while, based on the stratigraphy of Kerma pottery at Buhen, Stuart Tyson Smith (2004: 80) argues that the fire occurred after a peaceful Kerman take-over.

Egypt Returns

The earliest evidence for Egypt's re-entry into Lower Nubia comes in the third year of Kamose, with the building of a wall at Buhen, apparently describing the rebuilding of the fortifications. The inscription stone was later reused as a threshold for the commandant's palace (Smith, HS 1976: 206, Bourriau 2000: 207-208). After Kamose, there were campaigns in Nubia under Ahmose, Thutmose I (whose army seems to have sacked Kerma and reached the Fourth Cataract, Amenhotep I, Thutmose II (during whose short reign the Kingdom of Kush at Kerma ended), Hatshepsut, Thutmose III (who campaigned as far as Gebel Barkal, where he built a temple to Amun and left a boundary victory stela), Amenhotep III (whose campaign across the Nubian desert may have reached the Fifth Cataract), and Horemheb (Trigger 1976: 106-109, 123, Bryan: 2000: 224, 227, 235, 242-244, 268, 294, 299, Bard 2015: 281, Wilkinson 2017: 224-225).

New Kingdom Buhen

The fortress was rebuilt during the 18th Dynasty. New, lighter fortifications involving skin walls were built outside the old. A large town grew up around the renovated fortress, with substantial private and public buildings. The local elites were buried in the desert behind the town, in rock-cut tombs with small mud brick pyramids similar to those built at the same time in Egypt (Smith, HS 1976: 206, Trigger 1976: 120-122, Bard 2015: 281, Arnold 2017: 39). However, Emery, who led the salvage excavations in 1957-64, has a different interpretation. He believes additions to the outer walls were made before the Egyptian reoccupation (Emery 1979: v, 13).

The ditch outside the citadel had been filled with rubble during the Nubian occupation, and a sunken road was built over it. The walls of the citadel were completely rebuilt in the New Kingdom, with the whole design of the north, south, and west sides altered. The east side, facing the river, was unchanged, except in front of the South Temple, where 1.2 meter walls were erected on top of the rubble of the Middle Kingdom walls, and four of the five towers were removed so the outer façade was flat. A new stone gateway was constructed through this wall, connecting the temple to a new stone quay, 8.1 meters wide and possibly 22 meters long. Nine fallen towers in the north wall were rebuilt, with hieratic texts painted on in white, possibly with the builders' instructions or gang names. The brick stairway leading to the top of the walls was preserved, but because of wear the steps were replaced with wooden beams.

As during the Middle Kingdom, the new outer façade of the walls was faced with white-painted plaster (Smith, HS 1976: 206, Emery 1979: 13-14).

The lower ramparts of the Middle Kingdom fortifications were “obliterated” below a brick-paved terrace, 0.4 to 1.25 meters high over the original parapet, built on the debris that had fallen from the earlier walls. The West Gate, which had suffered significantly in the destruction of the fortress, was restored with a pavement on higher ground made by debris from the earlier structure, but without the pylon entrance. While the street system remained the same, the town underwent considerable alteration, with floors raised above the accumulated debris and the rebuilding of walls. Block A, apparently the commander’s residence, was fully restored with considerable alterations to some of the rooms and the removal of some partition walls (only to be burnt a second time after the final evacuation at the end of the 20th Dynasty). Some areas underwent considerable New Kingdom alterations. A new Block K, built on top of rubble covering the Middle Kingdom ditch, may have been a customs post or guard house, for traffic from the South Gate of the outer fortifications (Emery 1979: 14-16).

The Temples

Temples were not built in the fort towns only to serve the religious needs of the soldiers stationed there and give them a sense that Nubia was spiritually a part of the Egyptian sphere, but also to awe, and perhaps to help assimilate, the local population. These early 18th Dynasty temples were small, with a sanctuary, side rooms, and vestibule. The **North Temple** in Buhen was built by Ahmose around 1560 BC within the renovated Middle Kingdom fortress (Caminos 1974b: 106, Trigger 1976: 107, 118-119, Arnold 2003: 39).

This mudbrick structure was rebuilt around 130 years later by Amenhotep II, reflected by an inscription at the entrance gate, and measured 27 x 13.57 meters, and stood around 30 meters from the citadel’s north wall. The surrounding wall was 1.1-1.6 meters thick on all but the east side, but only 3.2 cm thick in front of temple, which Caminos (1974b: 105-106) says indicates a small pylon.

Excavators found only the stone pillar halls around three sides of the courtyard, beyond which lay two traverse halls, and the sanctuary, flanked by two rooms. It was originally covered with plaster, with bright frescoes, and stone doorways carved with figures and inscriptions divided the courts. A pillar bears the name Akheperure, the throne name of Amenhotep II. In Court E, underneath a pavement of Amenhotep II were stones from a door from the earlier temple of Ahmose, inscribed with his name. The architrave shows three scenes: in one Ahmose stands before Horus of Buhen in the form of a hawk, with the queen mother Ahhotep behind, in the second Ahmose stands before Min, in the third Ahmose stands again before the Horus Hawk (Randall-MacIver and Woolley 1911a: 83-89, Caminos 1974b:105-7, Arnold 2003:39, Wilkinson 2017: 229).

Caminos (1974a: 11 footnote 1, 1974b: 105-107) writes that Champollion and Rosellini believed the temple was dedicated to Isis and Min, based on a stela of Ramses I which they found in the forecourt, a view he says is unwarranted. He says that while Amenhotep II may have built his temple for Isis, the only relevant record for the original temple is the lintel and jambs showing Ahmose worshipping “Horus, Lord of Buhen” and Min.

The **South Temple**, dedicated to Horus of Buhen, 36 meters south of the North Temple, was built in sandstone by Hatshepsut and Thutmose III on the site of a Middle Kingdom temple (perhaps that built by Sepedher). This was levelled and a mound 3.5 meters high created, upon which the new temple was built, overlooking the town. It measured 31.52 x 23.85

meters, with its gate 25 meters from the river. It is an example of a Thutmoside ambulatory temple, surrounded on three or four sides by a corridor lined with pillars, which Emery says are similar to those of Hatshepsut's temple in Deir el-Bahri. Only two columns were complete, reaching a height of 3.4 meters. The court was 27.8 x 20.35 meters. The names of Thutmose I and II appear on reliefs, which suggests work had been done prior to Hatshepsut, but Emery says the main structure was built by her (Randall-MacIver and Woolley 1911b: 83, Emery 1965: 110, Caminos 1974a: 11-12, Emery 1979: 16-17, Arnold 2003: 12, 39, Wilkinson 2017: 229).

Emery comments that the orientation of the two New Kingdom temples, east-west, facing the river, does not conform to earlier structures at Buhen, which may have a religious significance. Remains of both temples were moved in 1962-63 to the National Museum of Sudan in Khartoum (Emery 1965: 110-111, Caminos 1974a: 7, Emery 1979: 17, Arnold 2003: 12, 39, Wilkinson 2017: 229), although Caminos (1974b: 107) says only three blocks from the North Temple were moved, with the rest of the remains covered by the waters of Lake Nasser during the summer of 1964.

The Buhen Horse

A sensational find that may or may not predate the New Kingdom is the skeleton of a horse, found under the West Wall, between the third and fourth towers. It was lying on top of the brick pavement of the Middle Kingdom rampart, covered by a stratified 1.15 meter deposit, below the New Kingdom brickwork, about 0.5 meters underneath a layer of cinders and charred wood. This yielded radiocarbon dates of 3630±150 years BP, which Emery attributes to its death during a storming of the fortress at the end of the Middle Kingdom around 1675 BC (Emery 1979: 13, Clutton-Brock 1974: 89). If this is correct, then this is the oldest remains of a horse found at an Egyptian site and contradicts Petrie's contention that the horse was introduced into Egypt by the Hyksos. Moreover, wear on one of the teeth has led to the conclusion the horse wore a bit of bone or bronze and was thus ridden or driven (Raulwing and Clutton-Brock 2009: 6, 82).

Both the dating and evidence of bit-wear had been challenged, and Raulwing and Clutton-Brock (2009: 83-84) suggest further testing, including accelerator mass spectrometer to determine the date, and electron microscope for the tooth-wear. Based on his reading of the Kerman occupation and fire, Stuart Tyson Smith (2004: 82) argues that the horse would not have been killed in a Nubian attack, but rather as part of Kamose's invasion, supporting the theory that horses were introduced by the Hyksos. That it wore a bit, Smith says, indicates it was drawing a chariot, much more likely in the 17th Dynasty than the 13th.

What we don't know

Besides the Horse, there are a number of other questions concerning Buhen. When and how did the Egyptians withdraw at the end of the Middle Kingdom, gradually or through conquest? Who burned the site, invading Nubians, withdrawing Egyptians, or the re-occupying forces of Kamose? There is also disagreement over the deities worshipped at Ahmose's temple. While the Horse and parts of the temples and reliefs are in Khartoum and can continue to be studied, most of Buhen is no longer accessible, as it is under the waters of Lake Nasser.

Stuart Tyson Smith (2004) looks at the Egyptian presence in Nubia as an early example of colonialism and imperialism. Understanding more about its implications can cast light on these issues later in history.

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