



Walking the Line: Bronze and Iron Age as Terms in Middle Nile Valley Archaeology?

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Abstract

This paper explores the justifiability, usefulness and appropriateness of employing the terms ‘Bronze Age’ and ‘Iron Age’ in the context of Middle Nile valley archaeology. It argues that the reluctance to use these terms is linked to the disciplinary isolation of Egyptian archaeology and the singularization of ancient Egypt, and by extension the Middle Nile valley, in the disciplinary discourse of the past two hundred years. It further argues that while we cannot step out of this history, a critical debate, and emerging from this an emancipatory use of the terminology, is the best way forward. Based on a case study from Mograt Island, the paper suggests that using macro level ‘epochal’ terms such as ‘Bronze Age’ and ‘Iron Age’ actually supports the engagement with micro level dynamics, local variability, agency and multidimensional interactions, as it allows to break up the illusory unity and reach of intermediate level entities such as ‘Kerma culture’ which have come to dominate archaeological interpretations in the past sixty years when enquiries were focussed on this level and the key sites which were taken to represent it.

Keywords

Bronze Age – Three Age system – chronology – Middle Nile valley – Kush – Mograt

Technology or Chronology?

In my view the issue of using, or not using, the terms ‘Bronze Age’ and ‘Iron Age’ in the context of Middle Nile valley archaeology comes down to two questions: First, is it ethically appropriate to employ them, and second, is it heuristically useful? While the Three Age system was developed by Christian Jürgensen Thomsen in 1837 with the view of classifying and chronologically ordering find material (Daniel 1943; Heizer 1962; Daniel 1975; Rowley-Conwy 2007; Eskildsen 2012), its three key terms ‘Stone Age’, ‘Bronze Age’ and ‘Iron Age’ are applied in at least three dimensions today:

- They are chronological terms referring to broad, and with regard to absolute chronology flexible, time spans.
- They refer to geographical areas, such as the ‘Bronze Age world’ or ‘Bronze Age Britain.’
- They are used to characterize the engagement of societies with specific technologies and associated objects and practices.

The first aspect is exemplified in chapter titles in current handbooks, such as the *The Oxford Handbook of the Bronze Age Aegean* (Cline 2012). In this context, the term ‘Bronze Age’ and its chronological subdivisions serve to orientate the reader and signal broad time spans in a very general and unquestioned way. ‘Bronze Age’ does not even appear as a keyword in the book’s index. Incidentally, ‘Nubia’ is listed with one entry: In the chapter ‘Egypt’ in the section ‘Wider Mediterranean,’ Jacke Phillips (2012:828) discusses finds of Mycenaean LH IIA through IIIB pottery which extend “all along the Nile from Tabo (just above the Third Cataract in Nubia) into the Delta.” How do we translate constellations such as this one into terminology? Was Nubia part of a ‘Bronze Age world’ and should we address it as such? Is ‘Bronze Age’ an appropriate and relevant term in the context of Middle Nile archaeology?

Ethical Considerations

The Three Age system was devised in a tradition of Western thought with the intention of making sense of northern European prehistoric material culture and, by extension, prehistory (Eskildsen 2012). It had become adopted to categorize findings from all of Europe and West Asia by the early 20th century, but it carries its origins with it. Hence, using it to address archaeological findings in other regions of the world and thus link them to trajectories of technological development in Europe and West Asia has been called Eurocentric (Connah 2010:63; Connah 2013:15, 30). It has been

seen as privileging “the European course of development” and positing it as “paradigmatic for humankind” (Kelhoe 2002:147 for North America; see also Jesse 2025). Against this background we may decide to reject the use of the Three Age system and associated terminology for the Middle Nile valley as part of the scientific imperialism perpetuating colonial appropriations of the region’s past and present (Näser 2021). I will return to this point later, after discussing other aspects which have a bearing on the question.

Usefulness

Graham Connah (2010:63–64) maintains that the Three Age system provided the “time dimension” which, fused with the idea of the spatial distribution of archaeological ‘cultures,’ laid the basis for the ‘culture-historical model’ that shaped archaeological understanding in the earlier part of the 20th century. He also claims that it “ceased to be necessary” as an “epochal model” with the advent of scientific dating methods (Connah 2010:63). However, the model and the associated terminology have survived into more recent disciplinary approaches. Indeed, archaeologists have come to realize “that time may be segmented in as many ways as convenient to the researcher concerned” (Kristiansen & Rowlands 1998:47). But all refinements in absolute dating and engagement with chronologies on micro, intermediate and macro scales aside, the concept of a ‘Stone Age,’ ‘Bronze Age’ and ‘Iron Age’ still asserts its place in archaeological research as a framework for relative periodization. It is this survival which suggests that it has proven relevant and useful for archaeologists.

I propose that it is exactly the element of the *relative* which makes for this attraction, i.e. the flexibility it offers, as opposed to the absolute chronologies produced by scientific dating (including geological periodization). As Bogucki (2008:1216) put it:

Although modern archaeologists realize that this tripartite division of prehistoric society is far too simple to reflect the complexity of change and continuity, terms like ‘Bronze Age’ are still used as a very general way of focusing attention on particular times and places and thus facilitating archaeological discussion.

It is a *lingua franca* which allows to a) signal general chronological affiliations without getting trapped in debates about chronological details, and b) facilitates comparison of and communication about archaeological findings from different regions.

Appropriateness: Africa as a (Non)Category

Another consideration is, however, whether it is actually *appropriate* to use the concept and the terminology of the Three Age system for regions outside Europe and West Asia, i.e. to scrutinize the spatial range of its applicability. Again, Graham Connah (2010:62–63) maintains that “attempts [...] to apply the model to African archaeology have produced little more than confusion, whereas in the Americas or Australasia it has been irrelevant.” However, a glance at handbooks on the archaeology of the study region, i.e. the Middle Nile valley, shows that the terms are still employed widely and without critical questioning (e.g. Edwards 2004; Raue 2019; Emberling & Williams 2021). Are the authors and editors of these books “apologists [...] not paying attention” (Connah 2010:64)?

I suggest that the second term and concept to which the question relates i.e. ‘Africa,’ and derived from this ‘African archaeology,’ brings equal issues with it. Africa is a geographical unit, but in terms of human history it is neither a uniform entity nor a “continent apart” (Stahl 2014:5). If we take a technology- and material-centered approach to the question (cf. Radivojević et al. 2019; Jesse 2025), it is clear that:

Egypt, North Africa and the Horn have a long history of participation in the metallurgical, ceramic, glass and other high temperature technological traditions of the Near East and the Mediterranean worlds. Other regions, primarily in sub-Saharan Africa, form a distinctly different area, which, although interacting with North Sahara, particularly after 500 BC [...], forms a distinct cultural and technological block.

CHIRIKURE 2015:17

Egypt and areas under its influence along the Nile broadly followed this trajectory of copper, bronze and iron transition.

CHIRIKURE 2015:23

Are we therefore to include Egypt, and thus a part of the geographical unit ‘Africa,’ into the ‘Bronze Age world?’ Both, in terms of technological parameters and political integration the answer to this question is a resounding Yes. This position is backed by discussions of the latter aspect from a ‘World Systems perspective.’¹ Indeed, Egypt was integrally linked to macro-regional

¹ For this approach see Flammini 2020 with references to earlier contributions and an explication of the use of the term ‘perspective’ versus ‘theory’.

trajectories from even earlier, at the latest since the Early to Mid-Holocene with the appropriation of the Near Eastern ‘Neolithic package’ (Shirai 2006; Tassie 2014).

But Friederike Jesse (2025) is right in observing that the terminology of the Three Age system, at least the terms ‘Bronze Age’ and ‘Iron Age,’ is almost exclusively used in research which pertains to contacts and interactions (e.g. Schipper 2012; Bader 2015; Miniaci & Lacovara 2022), regional chronology (e.g. Adams 2017), technologies (e.g. Jackson 2005; Hodgkinson 2018; Odler 2023) or cross-cultural comparisons (e.g. Iversen 2014). Is this because it is not otherwise relevant? I suggest otherwise. Rather, in my view this pattern is part of the disciplinary isolation of Egyptian archaeology, which has its origins in the 19th century, coinciding with the spread of the Three Age model. Interestingly and by way of example, Flinders Petrie (1915a; 1915b; 1925) used the term ‘Stone Age’ for Nile valley contexts and took a cross-regionally comparative approach to them, but spoke of ‘Bronze Age’ only with regard to European phenomena. The reason for this selective adoption of terminology and concepts, as well as its implications for later research, still await analysis. In contrast, Oscar Montelius, who was interested in making the Egyptian record productive for European typological and chronological studies, published an article on the “Bronze Age in Egypt” in 1890.² Thus, the reluctance to use the term does not relate to an “Egyptian exception,” but to an “Egyptological exception” (Moreno García 2015:58–60). A ‘Bronze Age’ existed in Pharaonic Egypt and its invisibility in disciplinary discourse and terminology reflects research agendas and disciplinary orientations more than anything else. Recourse to the associated terminology in recent research might thus be understood as an attempt to reorientate the discipline in order to overcome its inherited isolation (contra Connah 2010:64 quoted above).

But let us move further upriver. There is no doubt that the Kerma society engaged with metallurgical technologies, producing and consuming Bronze objects (Bonnet 1986; Drici 2016; Marchi et al. 2019; Rademakers et al. 2022). New evidence from Meroe suggests that iron metallurgy occurred in the Middle Nile valley from as early as the mid-8th century BCE and was thriving by the 6th century BCE (Humphris & Scheibner 2017; Humphris 2021).

Henriette Hafsaas-Tsakos (2009:50–70) called Kerma a “centre on the periphery of the so-called Bronze Age World System.” An unresolved issue is, however, how the extent, and indeed the nature, of the Kerma polity should be defined and how we deal conceptually and terminologically with the regions at its margins (Cooper 2025). Bruce Williams’ (2021:183) assertion that

² I thank one of the anonymous reviewers for pointing out this source to me.

its “control apparently extended through the Fourth Cataract” and its “power extended to the Horn of Africa” (compare also Bonnet & Honegger 2021:213) is not backed with evidence. Other authors recognize the mortuary remains in the Fourth Cataract as belonging to “a single culture which spread over a vast territory, extending from Lower Nubia through Kerma [...] as far upstream as the Fourth Cataract region,” testifying to people who “shared the same cultural identity” (Kołosowska & el-Tayeb 2006–2007:217–218). They introduced the term ‘Old Kush’ to emphasize the ‘historical’ dimension of this perceived entity and analytically decouple it from its manifestations at the site of Kerma (Kołosowska et al. 2003:21).

If we wanted to simply avoid the term ‘Bronze Age,’ we could replace it with the terms ‘Kerma period’ or ‘Old Kush.’ But this exercise would not help to clarify the actual issues, namely

1. whether the regions which produced material culture similar to that at Kerma were part of the political entity whose center has been identified at Kerma, and
2. how we can define and address their relations with the ‘Bronze Age world.’

Moreover, it should be noted that also the designation ‘Old Kush’ is not neutral. As a toponym, ‘Kush’ is attested in Egyptian textual sources from around 1950 BCE as referring to a region in the Middle Nile valley which is commonly considered to be identical with the Kerma polity (Cooper 2017:201–202; Cooper 2025). Recent research suggests that the term belongs to a North-Eastern Sudanic language, rather than an Afroasiatic one, i.e. represents a local name rather than an Egyptian one (Rilly 2006–2007). However, we have no idea about its connotations, e.g. whether the inhabitants of the region regarded the term as derogatory or appreciative, whether they used it as a self-designation, etc. It is only more than one thousand years later that we see elites from the region actually employing the term for themselves, but again our evidence is limited to texts in Egyptian language and the process of its adoption has not yet been problematized in research on the self-representation of the 1st millennium BCE ‘Kushite’ rulers (see e.g. Lohwasser & Sörgel 2020:passim, esp. 168–169 with note 760).

Thus, ‘Kush’ may actually not be a better choice with regard to ethical correctness. Plus, its spatial extent is as poorly defined as that of ‘Kerma.’ As stated above, we assume that 2nd millennium BCE Egyptian textual sources use ‘Kush’ to refer to the Kerma polity. But how narrowly or widely this definition was employed by the Egyptian authors, how detailed their knowledge of the Middle Nile political and cultural geography was, and how they applied it in their writings remain open questions (Näser 2013). In sum, substituting

'Kerma' by 'Kush' does not effectively solve any of the issues connected with the former term.

Walk the Line

Sometimes it is helpful to juxtapose the deconstruction of concepts and associated terminology with a concrete example. Mine comes from Mográt, the largest island in the Nile, some 300 km east of Kerma and 500 km south of the First Nile cataract, i.e. the traditional southern border of Pharaonic Egypt. Since 2006, we have conducted surveys and excavations on Mográt.³ Findings at the multi-period burial site MOG034 demonstrated that the local mortuary culture of the 3rd and 2nd millennia BCE differs in several aspects from that at Kerma and the region of the Fourth Cataract. Prominently, the burials almost completely lack grave goods, and the few ceramics which were associated with them do not display typical Kerma shapes (Weschenfelder & Rees 2014; Weschenfelder 2015; Weschenfelder in preparation). Thus, how do we address this evidence? It is inappropriate to subsume it under the terms 'Kerma culture' or 'Old Kush', as this would presuppose that communities on Mográt were part of a social or political entity, when their relationship with this entity is undefined and indeed forms part of the enquiry in itself. Similarly, 'Kerma period' is prone to connotations of cultural hegemony and may be lumped with 'Kerma culture' by all but very careful readers. And while we build a local chronology mainly based on a series of 14C dates (Weschenfelder in preparation), calendar date ranges do not reflect epochal associations. Resorting to the term 'Bronze Age' allows us to situate the evidence from MOG034 and related sites on the island in a framework which is simultaneously concrete enough to convey a general chronological position and wide enough to prevent a non-intended premature or false conflation with socio-cultural and political entities in other parts of the Middle Nile valley. It is exactly the generality of the term 'Bronze Age' which provides the space to explore the role of Mográt communities in the world and in world-making (paraphrasing Stahl 2014:6), including their role in or vis-à-vis the 'Bronze Age world'.

Similar considerations underlie the decision to employ the terms 'Iron Age,' 'Late Antiquity' and 'Medieval period' for evidence from Mográt. For each of these periods, the material culture repertoire and the creation and use of cultural landscapes show similarities, but also significant differences to the evidence from surrounding regions. Changes witnessed in the archaeological

3 For publications see www.mogratarchaeology.com.

record from Mograt align with epochal transitions in other areas of the Middle Nile valley. In the realm of mortuary archaeology this goes e.g. for the morphology of grave architecture, the spatial arrangement of the burial and the provisioning with grave goods (Weschenfelder & Rees 2014; Weschenfelder 2015; Weschenfelder in preparation; Näser et al. 2021). But we also see other phenomena coinciding with the ebb and flow of the wider world, such as the appropriation of Christianity (Näser et al. 2021). In fact, embedding findings from the island in an epochal framework helps to make sense of patterns of distribution, disentangle chronological details and explore past agency in a meaningful way by placing them into a wider, comparative context while simultaneously allowing for the recognition of locally specific trajectories.

In sum, from the perspective of Mograt island, a tripartite address works best. Macro level terminology, i.e. Bronze Age, Iron Age, Late Antiquity and Medieval period, helps to avoid the hermeneutic traps of intermediate level terminology, such as 'Kerma culture,' 'Napatan period' or 'Meroitic state', which refer to regional socio-cultural entities of unverified extent and integration. Adopting macro level terminology allows us to steer clear of premature assumptions about local communities having been part of these entities. It effectively opens the floor for analyses on a micro level, inviting enquiries to focus on local chronologies, the detailed characterization of local communities as well as their trajectories and their relationships with regional socio-cultural entities. Used this way, macro level terminology can actually help to advance the engagement with local variability, agency and multidimensional interactions. It breaks up the perceived unity and reach of intermediate level entities that have come to dominate archaeological interpretations in the past sixty years as archaeological enquiries were focused on this level and the key sites which were taken to represent it (Näser 2021:38–39).

Seen from close-up, every scientific term and concept – especially in a discipline with two hundred years of history steeped in imperialism and colonialism – is fraught with problems. While we cannot step out of this history, we are free to reflect critically on it and change the use and modify the significance of concepts and associated terminologies. As Glyn Daniel (1943:5) remarked early on, this also applies to the Three Age system. Graham Connah (2010:63) is right in observing “that what we call things influences how we think about them,” but the relationship is in fact dialectic. In my view, a critical debate about the history and the associations of the concepts we employ in the archaeology of the Middle Nile valley and, emerging from this, an emancipatory use of the terminology associated with them is the best way forward.

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