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CD-ROM review:
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Soudan: Royaumes sur le Nile

Sudan: Ancient Kingdoms of the Nile

Sindibad Multimedia LTD., 1997

CD-ROM - SRP US\$35.00

Review by Scott Noegel

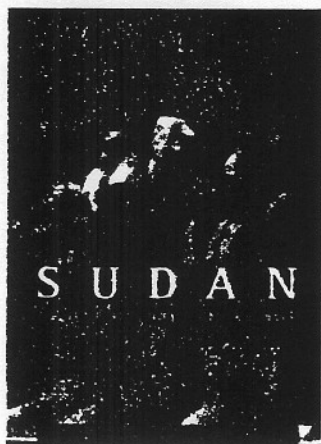
This bilingual cross-platform CD-ROM introduces users to the most important periods, peoples, places, and events of ancient Sudan, or Cush — in your language choice of English or French. Upon loading, the disk provides users with four possible avenues: an interactive time-line covering both ancient and modern Sudanese history, an exploration of the major Nilotic civilizations with a focus on Nubia, a downloadable archive of the CD-ROM's images, and an interactive glossary of terms.

The CD-ROM's best feature is its map that explains the division of ancient Sudan into its most important cultures (e.g., Neolithic, A-Group, pre-Kerma, C-group, Kerma, Napatan phase, and Meroe). Passing one's mouse over a specific culture highlights the settlements along the Nile associated with it. Clicking on an entry presents one with textual information about the culture and images of artifacts. One can find more specific information about each image (e.g., size, provenance, date, current location, etc.) by moving the cursor over the image without clicking. The disk also provides information on ancient Egyptian interest in Cush throughout its history.

While excellent in scope and overdue in terms of electronically available content, the CD-ROM's technological and informational naïveté seriously diminish its utility. For example, the

disk devotes much space to long animation sequences of questionable pedagogical and entertainment value. In order to explore the kingdoms of ancient Cush one must watch a crudely-made animation (called "dramatic"

on the sleeve) in which an ancient Nubian first introduces users to ancient Sudan, then walks into a tomb which subsequently floods with water. The man then boards a boat and rows into the distance. The aim is to reproduce visually the impact of the Aswan Dam, but the result is tedious. The entire process takes several minutes and clicking



anywhere on the animation sequence does not halt it. The creators should have programmed into the disk an opportunity to arrest the animation. In addition, though the glossary offers a large selection of terms, their definitions are not cross-referenced. Thus, if one selects the term "Amun," one will find the sanctuaries at "Sanam" and "Kawa" referenced neither here nor elsewhere in the glossary. Similarly, in the "Kingdoms of the Nile" section the explanations of cultures and periods are cross-referenced, but only in the most rudimentary ways. So, for example, by clicking on "Kerma" one finds the terms "Pharaoh" and "lions" cross-referenced, but "Tutankhamen" remains without a link. Under "Napata," one will find the words "Lower Egypt" referenced, but

"Nastasen" given without explanation and without a defining link.

Although users will appreciate the CD-ROM's downloadable archive of images, the fact that the archive provides no information for any of the downloadable images is sure to frustrate. Therefore, one must be familiar with the particular ceramic ware, figurine, or relief when choosing to download it, or search back through the maze of cultures and glossary items to find information on it. Moreover, to download a particular image, one must pass through every single image in order to find the desired item. One cannot skip directly to the item within the glossary or other sections of the CD-ROM.

One also must question the pedagogy of including an interactive timeline of Sudanese history that contains ancient and modern events, since the modern events mentioned here are found nowhere else on the disk. In fact, the "Kingdoms of the Nile" section covers only the Neolithic through Meroitic periods. Moreover, one must

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wonder why the programmers felt compelled to make the time line interactive, for the same information could have been presented in chart form. As is, it functions as a toy for displaying virtual paper.

The CD-ROM's informational naivete is evident in many of its explanations of terms. For example, the entry "māat" places its definition within a framework of Pharaonic "totalitarian vision" in which "everything which is alien to this Pharaonic order could only be inferior or bad." It then continues "This is why it was the obligation of the Pharaoh to combat the threat, to crush the cosmic enemy, personified as the 'foreigner'."

Moreover, one can sense throughout

an attempt to diminish or counter examples of Egyptian influence on Cush prior to the New Kingdom. Reading the entry for Kerma one finds that the Egyptian items discovered at Kerma do not suggest an Egyptian presence, but rather "are interpreted as the result of gifts, of exchanges or the taking of booty." Elsewhere, the disk classifies the ram's head as "the symbol of the Nubian conception of the god Amun," who "no doubt has his origins in more ancient Nubian cultural traditions,"

despite the well-known Egyptian association of Amun with a ram.

In all, while the goals of the CD-ROM are noble, its pedagogical and entertainment value is limited. □

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