CHAPTER ONE

NUBIA AND EGYPT

General Introduction

Over thirty years have passed since the largest ever cultural rescue campaign came to an end with the completion of the Aswan High Dam and the final flooding of Lake Nasser. Through both earlier research and as a consequence of the UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) salvage operation, many different pictures of Nubia and its relationship with Egypt have been drawn. These pictures range from a southern settlement by Egyptians and a pale copy of Egyptian civilisation to a strong rival to Egypt’s growing power and even the originator of many Egyptian notions of statehood and particularly kingship; from a subjugated land to a viable partner in a wider trade network. More recent research has favoured the interpretation of an indigenous cultural tradition that influenced and was influenced by Egypt. However the nature of the relationship between Egypt and Nubia, particularly as the Egyptian state fully emerged at the end of the 4th millennium BC, is still a matter for discussion.

It is not possible to simply divide the Nile Valley into Egypt versus Nubia. The Nile Valley, from the Egyptian Delta in the north to the point where the river divides into the White and Blue Niles, was home to several distinct cultural groups. A better understanding comes from looking at these groups and their development both as separate entities and in relation to one another. The growth of political states in the Nile Valley from the late 4th millennium BC onwards is linked with the growing adaptation to an agricultural and/or pastoral economy and more sedentary lifestyle. The Egyptian Nile Valley was particularly able to support an agricultural economy and the increased population that resulted. A more complex social system begins to emerge with this increase in population and the concepts of private ownership and the accumulation of wealth along with the heightened competition for resources that a sedentary lifestyle seems to bring.
While a more nomadic or mobile lifestyle allows for the easy exchange of both things and ideas, the move to a more sedentary way of life does not necessarily mean an end to exchange between communities although it tends to result in an increasingly formal arrangement. The growing craft specialisation in Egypt after 3500 BC promoted existing exchange relations and their markets and encouraged the development of new ones. The demand for raw materials from both Western Asia and Central Africa created long-distance trade and opportunities for commercial as well as reciprocal exchange relationships. The nature of Egypt’s relationships with her trading partners differed from region to region and over time. The economies and subsistence patterns of these trading partners would also have had a bearing on the nature of exchange relationships with Egypt because they had a bearing on the structure of their communities.

The internal nature of a society then, plays a significant part in the nature of its external relations. The catalyst for statehood and ‘civilisation’ has sometimes been linked to both technological advancement and a growth in trade and exchange. However, it seems more likely that trade, exchange and relations between neighbouring groups are among several factors involved in the development of complex societies. What then of the Nile Valley? Did an increased demand for raw materials and therefore trade and exchange significantly contribute to the unification of Egypt or did the emerging state of Egypt alter the various relationships along the Nile Valley? What, in fact were those relationships? Specifically, what was the relationship between the populations of Lower Nubia and those of the Egyptian Nile Valley?

Archaeology and Ethnicity

The concept of what constitutes Egyptian (Naqadan) versus Nubian (A-Group) enters into the broad scope of the discussion. The very nature of the Nile Valley makes the question of how the populations along the riverbanks viewed themselves and their neighbours valuable in the understanding of the nature of exchange and contact between peoples. How a group of people sees itself and, more importantly, how it sees other groups, has a profound effect on the way they interact. Can we see this as an expression of ethnic identity in Pre- and Protodynastic Egypt?

Modern borders and boundaries can seem fixed and they can also be seen as arbitrary particularly when imposed by outsiders or colonists as in the case of many modern African states. This type of colonialism or