CHAPTER TWO

EGYPT IN NUBIA

INTRODUCTION

Nubia has invariably been tied to its northern neighbour geographically, culturally, historically and also in the scientific study of its people and artefacts. When Reisner first identified his A-Group through his work at Shellal, he noted the similarities between its pottery and that of the Predynastic Egyptians. Indeed Reisner looked upon the Predynastic material in Lower Nubia as the remains of an Egyptian migration (Reisner 1909: 5; Reisner 1910: 319). Chronologically, Reisner’s A-Group does not begin until the Early Dynastic Period. Thus, from the very beginnings of scientific investigation in Nubia, Egypt has been given the starring role.

Subsequent work in Nubia, in particular the UNESCO salvage campaign of the 1960s, has altered the perception that initial settlement in the region was the result of Egyptian migration although the idea of Nubia’s inherent ‘backwardness’ has not entirely disappeared. While it is generally accepted that the A-Group was indigenous to the land of Nubia, rather than an introduced Egyptian phenomenon, there is still debate over its complexity and how it influenced and was influenced by its neighbours. Egypt again takes a central position due to the large number of Egyptian artefacts found in Nubian contexts. It is, therefore, of benefit to re-examine what artefacts have been found, in what numbers and where.

The Land of Nubia

The climate in Nubia is extreme with incredibly hot summer months and mild winter months which can nonetheless turn very cold (Adams 1977: 33). There is also very little rainfall between Aswan and Dongola between the Third and Fourth Cataracts which means that rain fed agriculture is not possible. Prevailing winds in Nubia also create problems for the local population causing damage to mudbrick structures and encroaching on farm land (Adams 1977; 34–35). Nevertheless the Nile means that the region is habitable even if the traditional flooding of the Nile did not
deposit as much fertile soil as it did in Egypt. In addition the lower water levels of the Nile in Nubia has meant that irrigation methods such as the use of the waterwheel (saqia) and the lever-lift (shaduf) are not as effective in Nubia as they are in Egypt.

Vegetation in Nubia is virtually the same from Khartoum to Aswan in the riverine areas of Nubia but the situation varies considerably in the desert regions (Adams 1977: 38). The dom palm which is native to Nubia is found along the desert margins and its trunk serves as a source of timber for building houses, particularly furnishing the roofs (Adams 1977: 38). Acacia trees are numerous in Nubia, valuable for boat building, housing, grazing for goats and possibly for charcoal. The official Weni even mentions acacia for building barges, some of which came from Wawat.1 Young shoots of halfa grass are also an important source of grazing for domestic animals. In the deserts rainfall alone allows for the presence of vegetation and this gradually increases as one travels from north to south although the sandstone plateau in Lower Nubia has no vegetation except in times of sporadic, short-lived rainfall (Adams 1977: 38–39).

As rock drawings show, Nubia was home to a range of game such as giraffes, elephants, rhinoceros, hippopotamus and gazelle. Other desert animals such as foxes and jackals also lived in the region as well as the leopards/panthers whose pelts the Egyptians desired particularly as they became scarcer in Egypt itself. In this same vein ostrich feathers and eggs (Phillips 2000), live animals as well as their skins (van Driel-Murray 2000: 302) and ivory (Kryzyszowska and Morkot 2000) were also sought from the increasingly more reliable sources in the south (Adams 1977: 42) Birds and fish are also seasonally available in Nubia just as they were in the Egyptian Nile and were important to the Nubian subsistence (Adams 1977: 39–40).

While Lower Nubia was never able to sustain agriculture on the same scale as Egypt, it was a region that was able to provide (or provide access to) other resources. Nubia is most often associated with gold but it has been suggested that in fact copper was the material which first created an interest in the area (Adams 1977: 41). The Wadi Allaqi is a convenient gateway to many of the natural resources available in the Eastern and Nubian Deserts such as cornelian, steatite, quartz and possibly amethyst (Andrews 1994: 100–106; Aston, Harrell and Shaw 2000; Ogden 2000) and it seems no coincidence that there is a concentration of A-Group

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1 URK I, 108.