CHAPTER SIX

THE NATURE OF THE BEAST

INTRODUCTION

In his introduction to *Nubia Egypt’s Rival in Africa* David O’Connor wrote that Nubia and Egypt “shared the same river, the Nile, and a common frontier over which contact and interaction ebbed and flowed for thousands of years” (O’Connor 1993: xi). Most people are familiar with Egypt and her boundaries: the Mediterranean Sea to the north, the First Cataract at Aswan in the south, the deserts to the east and west. Yet what of Nubia?

When ethnologists today talk about Nubia, they are referring to the geographical area occupied by tribes which speak the Nubian languages. This region today stretches from Kom Ombo in the north to Debba between the Third and Fourth cataracts (Shinnie 1996: 1). Modern Nubian peoples tend to refer to themselves by the dialect they speak (Shinnie 1996: 3).

The meaning and origin of the word Nubia remain uncertain; it did not even appear until the third century BC (O’Connor 1993: 1; Bianchi 2004: 2). It has been suggested that the term comes from the ancient Egyptian word for gold, *nbw*, particularly as Nubia is generally associated with gold exploitation; yet the ancient Egyptians themselves never used this term to refer to Nubia. Another possibility is that it is derived from the Nuba or Noba tribe.

The earliest ancient Egyptian name for their southern neighbours was *Ta-Seti* meaning ‘Land of the Bow’. This is also the name for the first nome of Upper Egypt which certainly suggests a more fluid boundary than has sometimes been proposed. This term dates from at least the 1st Dynasty (Wenig 1982: 526) and could indicate that until the establishment of the fortress at Elephantine, the southern-most nome in Egypt was considered peripheral to the rest of the country. Later, during the Old Kingdom, names designating more specific regions within Nubia came into use. From north to south these include Wawat, Irtjet, Setju and Yam; and to the east, Medja (Wenig 1982: 527). With
the possible exception of Yam, all these areas probably fell into northern or Lower Nubia.

Bronze Age Egyptians used the term Nehasyu for Nubians and this seems to include Nubians along the floodplain, nomads in the desert and even people from Punt (O’Connor 1993: 2). The term Ta-Nehasyu simply meant ‘Land of the Nubians’ (O’Connor 1993: 2). In his autobiography, the official Wenidescribes putting together an army composed of, amongst others, men from Wawat, Irtjet, Yam, Medja and Kaau in which he uses the term Nehasyu when naming each group. After 1550 BC the word Kush also came into use and seems to have originally been used to describe all or part of southern or Upper Nubia.

While historians and archaeologists sometimes talk about Nubia and Egypt somewhat arbitrarily, it is important to note that in the 4th millennium bc these place names simply, so far as we know, did not exist. How the various groups of people of the Nile Valley referred to themselves at the time remains a mystery.

How people refer to themselves and define themselves naturally leads to the concept of ethnicity and how one can identify it in the archaeological record. As mentioned in the opening chapter, the concept of ethnicity is based on commonalities such as ancestry, language, cultural practices and beliefs and sometimes territory, and that these are most clearly identified in differences between two or more groups. This can perhaps be best illustrated in examples of foreigners living in societies away from their homeland. Such evidence as distinct architecture, food preferences, material culture, burial practices and administrative technology may point to a different ethnic group living in a settlement perhaps in trade colonies or trade diasporas (Stein 2002: 36). It can also be seen in group or cultural encounters where traded items highlight difference and define groups or help them to define themselves.

Ethnicity can be difficult to detect and assess. Racial and cultural bias can also cloud the issue of ethnicity. For instance how the ancient Egyptians perceived foreigners such as Libyans, Asiatics and Nubians may not have been how these peoples perceived themselves. The ancient Egyptians had a very rigid ideological system of dividing Egypt from the outside world; Egypt was the ideal whereas the outside world was chaotic (topos) yet there are sources in which the outside world is not shown as inherently bad (mimesis) (Loprieno 1988; Smith 2003). The definition of non-Egyptians, specifically enemies of Egypt, recurs again and again in Dynastic Egypt, in the use of the term the Nine Bows. Typically such enemies include Asiatics, Libyans and Nubians. Depictions of the people