CHAPTER FIVE

LOWER NUBIA AND FIRST INTERMEDIATE PERIOD EGYPT (2160–2055 BC)

None indeed sail north to Byblos today. What shall we do for pine trees for our mummies? Free men are buried with their produce, nobles are embalmed with their oil as far as Crete. They come no more. Gold is lacking; exhausted are "materials" for every kind of craft.1

The evidence discussed in the previous chapter indicates that the materials and produces acquired from Lower Nubia and, via Lower Nubia, the area controlled by the Kerma chiefs and territories south of the Kerman chiefdom were of great importance for the rulers of the later Old Kingdom. The connections with the Lower and Upper Nubian polities could be regulated to the advantage of Egypt without major conflicts, which would have moved the rulers of Egypt to consider the subjugation of the C-Group chiefdom(s) or the emergent Kerman state. By the end of the Early Bronze Age Lower Nubia was confronted, however, with a largely altered Egyptian partner. The fading of the centralized Egyptian state started under the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties. The advanced Sixth Dynasty period saw the emergence of dynasties of local district administrators (the nomarchs) and the shift of power from the royal court to provincial centres.

The political disunity of First Intermediate Period Egypt is described traditionally as chaos, yet the changes occurring in the centre-province relationship and the social, economic and cultural patterns of the countryside may, with some exaggeration, also be described in the terms of a "social revolution".2 The c. one hundred years of the First Intermediate

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2 I use the term "social revolution" in the sense of Kemp 1983 115ff., 174ff.—Cf. also
Period (c. 2160–2055 BC)\(^3\) witnessed prolonged struggles between the provincial magnates\(^4\) and the formation of two competing kingdoms with the capitals Herakleopolis (Ninth and Tenth Dynasties) and Thebes (Eleventh Dynasty). The process of political disintegration was reversed by the Theban kingdom in the last decades of the third millennium BC. The rulers of Thebes re-established a centralized government operating now a more complex political system and controlling a more complex social structure.

The c. one century of the First Intermediate Period corresponds roughly with the earlier half of Phase Ib of the Nubian C-Group. Culturally, Phase Ib is part of the long evolutionary process embracing the Early, Middle, and Late C-Group periods.\(^5\) As formulated by W.Y. Adams,

> the most important transformations of the C Horizon may have occurred in the social and ideological spheres. Material changes, though they are the basis for archaeological recognition of this period, are more conspicuous quantitatively than qualitatively.\(^6\)

Yet a deeper insight into the transformations occurring in the course of the c. seven centuries of C-Group history is not rendered possible by the sources at our disposal. The Egyptian textual evidence and, much more indirectly, the archaeological remains permit us only to form a summary idea of the evolution of the three C-Group chiefdoms, the process of their unification, and the nature of their contacts with Egypt and with Kerma (see Chapters IV.2, 3).

It is rather self-evident that the decline and end of the Old Kingdom also affected the life in C-Group Lower Nubia. It may be concluded from the archaeological record that long-distance trade between Egypt and Kerma stopped at the end of the Old Kingdom and, as we also may read in the passage quoted from *The Admonitions of Ipuwer* at the head of this chapter, Egyptian trade with Lower Nubia disappeared

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\(^4\) Seidlmayer 2000 145ff. rightly warns that the picture of chaos presented in the literature of the Middle Kingdom should not be naively accepted as an authentic historical record of the First Intermediate Period.


\(^6\) Adams 1977 147.