CHAPTER TEN

RELIGION AND SOCIETY IN NEW KINGDOM NUBIA

The crown placed firmly on his head,
He counts the land as his possession,
Sky, earth are under his command,
Mankind is entrusted to him,
Commoners, nobles, sunfolk,
Egypt and the far-off lands.¹

1. Gods and Temples

1.1. The State and the Gods

The temples built, extended, and restored in the course of the nearly five hundred years of New Kingdom domination, especially in the c. two and a half centuries between the reigns of Thutmose III and Rameses II, were “the focal points, at physical, symbolic, and spiritual levels”² of the Nubian Nile valley. On the “physical” or “practical” level they were institutions of the civil and economic administration and centres of redistribution and jurisdiction. They influenced the development of the agricultural production and the forms of landholding and were involved in industrial production. The temples constituted the centres of settlements the existence and development of which largely depended on them. Being determined initially by the settlement pattern found in Nubia by the Eighteenth-Dynasty conqueror, their planned distribution was subsequently a tool of the shaping of Nubia’s political/economic map as an extension of Egypt. On the “symbolic” or “political” level the temples manifested the power of Pharaoh. On the “spiritual” level they were the dwelling places of the gods who established and perpetuated the royal power and sustained mankind in return for the worship and offerings they received from the ruler and

¹ From the Osiris hymn on the Eighteenth Dynasty stela of Amenmose, Lichtheim 1976 84. “Sunfolk”: the Egyptians and the whole mankind.
² Kemp 1978 23.
the people. The idea of mankind including the peoples of the far-off lands as it appears in the hymn quoted at the head of this chapter also occurs in the illustration of the fifth hour in the New Kingdom Book of the Gates in which Horus stands before the four races of mankind: the Egyptians, Asiatics, Nubians and Libyans, who are all under the protection of the gods in the next world.3

It is equally obvious on the practical, political and religious levels that the temples were means of, and manifested the unity of Nubia with Egypt. The task of the temples and their learned priesthood was to formulate and profess the divine origins of kingship in rite, visual image, written and spoken word and to present a discourse on the ms’t-determined4 functioning of reciprocity and solidarity between the gods and the king, the king and the people. It is frequently suggested that the ethical principles formulated in the Egyptian myth of the state—i.e., the myth on the legitimacy and functions of kingship5—were not perceived beyond an extremely small audience, viz., the literate upper classes.6 A similar restriction of knowledge7 is also supposed in the case of Nubia, where literacy was limited to a small number of specialized priests who composed administrative documents and temple inscriptions of a monumental character8 and some exceptional members of the native elite who received a high-level Egyptian education (Chapter XI.1). It may be objected, however, that not only were the basic concepts of kingship ideology, especially the god-king relationship, proclaimed in the form of powerful images on the temple walls, which were visible to all people, but also many “politically” relevant inscriptions were erected in the forecourts of the temples. These texts functioned as “national archives” and the priests recited their text to the illiterate providing thus

4 On the concept of ms’t, “order”, “Equity”, in the world view of New Kingdom Egypt, see Assmann 1990.
6 Baines 1995a 46.