CHAPTER TWELVE

A LONG, SILENT INTERLUDE?

LOWER NUBIA IN THE

THIRD INTERMEDIATE PERIOD (c. 1069–760 BC)

Behold, it is good for Amun…

although it is not his place.1

1. The Archaeological Record

The apparent emptiness of Lower Nubia’s archaeological map between the end of the Twentieth Dynasty and the eighth century BC (and beyond), combined with the negative connotations of the unfortunate term “Third Intermediate Period”,2 resulted in the view that with the end of the viceregal administration all political and social institutions disintegrated between the First and Third Cataracts, the more so that, after a gradual population decline starting in the Nineteenth Dynasty, by the end of the New Kingdom the region became almost completely uninhabited and it remained so for the next millennium or even longer.

Confronted with the tiny number of burials that were securely dated to the New Kingdom on the one hand, and the dimensions of temple building, on the other, Firth suggested rather absurdly that the temples in Lower Nubia were used only by visitors from Egypt.3 Firth also argued that the dramatic population decline was caused by losses through conscription suffered in Rameses II’s wars and mass migration to the south.4 In the view of William Y. Adams, by the early Ramesside period only

1 Senna, Kadimalo Inscription, col. 8, FHN I No. 1, trans. R.H. Pierce.
3 Firth 1927 25ff.
4 Firth 1912 29.
small numbers of Egyptians remained on frontier duty for another two centuries, building monuments to proclaim the glory and sovereignty of their pharaoh over a deserted land.\(^5\)

It was also suggested by Firth\(^6\) and maintained by later writers that a radical decline in the average Nile level from the mid-Eighteenth Dynasty was also responsible for the depopulation of Lower Nubia.\(^7\) Such a “hydrological crisis” in this period is, however, clearly contradicted by flood level records from Egypt.\(^8\) Säve-Söderbergh and Trigger suggested that the native population’s disappearance is largely an optical illusion caused by its material and religious acculturation and then by subsequent material impoverishment.\(^9\) From the late 1970s, Kemp\(^10\) and Morkot\(^11\) argued against the radical depopulation hypothesis on the basis of a broader set of textual and archaeological data. In effect, the settlement historical data reviewed in Chapter IX.2.3—in agreement with what we know about the changes in the land’s cult topography (Chapter X.1.2–5)—clearly contradict the contention according to which New Kingdom Lower Nubia was, as a general historical tendency, characterized by the disappearance of the native population and, from the early Twentieth Dynasty onwards, the gradual withdrawal of the Egyptian administration.

While Bruce Williams’ reassessment of the mortuary evidence\(^12\) increased the number of identified later New Kingdom period burials, he also pointed out two important factors. Namely, a similar decrease in the number of later New Kingdom burials in Egypt on the one hand, and, on the other, the adoption in Lower Nubia of the contemporary


\(^6\) Firth 1912 21ff.


\(^10\) Kemp 1978 39ff.

\(^11\) Morkot 1987 38f.

\(^12\) Williams 1992.