CHAPTER SIXTEEN

POST-MEROITIC LOWER NUBIA BEFORE
THE ADVENT OF CHRISTIANITY

When I had become king, I did not by any means proceed behind the other kings, but well ahead of them. For those who contend with me I do not permit to remain settled in their country unless they have beseeched me and entreat me. For I am a lion in the lower regions, and a bear in the upper regions.  

By the middle of the AD fifth century there were individual conversions in the Lower Nubian elite. Behind these conversions one may identify attempts made by the Roman government of Egypt to reinforce the diplomatic relationship between Egypt and the Lower Nubian polity through the promotion of the latter’s Christianization. A more radical step in this direction was made around AD 535–537 when the Isis temple at Philae, one of the latest strongholds of paganism, was closed. It was turned into the church of St. Stephen and Philae became the seat of a missionary bishopric. Around AD 543 a Monophysite mission sent by the empress Theodora arrived in Lower Nubia. In AD 566 the first bishop of the Noubades (see below) was appointed. The triumph of Christianity was not yet complete, however: after the conversion of the Isis temple the Blemmyean devotees of the goddess continued her

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1 Kalabsha, Silko inscription lines 10–15, FHN III No. 317, trans. T. Hägg
2 See the letter of Phonen on Silko’s son Mouses, FHN III No. 319 and cf. Godlewski 2005.
5 John of Ephesus, IV.7.
6 For the process of Christianization in Nubia, see Kirwan 2002 and cf. Welsby 2002 31ff.
worry at Philae for another thirty years or so.7 The temple of Dendur was converted into a church only in AD 559 or 574.8

The scene of these events and of the ensuing social and cultural transformation is an independent Lower Nubian kingdom, which extended from the First Cataract to the region between the Second and Third Cataracts. In the contemporary sources it appears as “kingdom of the Noubades” or the “Annoubades”; “Noubadia” or “Nobatia”; one of its fifth-century rulers calls himself, however, “King of the Noubades and all the Aithiopians” (see below). The old geographical/political terms Akine, Triakontaschoinos, Dodekaschoinos are no longer in use. One does not speak about the kingdom of Meroe, either—though it was only one or two decades ago that Heliodoros chose it as the scene of his novel entitled Aithiopian Story about Theagenes and Chariclea or Aithiopika.9 In his novel Heliodorus names the capital Meroe and presents its largely fictitious description.10 The ancient native name of the empire of the Twenty-Fifth Dynasty, Napatan and Meroitic rulers still appears, however, in the form Qes in the Meroitic inscription of the Lower Nubian king Kharamadoye dated to c. AD 410–440 (see below)—though as a geographical rather than political notion.11

More than three millennia after the fall of the A-Group chiefdoms (Chapter III) and about two millennia after the end of the C-Group polities (Chapter IV), one could witness once more the emergence of an autonomous polity in Lower Nubia. In this chapter we shall discuss the last decades of Meroitic rule in Lower Nubia and the first century or so of Meroe’s Lower Nubian successor state, the “Kingdom of the Noubades”.

The name “Noubades” is one of a plethora of ethnonyms—Nubai, Nobates, Annoubades, Noba—referring probably to sub-groups of the same people rather than completely different ethnicities. The Nubai appear first in the work of the third century BC geographer Eratosthenes as living west of the Nile in the area extending from the latitude of Meroe City to the region north of the Nile-Atbara junction:

7 Dijkstra 2004.
8 FHNIII No. 330.
9 For Meroe in the novel, see first of all Heliodorus, Aithiopika 8.1, 8.16.4, 10.11, FHNIII No. 274. The novel was written in the third quarter of the AD fourth century.
10 Hägg 2000.
11 REM 0094, FHNIII No. 300 lines 21f.: Qesw Adereke mtr ws Adh Pilqoke mtr ws, “Kushwards to Adere [Soleb], northwards to Philae”.