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.1

By the middle of the AD 5th century there were individual conversions in the Lower Nubian elite.2 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.3 Around AD 543 a Monophysite mission sent by the empress Theodora arrived in Lower Nubia.4 In AD 566 the first bishop of the Noubades (see below) was appointed.5 The triumph of Christianity6 was not yet complete, however: after the conversion of the Isis temple the Blemmyan devotees of the goddess continued her

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2 See the letter of Phonen on Silko’s son Mouses, FHN III No. 319 and cf. Godlewski 2005.
4 John of Ephesus, IV.6 10, 48 53.
5 John of Ephesus, IV.7.
6 For the process of Christianization in Nubia, see Kirwan 2002 and cf. Welsby 2002 31ff.
worship at Philae for another thirty years or so. The temple of Dendur was converted into a church only in AD 559 or 574.

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. In his novel Heliodorus names the capital Meroe and presents its largely fictitious description. 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.

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:

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7 Dijkstra 2004.
8 FHN III No. 330.
9 For Meroe in the novel, see 1st of all Heliodorus, Aithiopica 8.1, 8.16.4, 10.11, FHIV III No. 274. The novel was written in the third quarter of the AD fourth century.
10 Hgg 2000.
11 REM 0094, FHIV III No. 300 lines 21f.: Qesw Adereke mtr wse hwo Pilqoke mtr wse, Kushwards to Adere [Soleb], northwards to Philae.
To the left of the course of the Nile, in Libya, live the Nubai (Νυβαι), a large tribe, beginning at Meroe and continuing as far as the bends of the river. They are not subject to the Aithiopians but are divided into several separate kingdoms.12

As inhabitants of the same region, they are mentioned again by Pliny (Nat. hist. 6.192) and Ptolemy (4.5.6). Conflicts between Meroe and the Nubai or the Noba, as they would be called in later sources,13 are indicated by the ethnonym Noba inscribed in Meroitic cursive on magically punished prisoner figures dating from the 1st century BC – AD 1st century.14 Around the middle of the AD fourth century, not long before the fall of the kingdom of Meroe, the Aksumite king Ezana found Noba people in the possession of settlements in the Butana and north of the Nile-Atbara junction, which they have taken from the king of Meroe.15

The earlier literature interpreted the disappearance of Meroitic literacy after the AD mid-5th century in Lower Nubia (and the rest of the Meroitic kingdom) and the much later emergence of Old Nubian literacy as consequences of the ethnic history of Lower Nubia. Adams suggested that Lower Nubia was largely uninhabited before the second-third century AD when it begun to be (re-)settled by a Nubian-speaking agricultural population and a Meroitic-speaking elite.16 Accepting the hypothesis of the immigration of Nubian-speakers, other writers dated back the same process to the Early Meroitic period, assuming that it started between 207/6 BC in the times of the Upper Egyptian revolt (Chapter XIV.2). It was also supposed that the movement of Eratosthenes Nobai across the Nile and then their expansion in the Butana was encouraged by the kingdom of Meroe.

At Meroe the last royal pyramid burials date from the AD 350s or 360s, at the latest.17 The latest non-royal tombs in the cemeteries at Meroe City are contemporary with these. On the basis of non-Meroitic elements in burial customs and material culture they were identified as

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14 Tıršk 1989 89 300 312.
17 For the dating, see L. Tırk: An Archaeological Note on the Connections between the Meroitic and Ballana Cultures. Studia Aegyptiaca 1 (1974) 361–378.
monuments of a Noba occupation that brought about the end of Meroe City as centre of the Meroitic kingdom.\textsuperscript{18} The collapse of urban life, its institutions and social structure at Meroe City is indicated in the last habitation horizon by rural-type dwellings built for large extended families, the abandonment of the temples and squatter occupation within their walls; by burials in ruined palatial buildings and temples; the disappearance of Meroitic industries and the emergence of hand-made pottery wares.\textsuperscript{19} Though the life span of the last settlement horizon at Meroe City was not long, the growing presence of a new culture is discernible in its material. It also seems that the bearers of the new culture were to some extent Meroiticized. Hence, it may be supposed that the decline and collapse of the Meroitic kingdom was, at least partly, brought about not only by the Noba occupation of Meroitic territories and Aksumite incursions but also by a social, political and cultural imbalance caused by the presence of un-acculturated or superficially acculturated Noba settlers on Meroitic territory. Initially, the Noba immigration may nevertheless have been a centrally controlled process that may be viewed as a Meroitic variant of the settlement of barbarian \textit{foederati} on Roman territories. The resettlement of tribes was not an exclusively Roman invention: it was also practiced by the rulers of Aksum as recorded in Ezana’s Greek inscription from the mid-fourth century AD.\textsuperscript{20}

Replacing the earlier names Dodekaschoinos, Triakontaschoinos, Meroe, \textit{Akine} which are all geographical names, the names \textit{Noubadia}, Kingdom of the Noubades and the like de ne the Lower Nubian post-Meroitic polity with an ethnonym and give the impression that Lower Nubia was the scene of the coming to power of a Noubadian elite and/or a mass immigration of Noubades. It also may indicate that the emergence of a post-Meroitic polity and the presence of the Noubades were actually closely interconnected. Albeit indirectly, the ethnic aspect of the new political formation is indicated by the self-de nition of one of its rulers. Around AD 450 the Lower Nubian ruler Silko calls himself βασιλέας Νουβάδων και άλων των Αἰθιοπίων, kinglet of the Noubades and all the Aithiopians.\textsuperscript{21} As it becomes clear from the following passage of Silko’s Kalabsha inscription, the term

\textsuperscript{18} Kirwan 1939 41ff.
\textsuperscript{19} Cf. Tśrk 1997b 38ff.
\textsuperscript{21} Kalabsha, Silko inscription lines 1–2, \textit{FHN} III No. 317, trans. T. Hgg.
Aithiopians in Silko’s title refers to the inhabitants of the (Lower) Nubian Nile Valley in the same manner as it did in earlier, Ptolemaic and Roman period sources:

I fought with the Blemmyes from Primis (Qasr Ibrim) to Telelis (Shellal); on one occasion I ravaged the country of the others, too, above the Noubades, because they contended with me.22

Above indicates here an upstream direction; i.e., Silko gives a geographical definition of the realm of the Noubades. His title may thus mean that Lower Nubia as far south as the Second or the Third Cataract region (?) was defined politically and/or ethnically as the land of the Noubades, while the territory south of it was the land of the Aithiopians, i.e., the Meroites who had been living there from times of old. Yet it may equally mean that Aithiopians lived in the Kingdom of the Noubades as well, in a land, which was dominated by the Noubades, an ethnicity distinct from the Aithiopians.

The abandonment of Meroe City or the closure of the royal pyramid cemetery at Begarawiya North does not necessarily mean the end of the Meroitic kingdom. In the second half of the fourth century AD tumulus cemeteries with high status burials were opened all over the territory of Meroe. The most important are the cemeteries at Sururab23 c. 100 km upstream from the Sixth Cataract on the west bank, at el-Hobagi24 c. 110 km downstream from the Sixth Cataract on the west bank, at Tanqasi25 c. 40 km downstream from Nuri on the west bank; at several sites in the Dongola Reach26 south of Kawa; between the Third and the Dal Cataracts at Wawa27 c. 50 km upstream from Sai on the east bank; at Kosha and Firka28 c. 50 km downstream from Sai on the

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27 Bates–Dunham 1927.
28 Kirwan 1939.
east bank; at Gemai\(^{29}\) in the Second Cataract region on the east bank; at Qustul about 10 km downstream from Faras, similarly on the east bank and at Ballana opposite Qustul. Certain features of the burials in these cemeteries and their funerary equipments are interpreted in the recent literature as post-pyramidal Meroitic. It is supposed that after the middle of the fourth century AD a number of post-pyramidal polities emerged on the territory of the former Meroitic kingdom, which derived their legitimacy from the rulers of Meroe. El-Hobagi, Firka, Gemai (?) and Qustul are identified as princely cemeteries of these post-pyramidal polities.\(^{30}\) While the actual rank of the dead buried in the largest and richest burials at el-Hobagi, Firka and Gemai cannot be exactly determined, the largest and richest burials at Qustul and Ballana may be identified without any hesitation as tombs of the rulers of post-Meroitic Noubadia. The identification of the burials of rulers is supported by typological considerations, certain features of the burial rites, and the presence of rank symbols in the burials.\(^{31}\)

The status of the princes buried at el-Hobagi, Firka and Gemai is indicated, however indirectly, by a comparison with the cemetery of Ballana, which was a continuation of the Qustul cemetery and which was used for another 50-70 years after the closure of the aforementioned cemeteries. At Qustul\(^{32}\) four princely tumulus burials and several hundreds of private burials\(^{33}\) were discovered. The princely burials belong to four successive generations of princes and date from the period between c. AD 380–410/420.\(^{34}\) The tumulus cemetery of Ballana on the west bank opposite Qustul was opened around AD 420/430 as a direct continuation of the Qustul necropolis. At Ballana seven generations of rulers were buried between c. AD 420/430–490/500.\(^{35}\) The end of this cemetery seems to have been determined by the spread of Christianity rather than a radical political change. After the end of the

\(^{29}\) Bates-Dunham 1927.

\(^{30}\) Lenoble 1999.

\(^{31}\) See T r k 1988b.

\(^{32}\) Emery–Kirwan 1938; T r k 1988b 93ff.

\(^{33}\) Williams 1991c.

\(^{34}\) T r k 1988b 153ff.

\(^{35}\) T r k 1988b 109ff., 154. On the basis of typological considerations Williams 1991c 5ff. suggests two alterations in my Ballana royal tomb sequence (Gen. 5: B. 68 which I considered a non-royal tomb instead of B. 80; Gen. 7: B. 80 instead of B. 37, which is considered non-royal by Williams). The tomb inventories do not seem to support these alterations.
Ballana cemetery the kingdom of Noubadia existed as a political entity continuously until its uni cation around AD 620 with the kingdom of Makuria (see below).36

Disregarding the natural differences resulting from the evolution of substructure types and burial rites, the organic connections between the cemeteries of Qustul and Ballana are quite obvious. There is one single index, however, which indicates an important difference between the historical/political contexts of the two necropoleis: namely, the presence of crowns in the seven royal burials at Ballana, as opposed to the complete absence of this significant item of royal insignia at Qustul. Viewing from this particular aspect the above-listed elite cemeteries, also including Qustul, it might appear that they were the burial grounds of local administrators or vassals of the successors of the kings buried at Begarawiya North whose unknown centre(s) and necropolis remain, however, to be discovered. In the terms of the hypothesis of the survival of the Meroitic kingdom after the end of Begarawiya North the appearance of crowns at Ballana would mean that this enigmatic successor kingdom of Meroe ceased to exist by c. AD 420/430, whereas the family of the Qustul princes founded an independent polity in Lower Nubia and assumed royal insignia. In earlier studies I subscribed to the assumption that a successor of the kingdom of Meroe survived until the rst decades of the AD 5th century and it is the Ballana crowns that rst signal the emergence of independent post-Meroitic polities all over the territory of the former Meroitic kingdom.37

To-day I prefer a different reconstruction of the political map of Nubia after c. 360, the end of Begarawiya North and of the Meroitic kingdom. According to this reconstruction the high-status tumulus cemeteries of the later fourth and 5th centuries AD are monuments of the fragmentation of the kingdom into smaller political units. There may be no doubt, however, that the polities emerging in the south (see the princely cemetery at el-Hobagi), between the Second and Third Cataracts (see the princely cemetery at Firka), in the inner frontier region of the Second Cataract (see the princely cemetery at Gemai),

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37 Cf. Törk 1999 149.
and in Lower Nubia (see the princely cemetery at Qustul) represented a less developed form of political structure than the kingdom, which they have replaced.

The so far identified four post-Meroitic polities correspond with three regional cultures. The first is a southern culture characterized by the tumulus cemeteries of el-Hobagi, Tanqasi, and the burial grounds discovered in the Letti Basin (fourth-sixth century AD). The second is the Noubadian culture of the Nile Valley north of the Third Cataract (fourth-sixth century). The earlier literature stressed the differences between Meroe and these cultures. In the recent literature more attention is paid to the continuities. It is also emphasized, however, that the Meroitic traditions identified in post-Meroitic mortuary religion, rulership and material culture were incorporated into a political, socio-economic and cultural structure, which cannot be regarded as a continuation of Meroe.

A third regional culture may be identified in the former Dodekaschoinos. Its earliest monuments date from the early fourth century AD and it ends around the middle of the fifth century AD. Tumulus burials and a room complex serving the purpose of mortuary cult at Sayala some kms south of Maharraqa (the southern end of the Dodekaschoinos) and tumulus cemeteries in the Kalabsha region at Ta’s/Taifa, Kalabsha and Wadi Qitna dating from the period between the turn of the third and the middle (?) of the fifth century AD were identified as monuments of a Blemmy occupation in northern Lower Nubia. A distinctive decorated handmade pottery ware found at these and other Lower Nubian sites belongs to the Eastern Desert Ware associated with the Blemmyes.

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38 See first of all Lenoble 1999.
As suggested by coins and other well-datable finds, the first Blemmyan groups arrived shortly after the withdrawal of the Roman frontier in AD 298. Initially, the settlement of Blemmyan federate groups around Kalabsha and in the Sayala region was part of both the Meroitic and the Egyptian frontier defence and at the same time a measure to ward off Blemmyan incursions from the Eastern Desert. In AD 336 at the tricennalia, i.e., thirty-years anniversary, of Constantine Aithiopian (i.e., Meroitic), Blemmyan, and Indian (i.e., Aksumite) envoys appeared together in Constantinople. In AD 337/8 Constantius II delegated Flavius Abinnaeus, a cavalry commander, as Roman prefect to a group of Blemmyans. Abinnaeus spent three years with these federates of Rome in an area close to Egypt’s southern frontier, at a place, which could secure the control of the roads leading from the Eastern Desert into the Nile Valley.

In more general terms, alliance between Rome and Noubadia is indicated by archaeological finds dating from the first half of the AD fifth century, such as an alabaster largitio dish from Gemai with the representation of two emperors or two metal vessels from Arminna of the type Roman officials used to present to lesser federate chiefs. These finds may indicate direct connections between Rome and Noubadian local chiefs. It is more probable, however, that they are relics of the gift exchange between the rulers of Noubadia (whose burials at Qustul and Ballana contained rich collections of luxury items received from Rome, see below) and their neighbours and subordinates.

The Blemmyans proved difficult allies. During the course of the fourth century AD Blemmyan groups living in the Valley and/or in the Eastern Desert appeared alternately as federates and foes of the

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44 As indicated by the Roman coins and other Roman-Egyptian objects from Wadi Qitna and Kalabsha North dating from the first half of the fourth century AD, cf. Trk 1988b 179.

45 For conflicts in the frontier region see Claudianus, carmina min. 25-70 75, FHN III No. 278 (about Roman frontier defence around AD 283); Genethliacus of Maximian Augustus 17-4, FHN III No. 279 (around AD 291); Paneg. Constantii 5-2, FHN III No. 280 (AD 297/8 [?]); Johannes Zonaras 12.31, FHN III No. 281; also cf. Scriptores Historiae Augustae, Qadh. tyr. 3.1, Aureliam 33, FHN III No. 283; Prob. 17.2 3, FHN III No. 284; Zosimus, Historia Nova 1.71.1, FHN III No. 323.

46 Eusebius, Vita Constantini 4-7, FHN III No. 293.

47 P. Abinn. 1, FHN III No. 295.


kings of Meroe (before c. 360 AD), the princes of Noubadia (after c. 360 AD),\textsuperscript{50} and the Egyptian government. In AD 372–373 the regular cult life at Philae was disturbed by Blemmyans to an extent that for two years the sacred barge of Isis could not visit the neighbouring Abaton.\textsuperscript{51} In AD 373/4 an armed troop of Blemmyes raided a monastery on the Sinai and massacred its inhabitants.\textsuperscript{52} In the AD 390s several tragic encounters of Upper Egyptian monks with raiding Blemmyes are recorded in the biographies of Pachomius.\textsuperscript{53} Between c. AD 388–395 the \textit{Historia Monachorum} records repeated Aethiopian attacks against monasteries in the Thebaid.\textsuperscript{54} The \textit{Historia} uses the ethnonym Aethiopian as a general term for all inhabitants of Lower Nubia south of the First Cataract. In AD 5th century Coptic manuscripts the term Kushite is used in the same generalizing manner as an alternative for Blemmyan or Barbarian.\textsuperscript{55} Some time between AD 425–450 Appion, bishop of the region of Syene (Aswan), Contra Syene and Elephantine directed a petition to Theodosius and Valentinianus. In the petition he asked the emperors that the garrison of Syene be put under his authority in the same manner as the garrison of Philae was under the command of the bishop of Philae because otherwise he is unable to defend his churches against the attacks of those merciless barbarians, the Blemmyes and the Annoubades who are coming upon us as if from nowhere.\textsuperscript{56} Appion’s complaints are strikingly illustrated by a church treasure (also including a silver reliquary adapted to the special way of exhibiting relics in Egyptian churches and dating from the late fourth–early fifth century AD) buried with a king of Noubadia around AD 450–460 in Ballana tumulus B 3.\textsuperscript{57}

Around AD 394 Blemmyans took over a considerable part of the Dodekaschoinos. By the second quarter (?) of the AD 5th century there existed a Blemmyan polity the rulers of which titled themselves

\textsuperscript{50} See \textit{FHN} III Nos 293, 314, 318, 329.
\textsuperscript{51} Griffith 1937 Ph. 371, \textit{FHN} III No. 392.
\textsuperscript{53} S. Pachomii \textit{Vita Prima Graeca} 85; \textit{Paralipomena} 9, \textit{FHN} III No. 296.
\textsuperscript{54} \textit{Historia Monachorum} 1.2, \textit{FHN} III No. 307.
\textsuperscript{56} Papyrus Leiden Z, \textit{SB} XX 14666, \textit{FHN} III No. 314.
Besides the Kalabsha region, this polity also extended over a large part of the Eastern Desert between the Nile and the Red Sea as it is indicated by the fragment of a lost historical work of the diplomat and historian, Olympiodorus of Thebes. Olympiodorus was invited around AD 423 by Blemmyan tribal chiefs (phylarkhoi) and priests (prophetes) to visit them in the Kalabsha region. According to his narrative the barbarians around Talmis (Kalabsha) were in the possession of a section of the Lower Nubian Nile Valley between the Kalabsha region in the north and Maharraqa in the south as well as of the adjacent desert region with Phoinikon/el-Lakeitα and the emerald mines of the Mons Smaragdinum. The control of such remote places as Phoinikon/el-Lakeitα close to the Upper Egyptian Coptos on the desert road leading from Coptos to the Red Sea harbour of Berenice, the emerald mines close to the Red Sea c. in the height of Kom Ombo, and the Kalabsha region indicates a polity controlling an area of c. 30,000 km² or so.

As indicated above, around AD 410-420 the polity of the Noubadian reached a higher degree of political organization, which came to expression in the transfer of the princely burial ground from Qustul to Ballana and the introduction of royal insignia such as male and female crowns deriving from rank symbols of the Meroitic viceroys of Akime. A long text, apparently the latest known royal inscription in Meroitic, on the façade of the Hypostyle of the Mandulis temple at Kalabsha records military actions of a Kharamadoye who is termed gore, ruler, and who invokes Amun of Luxor (Mnote), Amun of Napata (Mnpte), Harendotes (Arette) and Isis (Wos). His actions are dated to the period between c. AD 410-440 by the mentions made in the inscription of Yismeniye, Kharamadoye’s opponent, who is termed similarly gore and is probably identical with the King Isemne of a Greek inscription from Kalabsha (see below). In the text conflicts are indicated in four geographical regions, viz., between Philae and Qorte (i.e., the whole Dodekaschoinos), between Philae and Karanog, between

59 Olympiodorus, fragm. 1.37 = Photius, Bibliotheca cod. 80 p. 62a9 26, FHN III No. 309.
60 Epiphanius of Salamis, De XII Gemmis 20 21, FHN III No. 305.
61 Tšršk 1987 a 55ff.
62 The name is Meroitic and not Blemmyan (as suggested by Updegraff 1978 101), see Millet 1968 271.
Karanog and the (Second) Cataract, and the (Second) Cataract and Soleb. The inscription of Kharamadoye marks a Noubadian conquest of Kalabsha, which was not final, however, as it is shown by later documents of the Blemmyan Phonen and the Noubadian Silko (see below).

The occurrence of the name of four Blemmyan kings, namely, Tamal,63 Isemne, Degou64 and Phonen (at that time *phylarkhos*)65 in Greek inscriptions in the Mandulis temple at Kalabsha indicates the Blemmyans traditional devotion and suggests at the same time that they regarded Kalabsha as their capital in the Valley. The priesthood of Mandulis preserved literacy in both Greek and Meroitic and carried on the civil administration of the area. The inscription of the *phylarkhos*, later king, Phonen at Kalabsha commemorates the building of an ornamental edifice, a *stoa*, donated by the head of the local cult society of the Blemmy (?) deity Amati. In the inscription references are also made to cult societies of the gods Abene, Chopan and Mander. While the identity of Amati, Abene and Chopan remains enigmatic, Mander is identical with the *Mrwil/Mnrl/Mryl/Mntul* of hieroglyphic, *Mrz* of Demotic, and *Μανδ/οικρυλις* of Greek texts.66 The inscriptions of Tamal, Isemne, Degou and Phonen are documents of the Blemmyans acculturation to the Egyptianized urban cult life of the Dodekaschoinos. The foundation of Egyptian-type cult societies of Blemmy (?) deities was not restricted on Kalabsha. A Greek inscription from Ta/s/Taifa records the following donation:

> Under (?) of Kola, Tesemaeikhem, president (*klinarchos*) of the cult society (*synodos*) of Amatí, had (this) hall made, (which) is called chant. He expended 10,200 talents. Silbanikhem (son of) Namous, agent (?) (*pret*) of the cult society (?) of Amatí, built (it).67

The process of acculturation was promoted by the priesthood of the temples of Kalabsha and Taifa as well as by the, however tempestuous, connections with Roman Egypt. The title *phylarkhos* of Phonen translates a Blemmyan tribal rank the actual significance of which remains obscure, but it also reflects the impact of contemporary Eastern Roman official terminology in which a phylarch was the chief of a federate

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63 *SB* I 1521–1523, *FHN* III No. 310.
64 *SB* I 1524, *FHN* III No. 311.
65 *SB* V 8697, *FHN* III No. 313.
66 *FHN* III No. 313.
67 *SB* I 5099, *FHN* III No. 312.
barbarian group. His inscription makes mention of a letter sent to the city of Kalabsha by a comes, who is in all probability identical with the commander of the Roman frontier forces stationed on the other side of the Egyptian border.

The sources of the first half of the fifth century describe a constant state of conflict in Upper Egypt and Lower Nubia. In the years around AD 450 concentrated efforts were made at the expulsion of the Blemmyes from the Dodekaschoinos both by the Noubadian rulers and the Roman government. At the same time the Roman authorities also tried to consolidate the relationship between Egypt and the Noubadians. While in AD 450 Noubadia started a war against the Blemmyan occupiers of the Dodekaschoinos, Maximinus, dux of the Thebaid defeated Blemmyans and Noubadians and concluded with them a peace treaty, which lasted, however, only to late 452 or early 453 AD. In the terms of the treaty the Blemmyans and Noubades were obliged to return the prisoners and livestock they had taken from Egypt, pay reparations for war damage, and surrender as hostages children of their ex-despots and former sub-despots; but in turn they were allowed to cross the border as pilgrims to Isis of Philae. Moreover, they were granted the permission to receive again the barge of Isis who would resume thenceforth her annual voyage to Lower Nubia. A Greek heroic Blemmyomachia describes a Roman victory over Blemmyans in a ne poetical style. The victory may have occurred in the course of these events just before the final expulsion of the Blemmyans from Lower Nubia, yet it is also possible that it describes a Blemmyan raid directed from the interior of the Eastern Desert on Upper Egypt in the period after AD 453.

The decisive mid-fifth century AD conflicts between Noubadia and the Blemmyans are recorded in two remarkable documents, viz., the triumphal inscription of Silko, King of Noubadia at Kalabsha and the letter of Phonen, King of the Blemmyes, directed to Silko’s successor Abourni and discovered at Qasr Ibrim. The first, which dates from c. AD 450, records three campaigns against the Blemmy conquerors of the Kalabsha region. The first campaign was concluded with a peace

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69 Priscus, fragm. 21, FHN III No. 318; cf. Evagrius, Church History 2,5=Priscus, fragm.
70 Papyrus Berol. 5003, 55-86, FHN III No. 326.
treaty sealed by an oath the Blemmyans swore by the images of their gods. Subsequently the Blemmyans broke their oath whereupon Silko directed two more campaigns against them, one of which also involved an expedition to the country of the others above the Noubades, which may refer to the Eastern Desert as well as to the southern neighbour of Nobadia. In the course of the third campaign Silko fought from Primis to Telelis, i.e., from Qasr Ibrim to the First Cataract, and occupied Kalabsha and Taifa.72

Phonen’s Greek letter73 presents a Blemmyan perspective of these, and subsequent conflicts. He recapitulates the course of the events as follows:

For indeed, first Silko won and took Talmis (Kalabsha). Today you won and took Talmis. First Silko seized our lands and kept us off them. Today you won and took Talmis. First Silko said that “Give me sheep and cattle and camels enough so that our lands be given (back). And I gave them all, and you were insolent, and he kept (them) from us.”74

Phonen’s account starts thus with the state of affairs, which is recorded in the Silko inscription as the outcome of Silko’s third campaign: viz., the Noubadian ruler is in the possession of the region around Kalabsha, which was formerly under Blemmyan control. Phonen starts negotiations with Silko in order to regain his lost Lower Nubian possessions. Silko’s initial answer is that he is ready to return the land in exchange for “sheep and cattle and camels enough. Phonen met his conditions but was cheated. Instead of restoring the Blemmyes’ possessions to them, Silko murdered the Blemmyan chieftain (phylarkhos) Yeny and imprisoned the prophets of the unidentifiable site of Phontauou. Our impression is that Yeny was murdered and the prophets were taken prisoner in a region once held by the Blemmyes but at the time overrun by the Noubades.

An allusion to two actual changes seems to be hidden in the rhetoric of Phonen: a Blemmyan reconquest and the subsequent “liberation” of Talmis by Abourni. But it is equally possible that upon ascending the throne of Noubadia Abourni inherited Silko’s conquests and was soon approached by Phonen who re-opened negotiations with the new ruler on the throne of the former foe, as was customary in the ancient world.

72 SB V 8536, FHN III No. 317.
73 SB XIV 11957-23, FHN III No. 319.
74 FHN III No. 319 lines 11–14.
Phonen did not achieve his goals. Kalabsha remained in Noubadian possession, and the Blemmyes lost their foothold in Lower Nubia for good. Had the Blemmyes recovered Kalabsha, the triumphal inscription of Silko, which was written in the language also used by the Blemmyes as an official language and which was inscribed in the temple, which had been the centre of Blemmyan administration and cult life, could hardly have escaped erasure.

Phonen’s letter highlights some aspects of the political structure of his kingdom. The phrases and terms employed by him reflect the world of a traditional tribal society. He addresses his letter to the king of the Noubades and his sons; he also quotes a statement from a previous letter from Abourni saying, (It is) a great [thing] for a man who is great [in his clan]. This is a clear summary of tribal rulership as opposed to charismatic kingship; and it is rendered still more obvious by what follows, viz., Phonen’s boasting of his son, relatives, and, in general, the greatness of his tribe:

Éindeed like you I have a son, I too. I have a son, Breytek, and Yeni’s brothers, and [many] other forces. So don’t think that He is not of a very noble family.

The nature of tribal hierarchy is indicated not only by the emphasis on kinship relations but also by the mention of two echelons of officials below the king, viz., the phylarchs and the sub-despots (hypotyrannoi). The first title denotes the chiefs of separate tribes, a federation of which appears to have formed the Blemmyan kingdom; the second seems to have been a Blemmyan invention to denote in Greek a tribal dignitary subordinate to a phylarch.

The name of one of Silko’s sons, Mouses, seems to indicate that by the time the Phonen letter was written conversions to the Christian faith had taken place in the highest circles of Noubadian society. The name Mouses was fashionable in fourth and fifth century Christian Egypt and was borne by several bishops too. The Silko inscription displays a greater familiarity with the contemporary diplomatic language

75 Cf. HŠgg 1990.
76 FHN III No. 319 lines 5f.
77 Cf. Papadopoullos 196620.
78 Cf. FHN III Nos 309, 318, 331, 336, 339; for the interchangeability of phylarkhos and tyrannos in contemporary official Greek terminology, see Chrysos 1978 45.
79 See W. Ensslin: Moses 2 11. RE XVI.1 (1933) 375.
than Phonen's letter. It defines Silko's status from two different aspects using the term βασιλεύς, 'king', when speaking about Silko as one of the rulers in Nubia, and the term βασιλίσκος, 'kinglet', when speaking about him in relation to the emperor of Rome. It may be that this fine distinction also gave expression to Silko's actual political status as a federate of Rome. The princely tombs of Qustul and the royal burials of Ballana present a rich evidence of gift exchange with Rome, including luxury objects, which were traditional items of imperial/official largitio such as, e.g., silver plate, calcite vessels and ornamental horse trappings as well as more special items such as folding chairs, which were status-indicating presents to 'barbarian' federates.

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82 Tørk 1995c.
83 Of the type found with the Esquiline treasure, Tørk 1988b Pls 45f., 51f., 55, 57, 181.
84 Cf. Tørk 1988b 81.