The Middle Kingdom

The rulers of the Egyptian Middle Kingdom put an end to the internal troubles of their country and united it under their sway. They then directed their attention to the land south of Egypt, namely, Nubia. This move began under the kings of the Theban eleventh dynasty. On a fragment from the temple of Gebelein in Upper Egypt, Menthuhotep II is depicted striking his enemies, among whom we find Nubians. A rock inscription of Menthuhotep III at the First Cataract refers to an expedition 'with ships to Wawat' which is the Shellal–Wadi Halfa reach of the Nile. Moreover, there are references which make it probable that the Egyptians of the eleventh dynasty had occupied Nubia as far south as Wadi Halfa. There are, for instance, several graffiti on two hills west and north of Abdel Gadir village on the west bank of the Nile just below the Second Cataract which mention Antef, Menthuhotep and Sebekhotep (names common in the eleventh dynasty), and which relate to quarrying, hunting and clerical work. However, whatever the situation in Nubia might have been during the eleventh dynasty, it was under the twelfth dynasty (—1991 to —1786) that Nubia was effectively occupied as far as Semna, where the southern border of the kingdom was firmly established. It was here that the remarkable stele of Senusret III, the fifth king of the dynasty, was set up to provide an unmistakable boundary mark. The stele forbade any Nubian to pass 'downstream or overland or by boat, [also] any herds of Nubians, apart from any Nubian who shall come to trade in Iken or upon any good business that may be done with them'. Iken is now known to be the fortress of Mirgissa, about 40 kilometres north of Semna.

Several pieces of evidence indicate that the permanent occupation of this part of Nubia was begun by Amenemhet I, the founder of the twelfth dynasty. He is thought to be partly of Nubian origin. The descent of King Amenemhet is deduced from a papyrus now in the museum of Leningrad, the sole aim of which was to make legitimate his coming to the throne of Egypt. According to this papyrus, King Snefru of the fourth dynasty called in a priest to amuse him. When the king asked him about the future, the priest foretold a time of hardship and misery in Egypt which would end when 'a king shall come belonging to the south, Ameny by name, the son of a woman of Ta-Zeti [Nubia]'. The name Ameny is the abbreviation of the name Amenemhet. A rock inscription found near Krosko in Lower Nubia dating from the twenty-ninth year of Amenemhet's reign states that his troops reached Krosko in order to 'overthrow Wawat'. In the teachings he left to his son we hear Amenemhet say: 'I seized the

people of Wawat and captured the people of Medju.\textsuperscript{39} Once again, inscriptions of the same king west of Abu Simbel show quarrying activities in Lower Nubia during the last part of his reign.

The occupation of Nubia commenced by Amenemhet I was completed by his son and successor Senusret I.\textsuperscript{40} On a large inscribed stone put up in the eighteenth year of Senusret I at Buhen by an officer with the name Mentuhotep, the Theban war-god Montu is shown presenting to the king a line of bound war-prisoners from ten Nubian localities. The name of each locality is contained in an oval frame beneath the head and shoulders of the captive who represents the people of the said locality. Amongst the conquered lands mentioned on this sandstone stele are Kush, Sha’at and Shemyk. Sha’at is the present island of Sai,\textsuperscript{41} some 190 kilometres south of Buhen, while Shemyk, according to a recently discovered inscription, is the Dal Cataract region 40 kilometres downstream of Sai Island.

Kush, though soon used by the Egyptians to describe a large southern land, was originally a restricted Nubian territory first heard of during the Middle Kingdom.\textsuperscript{42} If the Buhen stele enumerates place names from north to south as do other known documents from the same period,\textsuperscript{43} then Kush was not only north of Sha’at but also north of Shemyk. Now, we know that the latter is Dal Island or the Dal Cataract region north of Sai Island; and thus we can safely locate Kush somewhere north of Dal and south of the Second Cataract or Semna.\textsuperscript{44}

A second indication of the victory over Nubia won by Senusret I, which left the Pharaohs of the twelfth dynasty in full control of the country north of Semna, is provided by an inscription found in the tomb of Ameny, the monarch of Beni Hassan in Egypt. This tells us that Ameny sailed southward in the company of the king himself and ‘passed beyond Kush and reached the end of the earth’.\textsuperscript{45}

The reasons which prompted the Egyptians to occupy part of Nubia were both economic and defensive. Economically they wanted, on the one hand, to secure skins, ivory and ebony and, on the other hand, to exploit the mineral wealth of Nubia.\textsuperscript{46} The security of their kingdom necessitated the defence of its southern frontier against the Nubians and the desert dwellers to their east. The strategy was to maintain a buffer between the border of Egypt proper in the region of the First Cataract and the land south of Semna, which constituted the source of real menace to them,
FIG. 9.7 Nubia, 1580 before our era
in order to control traffic along the Nile and eradicate any threat to their
country from Kush.

The defensive nature of the Egyptian occupation of Nubia during the
Middle Kingdom period is clearly manifested by the number and the
strength of the fortresses the kings of the twelfth dynasty were compelled
to build in the occupied territory. A late Middle Kingdom papyrus
discovered in a tomb near the Ramesseum at Luxor 47 names seventeen
Nubian forts between Semna in the south and Shellal in the north. They
fall into two groups, those to the north of the Second Cataract intended to
maintain a strong grip on the native population, 48 namely, the C-Group
people, and those built on eminences between the Second Cataract and
Semna to protect boats in trouble in the shoals and defend the frontier. 49
That these forts were clearly built for defence is even shown by the
names assigned to them, such as 'Repelling the Tribes', 'Repressing . . .',
'Curbing the Deserts', 'Repelling the Inu' and 'Repelling the Mazaiu'. 50

The strength of these forts and the effort made to render them
impregnable can be seen from the fortress at Buhen, which was one of the
best-preserved forts in Nubia before it was flooded by the waters of the
new Aswan High Dam. This formidable Middle Kingdom fortress
consisted of an elaborate series of fortifications within fortifications built
on a rectangular plan measuring 172 by 160 metres. 51 The defence system
consisted of a brick wall 4.8 metres thick and at least 10 metres high with
towers at regular intervals. At the bottom of this main wall was a brick-
paved rampart, protected by a series of round bastions with double rows
of loopholes. The whole fort was surrounded by a dry ditch cut into the bed
rock 6.5 metres deep. The ditch was 8.4 metres wide and the other
scarp was heightened by brickwork. There were two gates on the east side
facing the Nile, and a third, heavily fortified, on the west side facing the
desert.

Following the collapse of the Middle Kingdom and the Hyksos (Asiatic
tribes) invasion, the Egyptians lost their control over Nubia. The forts were
ransacked and burnt by the natives, who seem to have seized the oppor­
tunity of the collapse of the central government in Egypt to regain their
independence.

Kerma (—1730 to —1580)

We have already noticed that the southern boundary of the Egyptian
Middle Kingdom was unquestionably fixed at Semna by Senusret III.
But the important excavations carried out by the American archaeologist