

## INTRODUCTION

### Pride and prejudice in the modern historiography of the Sudan

Some thirty years ago, the monuments and the history of ancient Nubia were frequently mentioned in world press.<sup>1</sup> This unusual interest in ancient cultures of a remote African land was generated by an impending catastrophe : the building of the High Dam at Aswan was to create a permanent lake which would then forever cover the Lower Nubian Nile Valley between the First and Second Cataracts (see Map). This valley section was known, as a result of earlier archaeological surveys, to be rich in prehistoric and historic settlement sites and cemeteries. Besides these, there were also almost forty pharaonic temples condemned to death : among them the temple complex of Philae Island and the rock sanctuaries of Abu Simbel — unless an unprecedented salvage campaign were undertaken.

The reaction of the world was an immediate manifestation of readiness to help when the two countries that were directly concerned, i.e., Egypt and the Sudan, appealed for aid to save the endangered monuments. In a uniquely impressive manner, when UNESCO, on behalf of these two countries, appealed to the conscience of the world to contribute intellectual and financial resources towards the conservation of the monuments of Nubia stressing that what is threatened in the Nile Valley is a common heritage of mankind, the result was a survey and excavation program in which more than forty expeditions took part from all over the world. In

a most spectacular manner, it also resulted in saving the temples of Philae and Abu Simbel and in the conservation of some thirty other temples.

Although confined only on the northern half of the Middle Nile Region, these actions between 1959 and 1969 brought about a significant development in the study of Middle Nile cultures. The final result of this extraordinary cooperation of archaeologists and historians is, however, as far as it can be judged to-day, not quite proportional to the possibilities that were inherent in such an intellectual venture. The archaeological work of the UNESCO Salvage Campaign promoted the « liberation » of Middle Nile studies from Egyptology, which was regarded by many participants as a methodological burden, yet its results somehow failed to keep alive a general academic attention which could then bring about the integration of Middle Nile studies into Ancient History. The continuing disinterest of scholars of Ancient History towards our region makes Middle Nile studies painfully isolated methodologically as well as in terms of logistics ; but it may also be said that this disinterest causes a loss to Ancient History too.

The student of the history of the Middle Nile Region is, however, much less worried about this unjustified isolation. He may be much more concerned about the place that is taken by the study of the past in the contemporary culture and politics of the peoples living in the region. He cannot fail to notice the emphasis laid by

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1 See Adams 1977, 81ff. ; Säve-Söderbergh : *Temples and Towns of Ancient Nubia*, London, 1987.

Sudanese historians and archaeologists upon issues of historical identity, and he also may feel troubled by political arguments based on different interpretations of the past. I do not intend to enter here into any long discussion of actual or possible uses of Middle Nile history as a « handmaid of authority ».<sup>2</sup> Instead, I propose to focus our attention on a more general aspect of this issue, which is doubtless more relevant for the ancient historian too.

The creation of a national identity which may manifest itself in the form of a cultural self-image as well as of a political ideology cannot be imagined without some well-defined attitude towards one's past. The notion of national identity as a structure resting on historical foundations may have rather specific features in Islamic countries. For example, in Egypt the general feeling of historical-national identity does not really embrace the history of the country before the middle of the 7th century AD and the pharaonic ancestry of the Coptic minority does not represent an ideological factor that would influence Egyptian self-image. The case of the Sudan is markedly different. The notion of ethnic continuity of the great majority of its peoples, from prehistoric times onwards, is now increasingly in the foreground of historical research and is bound to become a pillar of national identity and of political argumentation. That this is so is to a great extent a result of the UNESCO Nubian Salvage Campaign. Until the 1960s historians and archaeologists alike maintained almost unanimously that Reisner and later Ethnic Prehistorians were right when they described the history of the Middle Nile Region as a sequence of major social and cultural changes caused by the coming of new peoples.<sup>3</sup> The archaeological

discoveries made in Lower Nubia brought about a re-interpretation of finds from the southern parts of the Region too, and comprehensive studies as B.G. Trigger's *Settlement History*<sup>4</sup> and W.Y. Adams' more recent *Nubia Corridor to Africa*<sup>5</sup> argued convincingly against the theory of major ethnic changes. Such archaeological publications as the volumes of the Scandinavian Joint Expedition<sup>6</sup> provided theoretical considerations as well as a rich find material for the creation of a new historical picture. As Adams put it, there is no longer any satisfactory reason for believing that the modern Nubians are a different people from the Nubians of antiquity or of any intervening period. On the contrary, ... everything points to their being the same people.<sup>7</sup>

One of the direct consequences of this view was the quick and uncritical acceptance of ethnoarchaeology in Middle Nile studies in general, and by archaeologists trained in the Sudan, in particular. The idea of an unbroken ethnic continuity creates in this way the consciousness of a cultural heritage that is believed to reach back directly to prehistoric times. It lends the proud dimensions of great antiquity to the notions of ethnos and nation. On the other hand, it gives to the student of archaeology the illusion that the past survives directly, even physically, and that the investigation of present phenomena is a key to the understanding of the past. In this way, he may feel that insight into Sudanese antiquity could be derived from direct observation of Sudanese present.<sup>8</sup>

If we accept such a possibility, we also must accept that the way is open in the other direction too ; and this would mean that modern Sudanese identity may receive a decisive inspiration from what one *believes to have been Sudanese past*.

2 « The past has always been the handmaid of authority », says J. H. Plumb : *The Death of the Past*, London, 1969, 40 ; quoted by M. I. Finley : « The Ancestral Constitution », in : *The Use and Abuse of History*, London, 1975, 34-59, 45.

3 Cf. Adams 1977, 71ff. ; see further V. G. Childe : *Archaeology as a Social Science*, London, 1947 ; B.G. Trigger : *History and Settlement in Lower Nubia*, New Haven 1965 ; *id.* : Reisner to Adams : « Paradigms of Nubian Cultural History », in : J.M. Plumley (ed.) : *Nubian Studies*, Warminster, 1982, 223-226 ; *id.* : « A History of Archaeological Thought », Cambridge, 1989.

4 *History and Settlement in Lower Nubia*, New Haven, 1965 ; cf. *id.* : « History and Settlement in Lower Nubia in the Perspective of Fifteen Years », *Meroitica* 7, 1984, 367-380.

5 Adams 1977.

6 Ed. T. Säve-Söderbergh. See esp. Säve-Söderbergh in : *Late Nubian Sites. Churches and Settlements*, Helsinki, 1970 ; *id.* : in : *Late Nubian Cemeteries*, Solna, 1981. See also R. Holthoer : *New Kingdom Pharaonic Sites. The Pottery*, Lund, 1977.

7 Adams 1977, 667.

8 T. Kendall : « Ethnoarchaeology in Meroitic Studies », *Meroitica* 10, 1989, 625-745, 629.

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It is rather unlikely that ethnoarchaeologists even at the outset realized all implications of their creed. While it is obvious that ethnic continuity — if used as a basis for cultural continuity — is one of the constituents of historical continuity, it cannot stand alone for historical continuity.

Historical continuity can be interpreted in many different ways, and it usually serves political purposes. Quite often, historians are willing to extend ethnic continuity into historical continuity, and then historical continuity can be extended by any politician into state continuity. As long as generalizations of this sort are made retrospectively, i.e., are made while tracing back in time the origins of certain social institutions, the historian does not betray his professional objectivity. It is the opposite direction that is dangerous.

And here we arrive at the actual topic of this book. The historian is bound to be confronted with the warning that all use and abuse of history rests upon what the user and the abuser believe to be historical fact. As I have said earlier, the search for a national identity is a real concern for modern Sudanese society, and it was pointed out that the notions of ethnic and of historical continuity play a significant role in the genesis of modern national identity. It may thus prove useful to take a closer look at the genesis of the

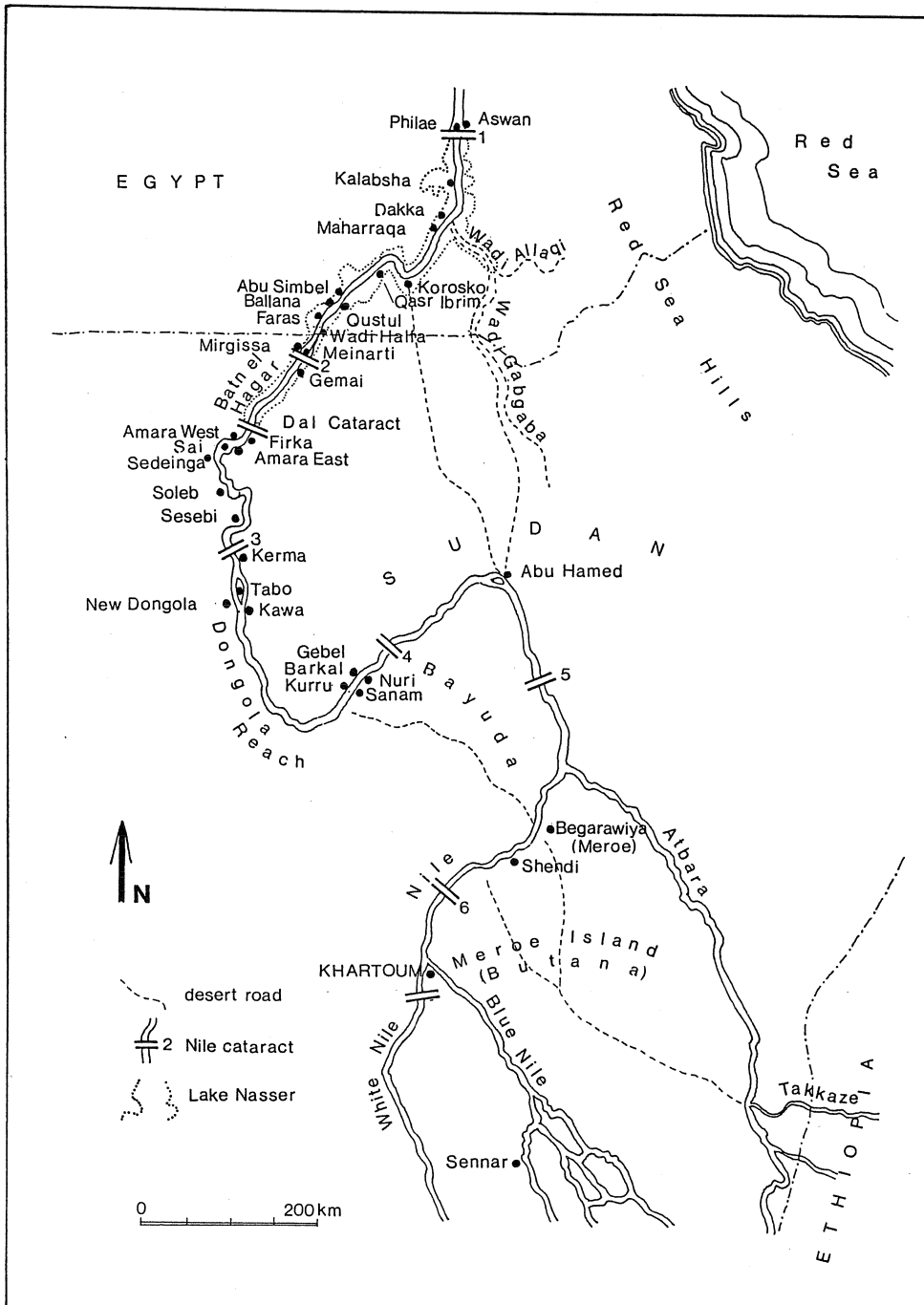
kingdom and the emergence of its myth of the state that is the great predecessor of modern state formation in this area. The paradoxes and the glory of the processes of more than two and a half millennia ago may make modern pride appear justified — and imprudent at the same time. The controversial nature of these processes must also shatter a number of convenient prejudices.

In the following I shall discuss three related topics. The first is the emergence of the kingdom of Kush after the end of Egyptian New Kingdom domination in Upper Nubia. My second topic is the problem of state structure in the first five centuries of the kingdom. Finally, in the longest part of this book, I shall discuss the evidence concerning the Kushite myth of the state and its relationship with Egyptian concepts. The issues of state formation and organisation and of kingship ideology are eminently relevant from the aspect of continuity. They doubtless have a bearing on the problem of historical identity too. The investigation of these issues may bring us closer to the understanding of the mental structure of the period under investigation — for there can be no doubt that the ideology connected to state organisation and the origins and function of royal power are direct reflections of what we may call mentality in the sense of social psychology and intellectual history.<sup>9</sup>

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9 Cf. Zibelius-Chen, 1988, xxi.

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Map of the Middle Nile Region