CHAPTER XVII

THE TANITES, BUBASTIDES AND NUBIANS

AFTER the death of Rameses III the prosperity of Egypt together with its art rapidly declined. He and his successors were all dominated by a religious obsession which resulted in placing enormous wealth and power in the hands of the priests of Amen, and the secular interests of the country suffered accordingly. Under Rameses IV to XII (some of whom were brothers and succeeded at short intervals), Thebes fell politically from its high estate; the poverty of the people led to the pillage of many of the tombs of the kings. A local noble at Tanis, Nesbanebtet (called Smendes by Greek writers) became dominant in Lower Egypt, and is regarded by Manetho as the founder of the XXIst dynasty. At the same time Herihor, the high priest of Amen, who had been the virtual ruler under the last of the Ramessides, proclaimed himself Lord of the two Lands and founded a concurrent priestly dynasty at Thebes. The result of this divided government was that all the foreign power of Egypt was lost, and gave way in Syria to the rising influence of the Assyrians. Beyond the completion of the temple of Khonsu no important architectural work was undertaken.

A new dynasty, the XXIIInd, was founded by Sheshenk, an Egyptianized Libyan who had risen to great influence in Herakleopolis and married a daughter of one of the Tanite kings. Under him the government was once more
consolidated, and Egypt regained considerable internal prosperity. It is he who is recorded, under the name Shishak, to have invaded Palestine in the days of Rehoboam and despoiled Solomon’s temple. His capital city was Bubastis, near the modern Zagazig in the Delta, where two of his successors, Osorkon I and II, carried on extensive building operations. The great temple of the local goddess, Bast, excited the admiration of Herodotus when he visited it nearly five centuries later. The site, known now as Tel Bast, is a mass of ruins, but excavations have revealed the plan of the temple and shown that it was built entirely of red granite, which must have been brought from Upper Egypt. There is a fine Hathor-head from one of the pillars in the British Museum.

The art of portrait sculpture seems to have been revived under Osorkon II, of whom a good statue in gray granite exists, but many fragments of statues found at Bubastis evidently date from the days of the Middle Kingdom. The chief architectural work of Sheshenkh was the forecourt of the great temple at Karnak, the western pylon of which was never quite completed. Another successor, Sheshenkh III, built chiefly at Tanis and destroyed the colossal statue of Rameses II (see p. 143) in order to

1 See Breasted, p. 548. Petrie, Hist., iii, 249.
build a pylon, the ruins of which still exist, with the fragments.

During the remainder of the XXIInd dynasty and the two short ones which followed it, Egypt again fell into a state of internal confusion, and was resolved into local and hostile political units which left the kingdom open to external attack. The first aggression came from the south, for the neglect of the Nubian conquests had given opportunity for the establishment of an independent Ethiopian kingdom which emerges on the scene of history in the eighth century B.C. Nubia had long been a stronghold of the cult of Amen, and many of the Theban priests had migrated to Napata when Thebes had lost its predominant position. Meanwhile Kashta, a Nubian king, and his son Pianki had extended their power to Thebes, and gradually made further encroachments. By repeated raids Pianki succeeded in subjugating all the chief towns of Lower Egypt, and some years later his brother Shabaka once more consolidated the government under what is reckoned as the XXVth or Nubian dynasty.

The most enlightened king of this line was probably Taharka, son of Pianki, but during his reign, which lasted twenty-five years, Esarhaddon king of Assyria invaded the Delta and reduced it to a state of vassalage. Taharka, however, retained a nominal suzerainty over Upper Egypt, and a monument of his reign exists in some remains of a pavilion which he built in the forecourt of the great temple at Karnak (see p. 114). The columns, though apparently imitated from those in the Hypostyle Hall, are inferior in construction, being built up in small sections. His most extensive work consisted of two temples at Napata which he built or enlarged. The larger temple, the sanctuary of which is excavated
in the isolated rock called Gebel Barkal, has an open court succeeded by a portico and a small hypostyle hall. The caryatid figures of Bes, as represented in a drawing given by Caillard, who described it in 1822, show a decided Ethiopian taste.

Under Taharka's successor Tanuath-Amen (Tentamon) Egypt was again invaded by the Assyrians under Assurbanipal. Thebes was attacked and ruined and the Ethiopian king was driven back to Napata. His dynasty in Egypt came to an end, and the country was divided into petty principalities subservient to Assyria.

But Assyria itself was unconsciously nearing its downfall, and while its main forces were occupied with wars against Babylon and Elam, Psamtek (Psammaticus) son

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1 "Meroe au Fleuve Blanc."
of Necho, who governed in the Delta as a vassal of Assyria, seized the opportunity, and with the aid of Greek mercenaries succeeded in throwing off the yoke. By degrees he secured the supremacy over the various local governments, and Egypt was once more united under a native king.