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State Formation in Ancient Egypt after the reading of Ibn Khaldûn's *Muqaddimah*

1. Introduction

The consolidation of the Egyptian state after the process of political unification at the end of the Predynastic period is, without a doubt, one of the central but more controversial issues in the debate about the origins of ancient Egyptian civilization. Even with the increase of archaeological evidences and inscribed material, our knowledge of the historical process that took place in that remote period is still fragmentary and, as a consequence of it, must be necessarily supported by theoretical approaches.

Indeed, from the abolished image presented by 19th century Egyptologists, of a "Conquering Master Race" or "Dynastic Race" (Emery 1961: 30f.), to the most accepted present theories which consider the unification as the culmination of an internal process, first cultural and then political (Baines 1995: 102), the treatment of the subject, far from being solved, is diverse and full of nuances.

Meanwhile, the quest for a comprehensible development of an emerging state or state-organized societies during the Predynastic and Early Dynastic Egypt has directed the attention of archaeologists to the increasing division of labour linked to the development of intensive agriculture. According to this, historiographic tendencies point out on adaptation from an economy of subsistence to one of production, which forced Neolithic communities, especially in Upper Egypt and Lower Nubia, to adopt more complex forms of society based on social inequality (Midant-Reynes 2003: 369-375).

Besides the predominant emphasis on economic changes, we must add technological, sociological and, of course, ideological elements without which it is impossible to evaluate the magnitude of any given cultural system. These are, in fact, main factors (some of them ponderable and some other imponderable

ones), through which particular theories evolve, trying to establish an objective base for historical analysis.

Far from adding fuel to the controversy on the point of departure for state and kingship in Egypt, the present article captures, in this respect, essential aspects of the masterpiece the *Muqaddimah* (Rosenthal 2005; Monteil 1997) written by Ibn Khaldûn (1332-1406), one of the most illustrious fourteenth-century Arab authors. In intensive reading of some of the passages of this excellent work we find a plethora of interesting arguments whose logic and brilliant consistency offer us a valuable, alternative explanation of the origin and development of human societies and the general ideological context leading to state formation and institutions.

2. Bedouins and sedentary people as natural groups

One of the first important aspects in Ibn Khaldûn's *Muqaddimah* is that referred to the dual conception of society, where a basic principle is given as follows: Bedouins – considered here as exponents of a nomad or non-urban society – and sedentary people are “natural groups”. The fact of considering both as “natural groups” is explained because, in his words, they “*exist by necessity*” (Rosenthal 2005: 92). This statement acts as a kind of introductory argument through which Ibn Khaldûn considers two pre-existent sociological models, which means different behaviour patterns, group identity and social structure (Rosenthal 2005: 92). Indeed, “natural” is a concept apparently used here to justify social, even biological, evolution, as Bedouins are considered “*the basis of, and prior to, cities and sedentary people*” (Rosenthal 2005: 93). But the notion of “natural” linked to “necessity” involves also divergence of interests, as both groups are, in fact, the result of adaptative strategies to a given “natural” environment (Rosenthal 2005: 45-69). Thus, nomads and sedentary people must be considered sociologically antagonists, although the latter, it is assumed, stems from the first.

Such a division, presented as the earliest stage in the development of human societies, does not imply, however, a rigid separation. In Ibn Khaldûn's view, both social systems are dynamic and, because of that, closely related and submitted to a process of interaction. This seems obvious at least in the case of nomads, about which it is said: “*urbanization is found to be the goal to which the Bedouin aspires. Through his own efforts, he achieves what he proposes to achieve in this respect. When he has obtained enough to be ready for the conditions and customs of luxury, he enters upon a life of ease and submits himself to the yoke of the city*” (Rosenthal 2005: 93). But what is there in return for sedentary people? This is indeed the most attractive aspect in Ibn Khaldûn's theory and will consequently deserve full attention.

3. From leadership to royal authority

When observing the ways leading to the formation and consolidation of "royal authority"¹, Ibn Khaldûn focuses part of his arguments on how nomadic structures take a significant role in its acquisition. First and very important in this particular point is the notion of "group feeling" or "esprit de clan" (Monteil 1997) considered here as a main factor leading to state formation. For Ibn Khaldûn, such a concept involves different internal characteristics.

- a) "group feeling" is the base of nomadic social organization from which social distance among individuals and territorial groups are regulated;
- b) "group feeling" concerns blood ties, rooted on a common descent, giving place to cohesion and solidarity among relatives, even mutual defence and protection. However, "group feeling" goes further including also "clients" and "followers" sharing in the "group feeling" of their masters;
- c) The association built upon common descent and the resulting "group feeling" is stronger than any other, even that acquired through intermarriage;
- d) "group feeling" is in the origin and development of a lineage;
- e) when two "group feelings" come into close contact, the less influential one gives added power to the foremost one (Rosenthal 2005: 285; Monteil 1997: 588).

Thus, in his opinion, group feeling is in the origin and development of a lineage (Rosenthal 2005: 102-103). If a highest ranking lineage is imposed in the group feeling, the resulting political organization is leadership, which prevails on other lineages, even "clients" and "followers" sharing in the group feeling of their masters. This is the way through which a "greater group feeling" is obtained (Rosenthal 2005: 108), "patriotisme supraclanique" (Monteil 1997: 216). Therefore, due to the fact that lineages are ranked according to a genealogical principle, "only those who share in a group feeling can have a "house" (Rosenthal 2005: 102) and the dominant "group feeling" (leadership) will be a perfect candidate *for/in* acquiring royal authority. Sedentary people may invoke a "house" but that is fictitious because their "group feeling has completely disappeared" (Rosenthal 2005: 102).

Contrary to the current and most accepted theories that understand the origins of state as the result of evolutive social structures from rural to urban communities and, hence, the consolidation of an earlier system of rule giving place to (proto) kingship, for Ibn Khaldûn the development of the apparatus of

¹ This is a key concept in the *Muqaddimah*, seen by Ibn Khaldûn (Rosenthal 2005: 47; 151) as "a natural quality of man which is absolutely necessary to mankind". "Royal authority", as a legal monopoly of coercion: tax collection, subject dominion, military expeditions... , clearly assimilated to the notion of state.

government leading to the state can only be explained by the capacity of a group, the nomadic group, of maintaining the social balance between cohesion (“group feeling”) and inequality (“superiority”); “*leadership exists only through superiority*” (Rosenthal 2005: 101). Thanks to “superiority” (Rosenthal 2005: 109) a tribe gains control over a corresponding amount of wealth and comes to share prosperity and abundance. From that moment on, relations among individuals are based on status and hierarchization. Also the ruling dynasty is stronger and the tribe “*submits to its rule. However, the toughness of desert life is lost. Group feeling and courage weaken*” until it is destroyed. “Superiority” is then for Ibn Khaldûn, the entrance door to sedentary life and one of the most important factors supporting “royal authority”. Once superiority is imposed “*all other people can only hold ranks below the rank of the ruler and under the control of the government*” (Rosenthal 2005: 308).

The fact that urban centres practise many crafts ² and trade, in an economy founded on the notion of surplus, becomes responsible for their loss of social cohesion and military effectiveness and, consequently, their impossibility of “growing” politically in a higher centralization of power. This is because in the social relations of sedentary people, kinship ties have been progressively replaced by status (growing social inequality) and, thus, eliminated the faculty for leadership which, in his opinion, is only sustained by group feeling. The consequence is, in this case, the decline of a real political control which is supplanted by the development of mere local bureaucracies (oligarchy). Local bureaucracies whose political control is held by those few who claim nobility as members of “*the most noble (but fictitious) houses*” (Rosenthal 2005: 102-103). Of course, those local bureaucracies can gain prestige and command but never a real, effective “royal authority”.

As “group feeling” conveys what Ibn Khaldûn calls the “desert attitude”, this exclusively concerns the Bedouin civilization. In its primary sense, “desert attitude” seems to act as a mechanism against (urban) corruption. For Ibn Khaldûn (Rosenthal 2005: 94) sedentary life “constitutes the last stage of evil and of remoteness from goodness”, moving away the risk of ambition and social exclusion (through the existence of a feeling of solidarity and cooperation). On the contrary, (Rosenthal 2005: 94) Bedouins are nearer the “*first natural state of creation*” and because of that “*closer to being good than sedentary people*”.

² Among the crafts considered by Ibn Khaldûn (Rosenthal 2005: 318-319) agriculture is seen as “*the oldest of all crafts*” and “*prior to and older than sedentary life*”. However, among nomads agriculture and other economic activities are not developed beyond mere subsistence levels, while among sedentary people all economic activities, even agriculture, are practised for “extracting surplus products” or “profit”.

But, going further, we can interpret such a concept as an implicit strategy for maintaining "social cohesion", i.e., a kind of "guardian" of nomad traditions. Therefore, the "desert attitude" invoked in *Muqaddimah* together with the term "austerity", would mean, in the last sense, the vindication of the nomadic group identity which unconsciously rejects all those things involving social changes and developments. This situation can be explained in the following ways:

a) the farther in a social aspect a nomad group is from urban civilization the stronger its group cohesion ("group feeling") and the deeper its "desert attitude". This will inevitably take us to the section (Rosenthal 2005: 118-119) where Ibn Khaldûn deals with the disastrous consequences of the encounter between desert-rooted nomads and sedentary people and the domination of the former.

On the other hand, b) the nearer in a social aspect a nomad group is from urban civilization, the better group cohesion ("group feeling") and "desert attitude" are combined to help the leadership aspirations of high rank lineage, thus contributing to its consolidation as a dynasty after the establishment of "royal authority" within a sedentary society.

However, (Rosenthal 2005: 109) an excess of sedentary habits and fast loss of desert attitude "*break the vigour of group feeling*" and, consequently, the tribe is not able to protect itself and then not able to acquire royal authority. It is inevitably "*swallowed up by other nations*". The moment in which there is an interaction between nomad attitude and sedentary attitude is then a delicate moment. Only the capacity of maintaining the perfect balance will permit the leader to obtain strong "royal authority".

This pattern is seen with special interest by Ibn Khaldûn, leading him to establish five stages of political development (Rosenthal 2005: 141-142) through which the new dynasty will start its unavoidable pathway towards its decline or "senility". The two first stages are crucial because royal authority will progressively get rid of its compromises before clients and followers – who will be replaced by new adherents, servants and helpers – producing a steady decrease of group cohesion ("group feeling") and bringing an increase of inequality ("superiority"). As a consequence, "royal authority" reinforces its position and acquires (see third and fourth stages) definite power and dominion. See the important role of the law (even religious laws) in restraining fortitude and providing fear and docility. For Ibn Khaldûn, law is clearly the expression of coercive power (Rosenthal 2005: 96).

A principal role in this socio-political process is played by religion which, according to Ibn Khaldûn, seems to constitute a subsystem of social interaction, providing it with reinforcement of group cohesion among nomads, but destroying

fortitude and increasing docility once it is imposed by law (religious laws) among people turned to sedentary life. For the consequences of religious propaganda giving additional power to a dynasty at its beginning see Rosenthal 2005: 126-128.

To sum up, the conception of state given by the *Muqaddimah* is clearly expressed not in terms of “internal social evolution”, from the enlargement of prosperous urban communities, but as the result of the interrelation between these two unitary and, at the same time, opposite sociological systems.

From this encounter, simple forms of communal leaderships (nomad groups) will become a more coercive and complex rule activity, “royal authority”. In this exchange, the wealth generated by urban economy, social specialization and technical development (sedentary groups), will provide the nascent institution of kingship with more effective, legal, instruments of power.

4. State formation in ancient Egypt after reading the *Muqaddimah*

From the examination of the accurate sociological model of Ibn Khaldûn, we infer two possible methodological perspectives, 1) archaeological; 2) historical, which could be very useful in the evaluation of the processes leading to state formation in ancient Egypt.

1) Archaeological perspective:

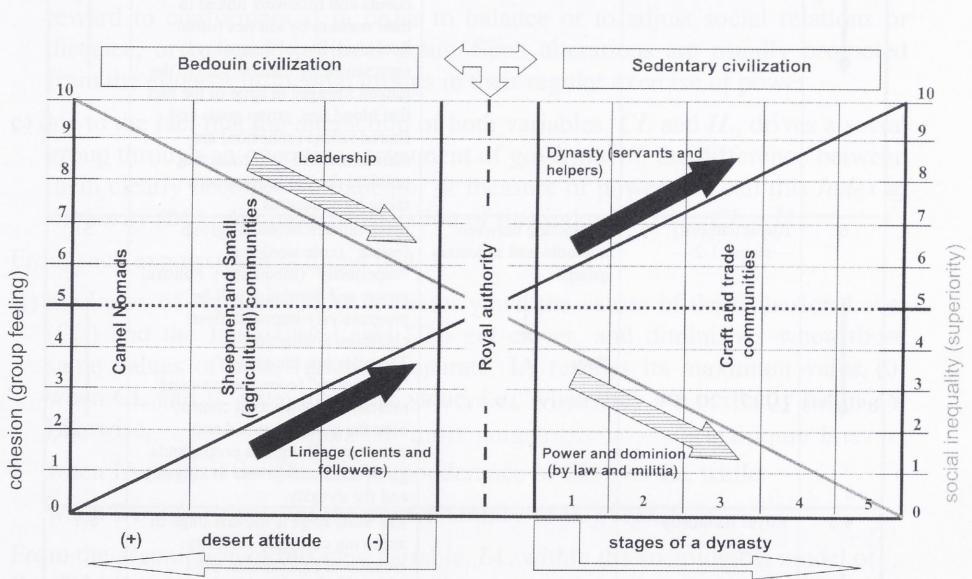
A central concept for the archaeological analysis of Predynastic cemeteries in Egypt is that of “inequality”. In the last few years there has been an effort to establish a real, objective, quantitative methodology which could help the historical interpretation in the context of social indicators (social stratification; Castillos 1982: 29-53; Wilkinson 1996; Griswold 1992: 193-198) This has led to several empirical approaches ranging from the study of associated artifacts, to grave size, volume, etc., in order to determine social position. The positive value of the results obtained constitutes a significant advance toward scientific interpretation of the development of Predynastic society. In this sense, the search of objective factors based on possible statistical materials leads us to seriously consider the particular contributions of Ibn Khaldûn’s theory.

One central concept in the *Muqaddimah* is “group feeling”, which is seen as a primary instrument for accepting group norms and for the consolidation of alliances among nomadic leaders in their way to obtain “royal authority”.

“Group feeling”, referred also to the identification and connections (congeniality, shared social values, group goals) among individuals within a community, would be equivalent to social cohesion, which has been an important variable in the study of primary and secondary groups (“Primary groups” or “face-to-face groups”, and “secondary groups” or large groups whose members do not

know each other, e.g. ethnic groups.) and satisfactorily applied as an indicator in behavioural predictions of group dynamics (Berger-Schmitt 2000). Likewise, for Ibn Khaldûn, cohesion (“group feeling”) would be highly dependent on inequality (“superiority”), a concept described, on the other hand, as a distinctive feature of sedentary groups in the acquisition of status and social differentiation.

Much of the theory developed through the *Muqaddimah* consists of the analysis of societies (Beduin and sedentary) in those terms. Thus, the combination of both concepts provides a chain of interactions in the regulation of political order, which eventually becomes an indicator or measure of power. The following graphic representation (Graphic 1) visualizes the above-mentioned interactions between social cohesion (group feeling) and inequality (superiority) according to the sociological processes described by Ibn Khaldûn.



Both variables are expressed in two y-axes ranged from 0 to 10:

y = Cohesion Level, **CL** (black line) and y' = Inequality Level, **IL** (grey line).

0 = lowest level of cohesion or inequality, while 10 = highest level of the same both variables.

By means of this we can be obtain the following classification (Table I):

Table I

| CL LEVEL | AFTER IBN KHALDŪN'S CLASSIFICATION | CURRENT ANTHROPOLOGICAL CLASSIFICATION | MAIN CHARACTERISTICS | IL LEVEL |
|-----------|----------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| 10-8 ↓ | From camel nomads to pastoral groups | Bands, tribes (hunting-gathering support activities) | According to the <i>Muqaddimah</i> , these nomadic groups are more rooted in desert life. They are also characterized by more simple forms of social and political organization, nearer to the so-called "egalitarian societies". | 0-2 ↑ |
| 7-6 ↓ | From pastoral groups to small (agricultural) communities | Leadership/Chiefdom | Presence of different lineages within the group, ranked according to a genealogical principle. In this stage a more centralized power (leadership) grows, supported by clients and followers linked to their masters by kin ties (often fictitious). Social inequality is represented by membership to the ranked lineages in spite of the fact that blood ties, group goals and shared values (cohesion) are maintained and determine that political decisions are mostly taken by consensus. | 3-4 ↑ |
| 5 ↓ | Royal authority —stages 1-2— | Interaction between nomadic and sedentary groups State ↓ | Ideal balance between "group feeling" (cohesion) and "superiority" (inequality). Political power and dominion will be progressively imposed: from chiefdom to kingship. The ruler sets his goal of "superiority" (coercive laws and militia) and gains total control over the groups (nomad and sedentary). Religious propaganda gives additional power to kingship and the dynasty. | 5 ↑ |
| 4-3 ↓ | Royal Authority —stages 3-4— | " | The third stage is the last stage in acquiring complete authority: creation of monuments, big constructions and large buildings (cities). Fourth stage: great influence of tradition and predecessors on the ruler. "Servants and helpers" take the place of "clients and followers". | 6-7 ↑ |
| 2-0 ↓ | Royal Authority —stage 5— | " | "Servants and helpers" have definitely replaced clients and followers. Conspiracy is settled in the royal court. The dynasty reaches "senility" and is eventually destroyed. | 8-10 ↑ |

A preliminary analysis of this model reveals, among others, the following principles:

- I) given a social group, submitted to the two variables, Cohesion (“group feeling”) and Inequality (“superiority”), it is deduced that: the Cohesion Level (**CL**) among individuals of that group diminishes or increases oppositely to Inequality Level (**IL**)³. However,
- a) Extreme levels (0 and 10) of both variables, **CL** and **IL**, are absolute and, consequently, ideal values. Actually, there is no social group showing complete cohesion or inequality.
 - b) Although the opposite relation between both variables, **CL** and **IL**, is always maintained, their resultant levels may be altered by means of specific actions (e.g. legitimating of leaders or institutions, discrimination of transgressors, reward to conformers...) in order to balance or to adjust social relations or distance, or to guide political goals. Such alterations are usually promoted from the elites or influential groups in their regular exercise of power.
 - c) due to the fact that the interaction of both variables, **CL** and **IL**, drives a social group through an operative instrument of government, the difference between them clearly becomes an indicator or measure of power; we call this *Index of Authority* (**IA**). A simple formulation of that index is: $IA = CL - IL$.

From such expression it is found that:

- II) the Index of Authority (**IA**) increases when the values of the Cohesion Level (**CL**) and the Inequality Level (**IL**) get closer, and diminishes when those same values of both variables separate. **IA** reaches its maximum value (0) when **CL** and **IL** have the same value, i.e., when they are perfectly balanced. Likewise,

when $IA > 0$; it denotes the preponderance of **CL** over **IL**, while

when $IA < 0$; it denotes the preponderance of **IL** over **CL**.

From the assumption of this new variable, **IA**, within the sociological model of Ibn Khaldûn, we obtain the following diagram:

³ i.e. the variation (Δ) of both functions, **CL** and **IL**, in a given interval of time, gives opposite values: $\Delta CL(t) = -\Delta IL(t)$ and vice versa, $\Delta IL(t) = -\Delta CL(t)$.

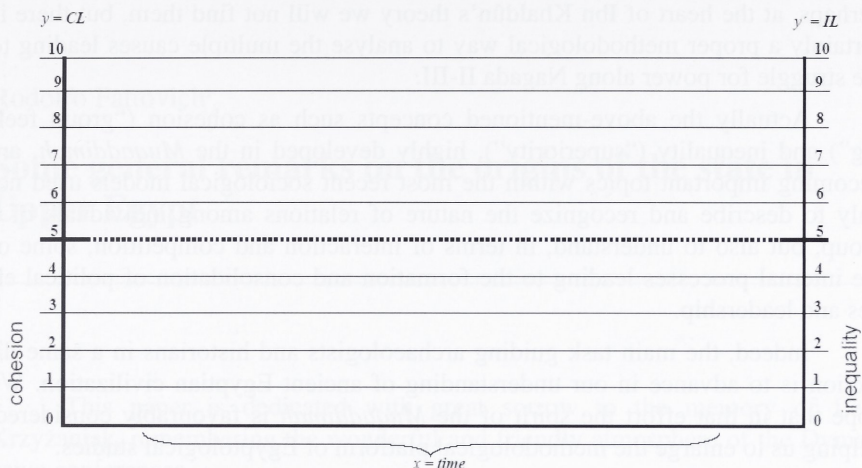
| <i>IA</i> | | <i>CL</i> | NOMAD GROUPS | <i>IA</i> |
|-----------|-----------------|-----------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 10 | ROYAL AUTHORITY | (+) | cooperative modes of government | 10 |
| 8 | | ↑ | | Leadership |
| 6 | | | ↕ (interaction) | |
| 4 | | ↕ (interaction) | | 4 |
| 2 | | | ↕ (interaction) | 2 |
| 0 | | ↕ (interaction) | | 0 |
| -2 | | | ↕ (interaction) | -2 |
| -4 | | ↕ (interaction) | | territorial bureaucracies (oligarchy) |
| -6 | | | ↕ (interaction) | |
| -8 | | ↕ (interaction) | | ↕ (interaction) |
| -10 | ↕ (interaction) | | ↕ (interaction) | |
| <i>IA</i> | | | | <i>IL</i> |

To sum up, part of the theory expressed in the *Muqqadimah*, which has been sketched before, offers the opportunity to investigate deeply in the specific archaeological context concerning state formation in ancient Egypt. Thus, the above-mentioned different variables and possible ways of measurement obtained would be added to previous methods of assessing social status and measuring social inequality, in order to be systematically adapted and applied to the archaeological quantitative analysis.

This would mean: a) the possibility of refining results from the examination of elements of stratification in Predynastic and Early Dynastic cemeteries; b) getting more accurate empirical approximations of the potential effects of cohesion (*CL*) and inequality (*IL*) in the socio-political environment, especially that of the social elites, avoiding *ad hoc* reasonings (Up to the present, inequality has been considered the only variable that leads to state formation.).

Perhaps the quickest way to get some insight into the effects of cohesion and inequality (e.g. *Index of Authority*) in a particular sociological context is to consider its geometric representation at a given period of time (t). Consequently, to the previously considered axes, $y = Cohesion Level (CL)$ and $y' = Inequality Level (IL)$, a third axis must be added, $x = time$, in order to achieve a more precise image of the interaction of both variables and their corresponding evolution along the chronological periods (see Graphic 2).

Graphic 2



While several possible factors of measuring inequality have been considered and some of them successfully proved in the archaeological analysis of Predynastic and Early Dynastic cemeteries, the abstract concept of cohesion and the determining factors, which help to measure such variable, have not been contemplated yet. From the point of view of sociology, social cohesion constitutes a relevant variable that drives group performance. Hence, identifying its possible dimensions and strong connections with social inequality would make sense and justify the future archaeological research, even in a wider context beyond that of state formation in ancient Egypt.

2) *Historical perspective:*

Leaving aside the possible empirical applications of Ibn Khaldûn's theory within archaeological research, our attention focuses now on the vindication of the significant contributions of this author to the analysis of socio-political systems.

It is commonly accepted that the Egyptian society at the end of the Predynastic period was a society in transition, composed of groups clearly influenced by different cultural environments and ethnic backgrounds. To this reality we must add the consequences of an economic accumulative system which helped to transform society into more complex forms of social division and hierarchization. But how these main factors could have contributed to the growing of complex structures of power, or which particular circumstances might lead to the estab-

ishment and consolidation of a unified kingship, are some of the questions about which, up to the present, Egyptologists have not given conclusive answers. Perhaps, at the heart of Ibn Khaldûn's theory we will not find them, but there is certainly a proper methodological way to analyse the multiple causes leading to the struggle for power along Nagada II-III.

Actually the above-mentioned concepts such as cohesion ("group feeling") and inequality ("superiority"), highly developed in the *Muqaddimah*, are becoming important topics within the most recent sociological models used not only to describe and recognize the nature of relations among individuals of a group, but also to understand, in terms of interaction and competition, some of the internal processes leading to the formation and consolidation of political elites and leadership.

Indeed, the main task guiding archaeologists and historians in a same direction is to advance in our understanding of ancient Egyptian civilization. We hope that in that effort the spirit of the *Muqaddimah* is favourably considered, helping us to enlarge the methodological platform of Egyptological studies.

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