

BRUCE G. TRIGGER

## The mainlines of socio-economic development in dynastic Egypt to the end of the Old Kingdom

---

Anthropologists cannot hope to possess the detailed knowledge of the language and culture of ancient Egypt that Egyptologists do. If they are to contribute significantly to the study of that civilization, it must be by employing a wide variety of the Egyptologists' specialized findings to produce a comprehensive and sociologically convincing interpretation of ancient Egyptian society. One test of the validity of such interpretations is that they make sense in the light of comparisons with other civilizations. In making such comparisons, anthropologists do not claim that all early civilizations were alike. The development of a strong and enduring national state at an early phase in Egypt's cultural evolution was not paralleled in many other civilizations. Effective cross-cultural studies must take account of such diversity. This includes understanding how particular ways of doing things in a culture may influence other features of that culture (Trigger, 1979). Only after such variation has been understood, is it possible to define the features that all societies share as a result of belonging to a particular stage of social development or possessing a common mode of production. It is particularly important to examine the history of Egypt prior to the Middle Kingdom from an anthropological perspective because so little contemporary written material, upon which Egyptologists generally rely for their understanding of Egyptian history and culture, has survived from that time. Most of what is known about the Early Dynastic period and the Old Kingdom is inferred from a restricted range of material culture, composed mainly of architectural and artistic items.

As a result of Karl Butzer's (1976) research, the ecological background for the development of Egyptian civilization is more accurately understood. Even in the historic period the overall population density of the Nile Valley was relatively low. In prehistoric times, the extremely rich floral and faunal resources of the region seem to have delayed the acceptance of total reliance upon an agricultural economy (Trigger, 1982). Large irrigation schemes sponsored by the central government do not appear to have been undertaken prior to the Middle Kingdom (Schenkel, 1974). It

was long regarded as enigmatic that the relatively poor section of Upper Egypt stretching south from Abydos should have played such an important role in the creation and maintenance of the Pharaonic state (Wilson, 1955). It now appears that the relatively limited natural resources of that area may have encouraged dependence upon an intensive farming economy at an earlier date than occurred elsewhere in Egypt. The small natural basins found there were also more easily modified to provide the basis for Egyptian hydraulic agriculture than were the larger ones farther north. The high productivity of these basins, when managed on a local or what would later be a provincial (*nome*) level, provided the necessary foundation for the emergence of the craft specialization, social inequality, and small states ruled by petty kings that characterized southern Egypt in the late Gerzean (Naqada II) period.

Patterns of food production do not alone suffice, however, to explain the development of the Pharaonic state. Competition to control long-distance trade has been identified as promoting the development of early states in many parts of the world (Sabloff and Lamberg-Karlovsky, 1975). Much of the material traded was luxury goods that served as status markers for the upper classes. Hence the political significance of such trade, both internationally and internally, often greatly exceeded its economic importance. During the Gerzean period, there is evidence of growing trade between Egypt and southwestern Asia. These contacts brought raw materials such as lapis lazuli, ultimately from Iran, and manufactured goods, such as pottery from Palestine and latterly Mesopotamian cylinder seals, into Egypt. At the end of the Gerzean period, they also brought to Upper Egypt artistic motifs and possibly general knowledge of other useful concepts from the burgeoning centres of civilization in Mesopotamia.

There is no evidence to support the once widely-held conjectures that in predynastic times the Nile Delta was either an uninhabited wasteland (Baumgartel, 1947 : 3) or the locale of a highly developed civilization trading by sea with the littoral of Syria and Palestine (Helck, 1971 : 5). The settlement of Maadi, south of Cairo, although not part of the Gerzean culture, appears to have played an important role in commercial contacts between Upper Egypt and southwestern Asia. It was located along the Nile at the head of the principal overland route that in historic times led to the copper mines of the Sinai Peninsula and on to Palestine.

It is possible that Egypt's most desirable export at this period was gold mined in the Red Sea Hills south of Qena. It is perhaps no accident that Naqada, whose Egyptian name meant literally "the Golden Town", was located opposite Koptos, which was at the mouth of the Wadi Hammamat and controlled access to much gold and other mineral wealth of the Eastern Desert. Other wadis gave access to mines east of Hierakonpolis, Edfu, and Kom Ombo. Managing the procurement of minerals, either by buying them from the native inhabitants of that region or by outfitting and providing military protection for mining expeditions, as was done in

historic times, probably greatly enhanced the power of rulers in the small states that were developing along the Nile in southern Egypt (Trigger, 1982). The desire to eliminate intermediaries and control long distance trade along the Nile river also may have produced the increasing competition and conflict among these rulers that ultimately resulted in the political unification of the Nile Valley north of Aswan. It is not known what part was played by far-sighted political alliances or by naked force in creating a nucleus of political power in southern Egypt that enabled a royal family from the Abydos region to subdue the whole country. The importance of Hierakonpolis and Naqada in later myths and rituals may reflect the major role that these centres played in the origin of the Egyptian state.

Unlike the trading states that developed on the savannas of West Africa during the Christian era, the Egyptian state was well endowed with natural boundaries. Even if, as a result of higher rainfall prior to 2,600 B.C., the distinction between the Nile Valley and the Sahara Desert was less marked than it has been more recently, the Egyptian state was surrounded on all sides by regions that were poorer and far more thinly populated than it was. It also appears to have been congruent, or nearly so, with a single ethnic group, the speakers of the ancient Egyptian language. Records of wars waged against the Nubians, Libyans, and Asiatics at the beginning of the First Dynasty seem to reflect the efforts of these early kings to reinforce natural and ethnic boundaries by transforming them into political ones (Hoffman, 1979: 248). The Pharaohs clearly sought to curtail and control movement across these frontiers. The state, thus defined, provided a stable setting within which a unique cultural development could take place.

In Mesopotamia, increasing competition among small political units resulted in a high proportion of the population, including most full-time farmers, relocating in large urban centres, each of which became the nucleus of an independent city state. Probably the largest of these states did not have a population exceeding 100,000 while the population of the Egyptian kingdom was about 2 million. There is evidence of the growth of some relatively large towns in southern Egypt, perhaps for defensive reasons, in late Gerzean times. Yet the political unification of Egypt soon eliminated the need for such defence. Later, regional centres served as administrative and religious capitals for their localities, but until the New Kingdom they appear to have had small populations composed mainly of officials, artisans, and priests. The national capital, where the royal court resided, was no doubt the largest and most opulent urban centre, but it too had a relatively small population made up of full-time specialists, most of whom worked directly for the king or his officials. The rest of the population, most of it a peasantry engaged in producing food, had remained in (or in some cases returned to) the peasant villages that were distributed throughout the valley. Unlike most Mesopotamian peasants, who were experiencing urban life at this time, Egyptian ones were able to preserve traditions of rural life that had their beginnings in the early Neolithic period. At the same time, they were less well

placed to benefit from the technological advances occurring in urban settings. In the villages, stone-cutting tools continued to be used into the Middle Kingdom. The small size of urban centres and the strong dichotomy between rural and urban life resemble the Inca civilization of Peru far more closely than they do Early Dynastic Mesopotamia (Morris and Thompson, 1970). A detailed structural comparison of Egyptian and Peruvian civilization might lead to a better understanding of both.

While little is known about the economy of ancient Egyptian peasant villages, we do know that their inhabitants produced, on a part-time basis, a wide variety of handicrafts that were exchanged by barter at local markets (Erman, 1894: 494 - 497). Hence few, if any, goods were required from urban centres and these villages may be regarded as self-sufficient. In this respect, they conform to the village as conceptualized in the Marxist model of Oriental Society (Altorientalische Klassengesellschaft). Yet, the Old Kingdom cemeteries at Naga-ed-Deir demonstrate clearly that the social organization of these villages was not egalitarian (Reisner, 1932). This inequality must have been sanctioned, protected, and reinforced by the power of the state.

One of the most distinctive features of Dynastic Egypt was the durability of its central government. While there is some evidence of a slackening of royal power and perhaps even of internal conflict during the Second Dynasty and to a lesser degree at other times, the unification achieved at the end of the Predynastic period was not totally disrupted until the First Intermediate period, approximately 800 years later. By that time, the concept of a national government was so entrenched in the Egyptian mentality that each of the principal successor states that held sway over part of Egypt was prepared to fight to rule over all of it. Attention must now be paid to the economic and political factors that maintained this unity.

The ancient Egyptians viewed the divine monarchy as the lynchpin of their national unity (Janssen, 1978: 218 - 223). Egypt itself was thought of as the "Two Lands", which the Pharaoh had united and held together. Yet the monarchy, as a focus of loyalty, did not inevitably promote the political stability of Egypt. There was no rule stating which of a king's sons should succeed him, to minimize disputes over succession to royal office. There appear to have been a number of conflicts concerning rights to the throne during the Early Dynastic period and the Old Kingdom, some of which seemingly were invested with ideological overtones. Some kings also violated the monuments of their predecessors.

Royal power was exercised through a hierarchical bureaucratic structure in which all officials were ultimately subject to royal authority. The details of this structure during the Early Dynastic period are by no means clear (Kaplony, 1963) and the effectiveness of the central administration at this time has also been questioned (Mendelssohn, 1974). During the Old Kingdom, the number of officials seems to have increased steadily and the bureaucratic hierarchy was altered and elaborated almost reign by reign (Baer, 1960; Kanawati, 1977). Local Predynastic rulers appear

to have been eliminated, either by being killed or by absorption into the official class or even the royal family. Except for village headmen, during most of the Old Kingdom, officials appear to have been moved from one district to another in the course of their career, with the highest offices, that would have been held later in life, returning them to the royal court (Frankfort, 1956: 99 - 104). Only in the Sixth Dynasty, did prominent officials begin to re-establish significant local roots.

Until the end of the Fourth Dynasty, major officials tended to be close relatives of the king. Hereafter, the administration not only grew more complex but also tended to become increasingly divorced from the family and household of the king and to be discharged by families of powerful officials. One of the duties of the bureaucracy was to collect taxes in kind from the peasantry. These were levied on grain, animals, and handicrafts. Corvee labour was also exacted for state projects. Much of this wealth was used for the support of the state and the upper classes. In return, however, the government maintained internal peace, protected the peasantry against external aggression, and was able to use its extensive storage economy to alleviate crop failures. These were not insignificant benefits for the peasantry. Control over offices and succession to office was a source of power for the king and the central government.

There was a vast increase in craft specialization in Upper Egypt during the Gerzean period. At first, full-time specialists produced goods for a socially undifferentiated local clientele. Later, as social stratification increased, goods began to be produced especially for the upper classes. By late Gerzean times, petty kings appear to have become patrons of certain specialists. Working exclusively for such patrons permitted these specialists to spend large amounts of time and energy to produce goods of extraordinarily high quality. Yet neither literacy nor the historical canons of Egyptian art developed until after the political unification of the country. What may be called the Great Tradition of dynastic Egypt was created by artists, highly-specialized craftsmen, and scholars working under the patronage and control of the king and frequently at the royal court. Under these conditions, knowledge and skills were enabled to reach hitherto unprecedented levels of sophistication and refinement and artists and craftsmen working in different materials were encouraged to develop a unified style that had a remarkable consistency and durability. Because of the wealth and resources at his disposal, the Pharaoh was able to employ such specialists and supply them with materials and labour on a scale that could not be achieved by any of the city states of Mesopotamia, even though in Egypt basic technological innovations, as evidenced by bronze-working and wheeled vehicles, tended to lag behind Mesopotamia (Trigger, 1968: 53 - 54). The Egyptian kings had at their disposal furniture, clothing, jewellery, and building skills such as no one else in Egypt possessed. These were used to provide status symbols for the king and his family and to reward officials and retainers for their faithful service. The upper classes sought these goods, both for their intrinsic value and as a sign of royal favour.

Hence the monopoly that the king possessed over the highest quality goods and artistic skills was an important source of power for him.

This power was reinforced by a monopolistic control of foreign trade. While the peasantry made do with local materials, the jewellery, furniture, and funerary equipment of the upper classes required imported raw materials, such as ivory and ebony from the Sudan, lapis lazuli and cedar wood from southwestern Asia, and incense from Somalia. These were paid for by the export of agricultural products, cloth, and other manufactured goods. In addition, the crown sponsored many expeditions to procure gold and rare stones from the Eastern Desert and turquoise and copper ore from the Sinai Peninsula. By controlling the procurement of exotic goods, the king further enhanced his control over the production of luxury goods. The abandonment and apparent destruction of Maadi at the beginning of the Early Dynastic period may symbolize the assertion of a royal monopoly over a formerly free trade (Hoffman, 1979: 213 - 214). The absence of an alternative procurement system for exotic raw material was no doubt an important stimulus for the struggle to restore a centralized administration during the First Intermediate period.

From early Predynastic times, there was a marked emphasis on funerary cults in Upper Egypt. These activities absorbed increasing amounts of wealth for tomb construction and grave offerings, but they also stimulated craft production and the procurement of raw materials. In the Gerzean period, there is evidence of pronounced social stratification in the form and contents of graves (Fattovich, 1976). This continued to be elaborated into the Fourth Dynasty. The earliest, so-called "royal" graves occur at Hierakonpolis, Naqada, and Abydos in the late Gerzean period (Kemp, 1973). In the Early Dynastic period, there appears to have been a hierarchy of upper class tombs, but there is not sufficient difference in size, quality of grave goods, or presence or absence of accompanying "retainers" graves to permit archaeologists to distinguish the tombs of kings unambiguously from those of the most important nobles. If Barry Kemp (1966) is correct, however, the tombs of monarchs were kept separate at that time even from those of other members of the royal family and were provided with imposing "funerary palaces". Beginning in the Third Dynasty, there was a vast increase in the wealth expended on royal funerary complexes, which were now built largely of stone rather than mud-brick. This culminated in the great pyramid complexes of the Fourth Dynasty. This elaboration seems to reflect the increasing emphasis being placed on the funerary cult of dead god-kings as essential for national prosperity. Temples erected in provincial centres served, among other things, as an indication of royal concern for that region and its patron deities. Yet, temples dedicated to the most important deities appear to have been quite humble constructions prior to the Fifth Dynasty and even those erected after that time were small by comparison with ones built in the New Kingdom and still later periods. Judging by the monuments, the funerary cult of deceased monarchs was the most important Old Kingdom religious practice. While a careful com-

parative study should be made of factors influencing the wealth invested in constructing royal funerary monuments, as opposed to other types of religious architecture in the early civilizations, it is clear that Old Kingdom Egypt represents an extreme case. It is rivalled, however, by the royal funerary temples of the Khymer, who also believed that their rulers posthumously became, or merged with, major deities (Sedov, 1978). The elaborate burials of the upper classes, on which their good fortune after death was believed to depend, required goods from abroad, including cedar wood for coffins, that only the king could procure (Goedicke, 1967). Even if most tombs were built at their owners' expense, only royal craftsmen could provide the highest quality of ornamentation. Hence religious beliefs reinforced and helped to add a significant supernatural dimension to the economic and political subordination of the upper classes to the monarch.

While it is difficult, given the limitations of available evidence, to reconstruct the nature of ancient Egyptian society at different periods of its history, especially the early ones, it is even more difficult to account for the changes that took place. Traditional explanations, popularized by James H. Breasted, interpret royal power as increasing into the Fourth Dynasty and then declining in favour of the growing political and economic activity first of major religious cults and next of a rising provincial nobility. Naguib Kanawati (1977) has argued, however, on the basis of a comparative study of tomb sizes in the Old Kingdom, that there is no evidence (in the form of more wealth in the provinces) of gradual decentralization during the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties. He argues that as more officials, largely resulting from family expansion, were incorporated into the official hierarchy during the Old Kingdom, the resources that were available to each official declined. By the reign of Unis, lower class officials were no longer able to afford tombs and by the reign of Pepi I the middle rank was similarly incapacitated. By undermining the reward system, the expansion of the privileged classes also undermined the stability of the state. It is alternatively possible that there was a slow but continuous expansion and elaboration of the Egyptian economy and society during the Early Dynastic period and the Old Kingdom. Until the end of the Fourth Dynasty, the growing prosperity of Egypt may have placed more wealth and talent at the disposal of the king and increased the power and effectiveness of the central government. Eventually, however, some decentralization became necessary to cope with growing complexity at a regional as well as a national level (Rathje, 1975). If that is so, increasingly effective administration at the provincial level, even when involving the development of hereditary succession to office, does not inevitably imply the weakening of the central government. It would have produced, however, alternative administrations that could exert strong centrifugal pressure if the central government weakened and became less vigilant. Far more knowledge of the economic and social structure as well as the ecology of ancient Egypt will be needed before we can really begin to explain the dynamics of social change during the Early Dynastic period and the Old Kingdom.

## References

- Baumgartel, E. J. 1947. *The Cultures of Prehistoric Egypt*. I. London.
- Baer, K. 1960. *Rank and Title in the Old Kingdom*. Chicago.
- Butzer, K. W. 1976. *Early Hydraulic Civilization in Egypt*. Chicago.
- Erman, A. 1894. *Life in Ancient Egypt*. London.
- Fattovich, R. 1976. Trends in the Study of Predynastic Social Structures. *First International Congress of Egyptology*. Cairo (in press).
- Frankfort, H. 1956. *The Birth of Civilization in the Near East*. Garden City, New York.
- Goedicke, H. 1967. Admonitions 3, 6 - 10. *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 6 : 93 - 95.
- Helck, W. 1971. *Die Beziehungen Ägyptens zu Vorderasien im 3. und 2. Jahrtausend v. Chr.* Wiesbaden.
- Hoffman, M. 1979. *Egypt Before the Pharaohs*. New York.
- Janssen, J. J. 1978. The Early State in Egypt. In: H. Claessen and P. Skalnik (eds.): *The Early State*: 213 - 234. The Hague.
- Kanawati, N. 1977. *The Egyptian Administration in the Old Kingdom*. Warminster.
- Kaplony, P. 1963. *Die Inschriften der ägyptischen Frühzeit*. Wiesbaden.
- Kemp, B. J. 1966. Abydos and the Royal Tombs of the First Dynasty. *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 52 : 13 - 22.
- 1973. Photographs of the Decorated Tomb at Hierakonpolis. *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 59 : 36 - 43.
- Mendelssohn, K. 1974. *The Riddle of the Pyramids*. London.
- Morris, C. and D. E. Thompson. 1970. Huanaco Viejo: An Inca administrative center. *American Antiquity* 35 : 344 - 362.
- Rathje, W. L. 1975. Last Tango in Mayapan. In: J. Sabloff and C. Lamberg-Karlovsky (eds.), *Ancient Civilisation and Trade*: 409 - 448. Albuquerque.
- Reisner, G. A. 1932. *A Provincial Cemetery of the Pyramid Age, Naga-ed-Dêr*. II. Oxford.
- Sabloff, J. A. and C. C. Lamberg-Karlovsky (eds.). 1975. *Ancient Civilisation and Trade*. Albuquerque.
- Schenkel, W. 1974. Die Einführung der künstlichen Felderbewässerung im alten Ägypten. *Göttinger Miscellen* 11 : 41 - 46.
- Sedov, L. A. 1978. Angkor: Society and State. In: H. Claessen and P. Skalnik (eds.), *The Early State*: 111 - 130. The Hague.
- Trigger, B. G. 1968. *Beyond History: the Methods of Prehistory*. New York.
- 1979. Egyptology and Anthropology. In: K. R. Weeks (ed.), *Egyptology and the Social Sciences*: 21 - 56. Cairo.
- 1982. The Rise of Civilization in Egypt. In: J. D. Clark (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Africa*. I: 478 - 547. Cambridge.
- Wilson, J. A. 1955. Buto and Hierakonpolis in the Geography of Egypt. *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 14 : 209 - 236.