EGYPTIAN ECONOMIC HISTORY: LOCATING POWER, PLACING AGENCY

Archaeology . . . has great power to suggest broad structural outlines in society. These are essential for finding order in texts which tend, by their very nature, to be accumulations of small details.¹

The economy of Old Kingdom Egypt is poorly understood at the level of its macroeconomic structure. Models for the economic world of the Old Kingdom tend to be influenced, consciously or unconsciously, by the pyramids. These large constructions seem to speak of an Egyptian state in charge of all resources, controlling all land and labor in the country. Yet by employing data exclusively from the purvey of the royal house and its attached administrative elite, any analyses are logically biased to these parties. In order to create a complete picture of the economy for this period it is necessary that one look for data addressing the roles and lives of all members of the population.

This study seeks to investigate the general structure of the Old Kingdom economy and its key relationships by examining a myriad of data, but focusing particularly on archaeological data. The core of this study is concerned with ceramics, specifically beer jars and bread moulds—two forms which would have provided the fundamental basis for economic exchange and relationships in the third millennium BC. My own perspectives are informed by a mix of archaeological theory and traditional Egyptological scholarship. By employing a perspective of the material record strongly influenced by the Processual view that material culture may be utilized to reconstruct cultural systems, together with an interest in agency stemming from Post-Processual critiques, I suggest that we can employ archaeological data to forward economic theories.²

Archaeology has the potential to reach greater economic generalizations than text as the evidence from excavations is more extensive and

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spatially and socio-economically diverse. For the third millennium the majority of our evidence is archaeological and artifactual, as text was employed by a restricted class of people. However, archaeological evidence should not be used alone, and the archaeologist like the philologist can run the risk of becoming too myopic in their focus. This book seeks to marry archaeological data to the well-known and oft studied textual evidence. Thus chapters three through six will introduce archaeological data which can be applied to economic questions, while chapters two and seven bracket these discussions with a review and analysis of the textual and iconographic data applicable to the question of the Old Kingdom economy. Archaeology allows one to fruitfully envision the macroeconomic structure of the Egyptian Old Kingdom and to break the power of the state over our reconstructions and analyses of this period.

This chapter presents overviews of four economic theories which have been employed to understand the Old Kingdom economy. While redistribution is in many ways the dominant paradigm, newer models embrace greater social and economic complexity and present an intriguing view of a vital economic system fostering many levels of control and economic interaction. Archaeological data can forward inquiry into the structure and complexity of the economy, but only when used in tandem with economic theories.

**Employing Theory**

Approaching the economy of the Egyptian Old Kingdom, especially when seeking to understand its macroeconomic organization, presents many challenges. The data are so sparse that it is tempting to simply describe them rather than to use them in support of an economic model. Yet all data are interpreted by the scholars who study them, whether through

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4 In this, study of the Old Kingdom economy is different from later periods, particularly the Ptolemaic period, where study of the economy is firmly rooted in a large volume of textual evidence. The Ptolemaic economy is different from, though related to, the economic structure of the pharaonic periods. The Ptolemies appear to have slowly overlain a new bureaucratic structure atop the general framework extant during the Persian period, which itself bore remnants of the economy of the New Kingdom. See J. G. Manning, *Land and Power in Ptolemaic Egypt: The Structure of Land Tenure* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 3–11, 60, 174–175.