CHAPTER TWO

WAGES AND PAYERS

Discussion of economic history in the field of Egyptology arose with the work of W. Helck and J. Janssen—making it a comparatively young study.\(^1\) Redistribution itself has only been embraced since the 1970s, with other perspectives emerging more recently. The study of Egyptian economic history has focused on texts in part because Economic History itself prizes textual evidence in the form of accounts, receipts, and other records of monetary transactions. The academic discipline of Economic History, however, largely focuses on the early modern and modern periods in order to explain why our world looks as it does today, with some countries rich and others poor.\(^2\) The ancient world falls out of such discussions.\(^3\) Economic historians who try to engage with the ancient world are resul­tantly less comfortable working with societies more ancient or further east than the Classical World.\(^4\) Differences in social structures, subsistence, agriculture, and finance should lead those studying ancient economy to evaluate a different set of resources than early modern economic histori­ans. Some questions cannot be answered; most cannot be investigated in the same ways.

Texts provide a window into the economy that is largely focused on how goods are controlled and distributed by members of the pharaonic

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\(^4\) See, for example, Allen, *Global Economic History*. A quick search of ‘ancient economy’ in any major web-based book server will deliver multiple titles concentrating on Greece and Rome. Additionally, the history of Egyptology shows the field to have been isolated—or isolating itself—from advanced methods of inquiry: Moreno García, “From Dracula to Rostovtzeff,” 192–198.
administration. Textual evidence dating to the Old Kingdom and originating from provincial sites is sparse, therefore limiting any discussion of provincial agency or the distribution of goods outside of the capital.\(^5\) However, the textual record does offer limited documentation of wage payments, from both royal and private (though elite) contexts. The mechanisms through which the populace is sustained and supported would have been fundamental to the structuring of the Old Kingdom economy. Redistribution and patrimonialism both provide avenues for the movement of wages—redistribution through state involvement, patrimonialism through the support of many levels of household. Discussion of wages, then, becomes in part a question of scale of distributing authority.

This chapter investigates the textual record for evidence of who paid wages, to whom, and in what manner. The textual data present the role of the royal house and the elite. The non-elite are captured in this data as well, as non-elite laborers or craftsmen were often the recipients of wages, though who these non-elite individuals were and the role they played in the economy of the Old Kingdom can be harder to verify. These data provide evidence which compliments analysis of the archaeological record, verifying the importance of beer jars and bread moulds as well as lending evidence to aid further economic analysis of these forms.

Old Kingdom Egypt was an in-kind economy. Bread and beer—two very basic consumables which constituted the basis of the Egyptian diet—appear to have been the most fundamental commodities comprising wage payments, while other goods could be added or substituted occasionally. Linen was frequently used as a wage, though it does not appear to have been as universal as bread and beer and rarely stood as a payment on its own.\(^6\) The archaeological record cannot verify the role of linen in wage


\(^6\) For example: payment in bread, beer, and linen: Remenuka, Mehuakhti, Hetepherakhti. Payment in just bread and beer: Akhetmehu and stela BM EA1186 (name unknown), A. M. Roth, “The Practical Economics of Tomb-Building in the Old Kingdom: a Visit to the Necropolis in a Carrying Chair,” in For His Ka: Essays Offered in Memory of Klaus Baer, ed. D. P. Silverman (Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1994), 232–238. A Sixth Dynasty letter from Saqqara seems to document the late payment of linen to a