

Introduction

Reading the vast number of studies—spanning more than a century—that are devoted to Egyptian nomarchs, it soon becomes clear that these officials have been mostly, and understandably, looked upon from an administrative and political perspective. There can be no doubt that we are facing a category of high regional officials who exerted a crucial influence during the period between the late Fifth Dynasty and the later Twelfth Dynasty. Additionally, scholarship has duly noted that many of them were also holders of religious offices, for instance as directors of priesthoods of local temples. Although their autobiographies occasionally refer to this, information on these undoubtedly important tasks remains hazy, however. In most cases, the texts only inform us of the fact that a nomarch (for instance) carried the title of *im.y-r hm.w-ntr*, “overseer of priests,” without offering any supplementary information concerning the specifics of this occupation. Although, like the earlier studies, this book will mainly address the administrative aspect of their position in Egyptian society, it nonetheless seems possible, if all available information is considered, to circumscribe in more detail what their religious activities were. In order to achieve this aim, however, it would be an error to consider the ritual and theological aspects from the outset.

Religions do not function in a void. The individuals that produced our religious source material were not only developing religious ideas, they also were the members of a society that, like any other, pursued economic and political aims. In modern western society, these domains are essentially kept separate, although in recent years trends in the opposite direction are unfortunately only too manifest. In any case, such segregation has never played a role in ancient Egyptian culture. In fact, all available sources—even those usually labeled as “historical texts” by Egyptologists—originate from the thoroughly religious context of funerary architecture. It is important not to lose sight of this crucial fact.

Although it is difficult to define generally applicable characteristics to religion, there can be no doubt that religions often offer an ideological basis to the existing social structure. This was certainly the case in ancient Egypt, where the king himself was supposed to play a divine role—or rather several divine roles simultaneously. Many Egyptologists have dealt with such topics, studying, for example, the ways in which pharaoh’s divinity was expressed. However, the issue could also be approached from the opposite direction, by first studying the social structure (in the case of the present book, primarily that of the

Upper Egyptian provinces), with a view to clarifying to what extent this structure might correspond to that of myths, or to ritual scenarios.

The first chapter deals with the historical, social, political, administrative, and of course religious roles of the nomarchs. Most of the pertinent documentation originates from the nomarchal cemeteries. Even a superficial overview of the available information on these immediately reveals a bias both in the documentation itself, and in the questions that Egyptologists have been interested in. For instance, with regard to the well-known site of Banī Ḥasan,¹ it was the monumental sepulchres of the nomarchs themselves that have attracted most attention. Thus there are numerous studies that attempt to historically situate these people. Of course this is a very relevant issue, but the tombs of the governors occupy only a part of the site. Almost one thousand tombs, belonging to the retinues of the governors and other inhabitants of the communities that they governed, were discovered over a century ago by GARSTANG at Banī Ḥasan, to name but this example. Unfortunately, in many cases he destroyed, rather than documented, the archaeological contexts of these hundreds of burials. Moreover, the objects that were discovered have been dispersed across the globe. S. OREL's attempt to reconstruct these contexts is certainly of importance, but only gives a very approximate idea of the original find circumstances.² This implies that our information on the organization of the site—an organization that must somehow reflect the social organization of this nomarchal community—remains restricted.

The case of Banī Ḥasan is unfortunately no exception. The kind of excavations undertaken in the early twentieth century at Dayr al-Barshā, Mīr, Asyūṭ, Dayr al-Jabrāwī, Qāw al-Kabīr, or, more recently, at al-Hawāwīsh, all had the aim to collect “art” or to document decorated and inscribed tombs. For several of these sites, which have not attracted much attention since the early twentieth century, no ground plan even exists.

The second chapter will be devoted to the nomarchal cemetery of Dayr al-Barshā, where the KU Leuven team has been active since 2002. It will address the question of whether the organization of the site (i.e., the spatial distribution of different tomb types and assemblages of tomb equipment) can offer new insights in the degree to which funerary customs were shared by all the population. On this basis it will be possible to advance some hypotheses on how funerary culture manifested itself in different social strata. Building upon

1 Arabic geographical names in this volume are transcribed according to the system of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*.

2 OREL, *Chronology and Social Stratification*.