“Wer und was ist überhaupt ein ‘Nomarch’?”

The title “nomarch” goes back to the Graeco-Roman period. Literally translated, it means “leader of a nome (or province),” but that is not in keeping with the real role of such officials within the province. In the early Ptolemaic period, the nomarch shared power with the stratègos (i.e., the military commander of the nome), an official that, as of the reign of Ptolemy III, also held civil responsibilities, while the nomarch title referred to an official of secondary rank. Although the Graeco-Roman nomarchs thus were not provincial governors in the full sense of the word, the term is generally used by Egyptologists as a designation for the most high-ranking administrators of a province.

Defined this way, the term “nomarch” is accordingly an Egyptological invention. However, even among Egyptologists, not everyone attributes the same meaning to this word. Moreover it is important to clarify from the outset what we know concerning what a nome and what a nomarch were. These concepts are unfortunately less easy to circumscribe than one might expect. On top of this, we shall see that the “real” nomarchs, i.e., those officials whose titles explicitly qualify them as provincial governors (i.e., the ḫr.y-tp Ꜣ n nome), were members of a broader social stratum, which also included officials who,

1 D. Franke, BiOr 62 (2005), col. 466.
2 For the provincial administration in the Graeco-Roman period, see Bowman, Egypt after the Pharaohs, p. 56–88; Hölbl, Geschichte des Ptolemäerreiches, p. 59 and passim. As regards the age of the earliest Ptolemies, the situation is not very well understood (information kindly provided by my colleague Willy Clarysse).
3 See for example the following remark by K. Baer: “it is only the ḫrj tp Ꜣ who seems in all cases to be an official heading the administration of a nome; only this title should therefore be translated ‘nomarch’” (Rank and Title, p. 281). See also Moreno García, in: Des Néférkarê aux Montouhotep, p. 220. In a recent publication, Moreno García has downplayed the importance of the title, suggesting that ḫr.y-tp Ꜣ only indicates the informal power wielded by certain local potentates, and that it is not really a title (in: Ancient Egyptian Administration, p. 139–146). However, apart from vaguely circumstantial indications, he offers not a shred of evidence in support of this new hypothesis. The fact that the sudden introduction of this title in the later Old Kingdom coincides with numerous other administrative reforms discussed
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despite the fact that they did not bear the nomarch title, played very similar roles in their communities. Therefore one should distinguish between the “nomarchs” in the narrow sense of the word, and the more encompassing mode of social organization that B. Kemp has referred to as the “Nomarchy.” It is this latter nomarchal culture, rather than the nomarchs in the narrow sense of the word, that I intend to study here. Yet even if one wishes to study the problem of the nomarchy in this broader sense, it is impossible to penetrate very deeply unless the concept of nome (and nomarch) can be defined more precisely.

The Origin of the Nomes

In soubassement inscriptions of temples of the late and Graeco-Roman periods, one frequently encounters lists of nomes (fig. 1). They usually take the form of processions of men or women, personifying the nome indicated by the symbol on their head. The basis of these nome symbols is usually a sign depicting a group of square agricultural fields separated by small dykes, of a type still widespread in Egypt today. This hieroglyph denotes “district,” and in the case of the nomes, it supports a symbol characterizing a specific region. For example, the fifteenth Upper Egyptian nome, with the nome capital al-Ashmūnayn and the cemetery Dayr al-Barshā, was the “Hare nome.” The symbol of the hare is carried by one of the nome embodiments depicted in fig. 1.

The nome lists encountered in late temples present a fossilized and traditional image of regional units which, in most cases, had little to do with the administrative districts of the day. However, these lists have more ancient...