When Simut-Kyky stated “I have not made a(ny) protector for myself from (other) men, [I have not attached] myself to (any) from among the notables, not even a son of mine” (KRI III 337:3–4), he was not just simply making a rhetorical claim—also known from other sources. He was instead referring to a practice whose roots may be traced back to Middle Kingdom literary texts (like the *Teaching of Ptahhotep*), and even to Old Kingdom inscriptions like that of Hesi at Saqqara: “His Majesty caused (it) to be done for me because His Majesty knew my name while selecting a scribe because of his hand (= ability), without any backer, (simply because) he remembered the one who had spoken to him wisely.”¹ Powerful patrons, well-placed contacts, or membership in influential social networks were informal, but nevertheless essential means for furthering one’s career or, simply, for gaining some protection against difficulties. They were also fundamental in ensuring that authority circulated effectively between upper and lower social strata and between the power core of the kingdom and the provinces. Even if the virtuous statements of Simut-Kyky or Hezi are not to be taken at face value, they nevertheless testify to a common practice often concealed by the scribal culture and its insistence on promotion through merit. The case of Weni of Abydos in the 6th Dynasty is worth remembering in this respect: traditionally considered the archetypal dignitary promoted on the basis of his prudence, capability, and administrative skill, only on the basis of his own autobiographical claims, the recent discovery of his tomb together with new epigraphic evidence at Abydos reveals a quite different story.² In fact, Weni came from a high

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ranking family of provincial viziers (a title held by his father, by Weni himself, and by his son), well-connected with two queens also from Abydos. Thus his exceptional career appears in a different light, and his success is best explained on the basis of not only his own qualities or the political opportunities of his time (conspiracies, destitution of high officials), but also a favorable and influential family environment. Of course such possibilities were alien to most Egyptians, who were used to enduring arbitrary decisions and the crude exercise of power by the authorities; such a reality was represented in literary works (like *The Eloquent Peasant*), in teachings (one example is *Amenemope* XXI, 3–4: “do not accept the gift (*fqi*) of a powerful man (*nh₃*) and deprive the weak (*s₂*) for his sake”), and in formulae where the pious official asserted that he protected the poor from the powerful one. In fact, the protection dispensed by powerful men was frequently invoked in literary texts as a crucial means of solving conflicts, even when people had legal recourse: “do not say: ‘find me a strong superior (*ḥrj nh₃*), for a man in your town has injured me’; do not say: ‘find me a protector (*st*) for one who hates me has injured me’” (*Amenemope* XXII, 1–4) or “do not go to court against your superior when you do not have protection [against] him” (*Ankhsheshonq* 8, 11).³

Nothing of this is really new or surprising. Patronage, informal networks of influence, factions, corruption, and favoritism ‘oiled’ the everyday functioning of power in pre-industrial states, to the point that all these elements could simultaneously complete, counterbalance, and menace the authority of the central power.⁴ But, on the other

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