Chapter 1

Ancient Egyptian History as an Example of Punctuated Equilibrium: An Outline

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Abstract

The present study attempts to identify and characterize some basic principles that underlined historical development in ancient Egypt, specifically during the Old Kingdom period. Looking at the ever-increasing corpus of the evidence, it applies the theory of punctuated equilibrium for explaining some of the major features operating human society from a diachronic perspective. The explanatory potential of the punctuated equilibrium concept seems to work rather well when applied to the historical evidence we have at hand. As a consequence, Old Kingdom history is not any more a rather homogenous continuum represented by individual pharaohs and monuments arranged into a regular evolutionary scheme; on the contrary, it emerges as an intricate open system punctuated by several historically brief “events” during which major changes in society took place and which were divided by longer periods of stasis, a continuum with seemingly no significant development. The Old Kingdom era emerges as an open system in which the specific role of the individual in specific historical circumstances is able to significantly enhance our understanding of new discoveries, historical facts, and known contexts.

1 Introduction

In this brief paper I would like to address the specific dynamics which—in my view—best illustrate the nature of general historical processes and cycles in the development of civilisations. In doing so, I shall use the example

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of ancient Egyptian civilisation, specifically of the Old Kingdom period (ca. 2700–2200 BCE). The reason for doing this is a very simple one: modern observers (including some of us scholars) tend more often than not to view ancient Egyptian history as a more or less continuous and perhaps uneventful parade of reigns marked by isolated royal monuments that is interrupted from time to time by unique events, such as building monumental architecture, foreign trade or military expeditions, Sed-Festivals, cattle counts, donation of land and inventory to temples, or incursion of enemies, to name but a few such incidents.¹ In the best case, we divide this historical continuum into dynasties which are in turn used to provide a sufficient historical framework for ancient Egypt.²

Ancient Egypt is renowned for several deeply rooted concepts which formed the perceived basic nature of that state and which permeated virtually every single aspect of the society of the day. In particular, we may note the ancient Egyptians’ cyclical concept of time. Equally important was the concept of Maat, a concept which advocated stability and the unchanged order of matters within the society and its culture whereupon it was the pharaoh, earthly and chosen representative of the gods, who was in charge of its maintenance. This paradigm was endorsed by the king and the ruling elite, and the ritual of honouring Maat was expected to be re-enacted by every new king.³ On the cultural front, for example, one can best observe the enactment of Maat by the superficial “sameness” within Egyptian iconography and the visual arts (for instance, in royal statuary, or in royal iconography representing the king smiting his enemies, etc.) (Fig. 1.1). Thus it may seem that the ever-repeating cycle and unchanging order of things dominated the ancient Egyptian mind. Yet it is appropriate to inquire if this modern observation can really be an undistorted reflection of the past.

The specific period under discussion is the third millennium BCE in Egypt, and specifically the Old Kingdom. While we are indeed capable of seeing and identifying profound differences between, for instance, the later Predynastic Period and the First Dynasty in terms of art, administration, or history, or the changes in building techniques separating the reigns of Khasekhemwy and Khufu or Nyuserra, we might hesitate to outline major differences between

¹ Stadelmann, Die ägyptischen Pyramiden and Die grossen Pyramiden von Giza; Verner, The pyramids: a complete guide; Hawass, The treasures of the pyramids; Lehner, Complete Pyramids; Wilkinson, The Rise and Fall of Ancient Egypt.
² Redford, Pharaonic king-lists, annals, and day-books.
³ Assmann, Maat: Gerechtigkeit und Unsterblichkeit im alten Ägypten.