Did the Old Kingdom Collapse?  
A New View of the First Intermediate Period

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**Abstract**

Our perceptions of the First Intermediate Period are heavily colored by later literary texts such as the Admonitions of Ipuwer and the Instructions for Merykare. Almost half a century ago, Gun Björkman showed that the Instructions for Merykare did not match the milieu in which it was set. Stephen Seidlmayer has shown that there is an increase in wealth at the end of the Old Kingdom and into the First Intermediate Period, which does not fit with the narrative of the Middle Kingdom narratives. Historical inscriptions contain references that might explain this increase, but understanding them requires a change in perspective on the period that rejects the Middle Kingdom assessments of the First Intermediate Period. When viewed in this way, one must ask in what sense was the end of the Old Kingdom a collapse?

1. **The Collapse of the Old Kingdom**

One of the truisms of Egyptology is that, in the words of the UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology, “the collapse of the Old Kingdom was followed by the tumultuous First Intermediate Period.” The “collapse of the Old Kingdom” has become something of a catchphrase often repeated in books on ancient Egypt without a second thought being given to its use. There has thus been no end of speculation about the causes of its collapse.

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3 Leclant, “A Brief History of the Old Kingdom,” 11: “Specialists will no doubt debate for many years to come the circumstances surrounding the collapse of Old Kingdom Egypt.”
Some suggest an invasion or immigration problem depending on whether it is seen as “incursions into the Delta,”4 or “the infiltration of Asiatics into the Delta.”5 Thus, there were said to be “increasing Bedouin hostilities, a weakening Egyptian garrison”;6 “perhaps even attacks from desert raiders”;7 “strife between districts; looting, killing, revolutions, and social anarchy”;8 “the forces of disorder were unstoppable.”9 Some, however, argue for general “social unrest” among Egyptians,10 and not just illegal immigrants.

Others suggest that it was the result of climate change: “One cannot escape the potential relevance of the climatic events of the First Intermediate Period.”11 It is said that there were “one or more unusually severe ecological crises at the very end of the Old Kingdom.”12 “The collapse of the Old Kingdom . . . can be traced at least in part to variations in Nile flood levels”,13 “a series of catastrophically low floods”;14 “catastrophic drought and cooling that generated regional abandonment, collapse, and habitat-tracking”;15 or “a prolonged and severe deficiency in the annual floods of the Nile”;16 “a series of inadequate Nile floods that brought famine”;17 and “widespread droughts, each lasting several decades.”18 But this explanation is problematic. After all, “it is debatable whether all of these references [to catastrophically low floods] can be considered historical rather than literary allusions to real, datable events.”19 As Stephan Seidlmayer notes:

Independent evidence confirming climatic change during the First Intermediate Period is lacking. Instead, the available data seem to suggest that the ‘Neolithic Wet Phase’ had already ended during the Old

6 Mumford, “Tell Ras Budran (Site 345),” 59, n. 66.
7 Freed, “Egypt in the Age of the Pyramids,” 30.
9 Malek, *Egyptian Art*, 152.
10 Tainter, *Collapse of Complex Societies*, 47.
16 Bell, “Climate and the History of Egypt,” 224.
17 Freed, “Egypt in the Age of the Pyramids,” 30.