CHAPTER 10

The State of Egypt in the Eighth Dynasty

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Abstract

The final stages of the Old Kingdom remain contentious with respect to a host of historical challenges ranging from the duration of the reign of some of the Sixth Dynasty kings to complex succession issues. These, in turn, necessarily affect the analysis of the ensuing dynastic lines, which remain pivotal in the lead-up to the First Intermediate Period. The reconstruction of the events related to this interlude must address the degree of reliability of the available historical sources, as well as the family relationships established by the Sixth Dynasty with prominent Upper Egyptian officials. Thus, it appears that the connections it maintained not only influenced the state of affairs in that period but in subsequent ones as well, particularly in the Eighth Dynasty, which may have emulated the type of government and policies prevalent in preceding period.

1 Introduction

The analysis of the disintegration of the Egyptian state at the end of the Old Kingdom, and by extension the status of the initial stages of the First Intermediate Period, has traditionally generated extensive academic debate. Generally, the accepted premise has been to acknowledge the Sixth Dynasty as concluding the Old Kingdom and leading into the breakdown of the Egyptian state, a process that would begin its gradual reversal through the efforts of the early Eleventh Dynasty Theban rulers, and would appear to be completed by the end of the reign of Nebhepetre-Montuhotep. However, recent trends would favor extending the Old Kingdom until the start of the Herakleopolitan line of Dynasty Nine/Ten and thus shortening the span of the First Intermediate Period. The present article adheres to the latter argument in order to advance proposals that might argue in favor of maintaining the Old Kingdom Egyptian state through most of what is considered to be the Eighth Dynasty, which would make that particular line rather pivotal in terms of its transitional character. The range of the available sources attributed to the Eighth Dynasty appears to suggest that it perpetuated (at least throughout most of its duration) the
traditions of kingship and type of government prevalent in the Old Kingdom, emulating especially the Sixth Dynasty. A proposal of this nature would prompt us to examine closely the material available from the Eighth Dynasty in order to evaluate, classify, and present the information in a more integrated and coherent fashion, but more importantly yet, to correlate the features inherent to the data with the historical reality of the broader Old Kingdom, in particular the issue of the intervening Seventh Dynasty and the character of kingship in the Eighth Dynasty.

2 Theoretical and Methodological Matters

At the outset, the study of the Eighth Dynasty is confronted with the principles of Egyptian historical inquiry, namely the definition of what constitutes a dynasty or a unified state, as well as the extent to which any perceived shortcomings and (in)applicability of Manetho’s division of Egyptian history affect the overall argument. In addition to the usual host of chronological challenges that plague an investigation of this type (e.g., the exact terminus of the Sixth Dynasty), there remains a methodological one in modern historical discourse that stems from applying contradictory criteria to the analysis of comparable issues. This concerns principally the designation of a given period as being either within the parameters of the unified state or outside of them. The label intermediate used in prevailing historical approaches to ancient Egypt is based on norms that were devised to contrast what appear to be periods of unified and/or native Egyptian rule with intervals of time that in our view did not meet those restrictive conditions. Furthermore, the abrupt transition between periods no longer appears tenable. Barring a major natural catastrophe, which would unexpectedly and providently alter the existence of a given region, historical shifts require a period of growth. Therefore, an abrupt dissolution of a unified state entity such as the Old Kingdom should not be expected to have taken place, for instance, following the death of a king or as a result of a single missed harvest.

Consequently, accepting the still ill-defined end of the Sixth Dynasty as the sudden conclusion of the Old Kingdom creates discrepancies with respect to our understanding of a dynastic line, as well as the definition margins of an Intermediate Period, resulting in some of the methodological disconnects stated above. The Eighth Dynasty seems to have adhered to one of the major

1 The polemic surrounding most aspects of those issues has been discussed and analyzed by Schneider, “Periodizing Egyptian History.”