The Old Kingdom Abroad: An Epistemological Perspective
With Remarks on the Biography of Iny and the Kingdom of Dugurasu

Thomas Schneider
University of British Columbia

Abstract

This contribution reflects on the epistemological problems caused by the lack of evidence on Egypt’s foreign policy in the Old Kingdom. Taking up a call made by Karl Jansen-Winkeln to develop a methodology that “suits the situation of our evidence,” the article applies an approach proposed by Aliezer Tucker to the preserved sources from the Old Kingdom. This approach attempts to explain how the presently known evidence came about, rather than to produce a narrative of the past. In its second part, two case studies are presented that show how new evidence and new interpretations of existing evidence can fundamentally alter our perceptions of interrelations in the Old Kingdom, proving that evidence-based narratives of the past are prone to failure. The two case studies suggest (a) that the recently published biographical inscription of Iny contains a reference to Egyptian expeditions reaching the city of Sumur and the Eleutheros plain, and that (b) references in letters from Ebla to a “kingdom of Dugurasu” as a trading partner of Ebla could be understood as referring to the civilization of ancient Kerma in the Sudan. Kerma would thus emerge as a formerly unknown independent player in the trade exchange with Early Bronze Age Syria.

The Epistemology of Foreign Relations in the Old Kingdom

In a contribution presented to the workshop inaugurating the Journal of Egyptian History at the University of British Columbia in 2008, John Gee pointed to the fallacies arising from limited evidence:

As historians and Egyptologists, we need to be aware of not only what we know, but also how we know what we know. The basis for our knowledge is as important as that knowledge.1

1 Gee, “Egyptologists’ Fallacies.”
At the same time, Karl Jansen-Winkeln reminded us, in a contribution on the *Unknown* in Egyptian history, of the ever so often false coherence and fictitious nature of our historical reconstructions.\(^2\) In light of the extreme scarcity and the coincidental nature of what has been preserved and found, he admonishes us not to naively equate what is attested with what happened, but to bear in mind the gaps of knowledge and the vastness of the unknown. His three methodological proposals are as follows:

(1) The evidence ought to be presented in an explicit way, and if possible, according to factual areas. On no account should we ignore or bridge the gaps of knowledge. To the contrary, we should very decidedly point to the unknown. Somebody who deals with the foreign relations of Egypt under Ramesses II, to give one example, needs to clearly state that we simply do not have any sources pertaining to them from the last decades of his reign. This is a lacuna of our evidence, not proof of a period of peace.

(2) Evidence and interpretation must be neatly separated, and any inference drawn from the evidence must be made in an explicit way. What is it that makes scholars postulate that the peak of state absolutism was reached under Kheops? If it is the size of his pyramid and the uniformity of the tombs of the officials, the weakness of such reasoning becomes instantly obvious.

(3) Overall, we must not seek to emulate the narrative presentations of history that abound in modern historiography. This will only delude ourselves and others. Fields of history such as Ancient Egypt that have left so little evidence—evidence that, moreover, very often allows but for indirect conclusions—require their own methodology. *We should probably strive to develop a methodology that suits the situation of our evidence.*

In this contribution, I will attempt to take a critical look at our modern assumptions about foreign relations during the Egyptian Old Kingdom, rather than to draft a picture of how those relations appear at present on the basis of the sparse existing evidence.

Assessments biased by our limited evidence abound in the literature on foreign relations in the Old Kingdom, and have frequently found their way into the textbooks. Nicolas Grimal, in his *History of Ancient Egypt*, claims that “the kings of the Fifth Dynasty seem to have opened up Egypt to the outside world, both northwards and southwards,”\(^3\) and T.G.H. James, in his *Short History of Ancient Egypt*, believes in the same vein that

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\(^2\) Jansen-Winkeln, “Die Rolle des Unbekannten in der ägyptischen Geschichte.”

\(^3\) Grimal, *History of Ancient Egypt*, 76.