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CREATION OF AN EMPIRE INSTITUTIONAL CONSOLIDATION OF OLD KINGDOM EGYPT.

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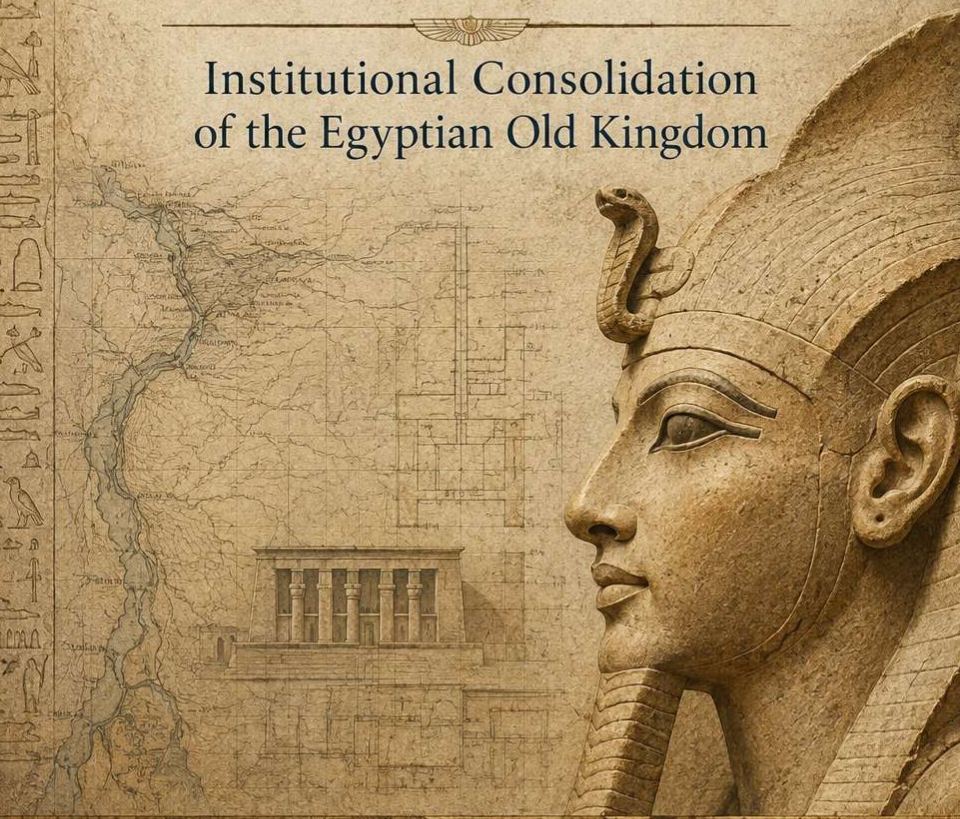


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CREATION — OF AN — EMPIRE

Institutional Consolidation
of the Egyptian Old Kingdom



AGUSTÍN V. STARTARI

MAAT

CREATION OF AN EMPIRE

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WORKING PAPERS

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CREATION OF AN EMPIRE

This study examines the institutional consolidation of Old Kingdom Egypt, traditionally termed the Ancient Empire in part of Spanish-language historiography. It focuses on the formation of political, administrative, religious, and economic structures capable of articulating diverse territories and communities during the age of the pyramids. The continuity of the Egyptian state is not attributed here to a single environmental or administrative cause, but rather to the interaction among the monarchy, central and provincial institutions, networks of labor and redistribution, cults, settlements, and Egypt's connections with Nubia, the Levant, Sinai, and the Red Sea.

According to leading Egyptologists and historians, the Old Kingdom of Egypt is one of the most complex periods to study because of the scarcity of documentation and the ambiguity of the surviving evidence. This work examines the process of institutional consolidation during this fundamental stage, a subject of considerable importance that requires a meticulous and critical analysis of the historical sources that have survived to the present day.

This collection brings together independent studies that explore power, ideology, legitimacy, and history from a cross-disciplinary perspective. Each volume constitutes an autonomous work while forming part of a common line of inquiry: the critical analysis of how power is configured, exercised, and sustained over time. From Ancient Egypt to twentieth-century totalitarianism, *Papeles de Trabajo* presents, with academic rigor and clear exposition, the historical and discursive mechanisms that shape our societies. Each installment is numbered to reflect its place within this evolving series.

Agustin V. Startari, born in 1982, is a recognized Uruguayan author, thinker, and researcher with a solid academic background in Historical Studies and Linguistics from the Universidad de la República (UdelaR). His extensive body of work ranges from rigorous historical research to fiction and studies of Buddhism, reflecting both his intellectual versatility and his sustained curiosity across diverse fields of knowledge.

Among his most notable publications are *Maquinaria de Propaganda: El Nacionalsocialismo*, an analysis of discursive power in twentieth-century Germany; *Evangelización en la Pluma de Fray Bartolomé*, a study of the influence of evangelization in the New World; and *Ucrania y Rusia: Un Conflicto en Progreso*, an investigation of the ongoing geopolitical dispute between the two nations.

Startari is distinguished by his ability to make complex subjects accessible to readers with a strong interest in history, offering a clear and approachable perspective without sacrificing academic rigor. His depth of knowledge and analytical approach make his works valuable references for those seeking a deeper understanding of diverse historical and cultural processes.

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INSTITUTIONAL

CONSOLIDATION OF OLD KINGDOM
EGYPT

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SUMMARY

This study examines the institutional consolidation of Old Kingdom Egypt, conventionally situated between Dynasties III and VI, while remaining attentive to debates over absolute chronology and the boundaries of periodization. Its central hypothesis holds that the ideological centrality of the pharaoh did not amount to the existence of a uniform and omnipotent state apparatus: effective authority depended on coordination among the court, provincial officials, estates, cult foundations, labor systems, settlement networks, and documentary practices. The study combines critical analysis of primary sources with archaeology, papyrology, institutional history, and recent chronological and environmental research. It systematically distinguishes between ideological representations of kingship and the administrative mechanisms through which resources, offices, commands, and ritual obligations were mobilized. In a limited analytical capacity, it also employs the concept of the compiled rule to describe stabilized institutional forms - titulary, seals, documentary formulas, and ritual sequences - capable of reproducing relations of authority without reconstructing the entirety of their justification on each occasion of use. The Old Kingdom thus emerges as a dynamic political formation sustained by the interaction of ideology, administration, economy, cult, territory, and formalized procedures.

Keywords: Old Kingdom; state formation; kingship; administration; institutional history; religious institutions; compiled rule.

ABSTRACT

This study examines the institutional consolidation of Old Kingdom Egypt, conventionally placed between Dynasties 3 and 6, while recognizing continuing debates over absolute chronology and period boundaries. It argues that royal centrality should not be equated with a perfectly uniform state apparatus: effective authority depended on the coordination of court institutions, provincial officials, estates, cult foundations, labor systems, settlement networks, and documentary practices. The analysis combines critical reading of primary sources with archaeology, papyrology, institutional history, and recent chronological and environmental research. Particular attention is given to the distinction between ideological representations of kingship and the administrative mechanisms through which resources, offices, commands, and ritual obligations were reproduced. The study also employs the concept of compiled rule in a restricted analytical sense to describe stabilized forms - such as titulary, seals, documentary formulas, and ritual sequences - that could reproduce authority without restating their full justification at every use. The Old Kingdom consequently emerges as a dynamic political formation whose durability rested on the interaction of ideology, administration, economy, cult, territory, and formalized institutional practices.

Keywords: Old Kingdom Egypt; state formation; kingship; administration; institutional history; religious institutions; compiled rule.

INTRODUCTION

Problem, Hypothesis, and Scope

The present study analyzes the process of formation, structuring, and consolidation of Egypt's Old Kingdom, referred to in this work as the Ancient Empire in continuity with a tradition of Spanish-language historiography. The term corresponds to the Old Kingdom of international Egyptology and does not imply, for this period, a territorial empire in the sense Egypt acquired during the New Kingdom. Its conventional framework encompasses Dynasties III through VI, although absolute dates remain subject to refinement. High-precision radiocarbon research published in 2025 has strengthened relatively high chronologies for the Old Kingdom and has substantially reduced the empirical support for low chronologies.¹

The Nile Valley and Delta provided ecological conditions crucial to agricultural production, mobility, and demographic concentration, but the relationship between environment and state must not be formulated as an automatic form of hydraulic causation. The management of flood basins, canals, dikes, storage, and collective labor operated at varying local and regional scales. Political centralization emerged from the interaction of regional

¹Pinar Erdil et al., "Resolution of the High versus Low debate for Old and Middle Kingdom Egypt", PLOS ONE 20, no. 5 (2025): e0314612, DOI 10.1371/journal.pone.0314612.

competition, economic integration, palatial institutions, legitimating rituals, exchange networks, and the capacity to mobilize resources. The Nile was therefore a structural condition of Egyptian development, not in itself a sufficient explanation for state formation.²

The study of the Old Kingdom poses major methodological and hermeneutic difficulties. The surviving documentation is uneven and strongly conditioned by differential preservation: funerary inscriptions, reliefs, seals, papyri, settlement remains, production facilities, and archaeological evidence derive from markedly different contexts. Institutional analysis requires distinguishing among normative texts, monuments of self-representation, contemporary administrative sources, and much later Greco-Roman testimony. Settlement archaeology and papyrological documentation discovered in recent decades have substantially broadened the field of observation, yet every reconstruction must make its degrees of certainty explicit.

The working hypothesis holds that the consolidation of the Old Kingdom resulted from a growing capacity to coordinate and reproduce relations of authority through relatively stable institutions, offices, resources, rituals, infrastructures, and

² Richard Bussmann, *The Archaeology of Pharaonic Egypt: Society and Culture, 2700-1700 BC* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023); Nadine Moeller, *The Archaeology of Urbanism in Ancient Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

documentary forms. Centralization is understood here not as uniform control over every locality, but as the Crown's capacity to establish frameworks of competence, mobilize resources, delegate functions, and render particular positions of authority recognizable across different scales. This approach makes it possible to account simultaneously for the strength of kingship and the existence of provincial, household, temple, and local forms of mediation.

Structure of the Study

The present work undertakes a systematic and multidimensional analysis of the process of institutional consolidation in the Old Kingdom. The study is organized into four chapters. The first examines the temporal and spatial framework, the geography of the valley and Delta, the dynamics of the Nile, and regional connections, while avoiding the treatment of environment as a single cause of political centralization.

The second chapter addresses religious and cultural dimensions, with particular attention to the plurality of theological traditions, kingship, maat, funerary practices, writing, labor, craft production, and architecture. The relationship between religion and power is analyzed as a historical constellation of practices and institutions, rather than as a uniform and unchanging theocracy.

The third chapter examines the Predynastic Period, state formation, and the Early Dynastic Period - that is, Dynasties I and II - as well as the transition to Dynasty III. It considers competition among regional centers, exchange networks, the

emergence of administrative writing, the construction of royal ideology, and the progressive integration of Upper and Lower Egypt.

The fourth chapter focuses on the institutional consolidation of the Old Kingdom. It examines central and provincial administration, the titles and careers of officials, taxation and labor mobilization, funerary and temple foundations, foreign relations, the circulation of goods and people, and the changes that occurred between Dynasties III and VI.

The architecture of the study makes it possible to compare ideological representations of authority with practices documented in archives, inscriptions, archaeological contexts, and settlements. The aim is not to reconstruct a perfectly uniform state apparatus, but to identify how the Crown, estates, cult institutions, officials, and local communities articulated resources and jurisdictions across different scales.

Sources, Method, and Levels of Evidence

The methodology combines critical analysis of primary sources, philological evaluation where the material permits, the archaeology of settlements and landscapes, institutional history, and engagement with specialized historiography. Classical sources such as Herodotus, Diodorus, and traditions derived from Manetho are used as evidence of reception and historical memory when they are chronologically distant from the events of the Old Kingdom, rather than as automatic equivalents of contemporary documentation.

The Compiled Rule as an Analytical Category

Within this framework, the study incorporates the notion of the compiled rule in a limited capacity as an analytical tool for examining the institutional reproduction of authority. A compiled rule is a form whose justification has already been resolved and which, once stabilized, can be executed without requiring each instance of use to reconstruct the reasoning that produced it. Applied to third-millennium BCE Egypt, the category does not imply attributing to historical actors a formal theory of language, nor does it equate repetition with automatic obedience. It is employed only where the evidence reveals a relatively stable, recognizable, and recurrent form - titulary, seals, documentary formulas, or ritual forms - whose execution can activate, authenticate, or reproduce relations of authority. The historical interest lies in observing when form ceases to be an isolated representation and begins to function as an institutional procedure.

The conclusion synthesizes the findings concerning the formation and functioning of institutions while maintaining distinctions among levels of evidence. The durability of the pharaonic model is understood as the result of successive transformations and recompositions, rather than as the persistence of an immobile structure. From this perspective, the Old Kingdom provides an early case for examining how authority, administration, cult, economy, territory, and documentary production were integrated without being reduced to a single explanatory cause.

CHAPTER I

Temporal and Spatial Context

This chapter defines the temporal and spatial conditions within which the Old Kingdom developed. Its purpose is not to present geography and chronology as external background, but to show how both condition the quality of the evidence and the possibilities for institutional action. Chronology establishes the framework within which dynastic and administrative changes can be compared; the Nile, the Delta, the deserts, and regional routes define opportunities and constraints for production, mobility, and communication. The analysis concludes with the concept of the Two Lands, because the integration of Upper and Lower Egypt transformed a persistent geographical distinction into a central political category.

1.1 Temporal Location and Chronological Problems

The term Ancient Egypt conventionally designates the history of the societies of the Nile Valley under pharaonic state forms from the end of the fourth millennium BCE to the Macedonian conquest of 332 BCE, although Roman rule and the continuity of Egyptian institutions and languages extended other aspects of that history. Modern periodization distinguishes the Early Dynastic Period, Old Kingdom, First Intermediate Period, Middle Kingdom, Second Intermediate Period, New Kingdom, Third Intermediate Period, and Late

Period, in addition to the Ptolemaic and Roman periods. The dynasties ultimately derive from the scheme attributed to Manetho, but contemporary Egyptology tests that framework against king lists, contemporary inscriptions, archaeology, and scientific dating methods.

Egyptian chronology combines relative and absolute chronologies. Ancient documents dated events by regnal years and by their own administrative systems, not by means of a continuous era equivalent to the modern one. Correlation relies on royal sequences, historical synchronisms, archaeological seriation, astronomical data, and, increasingly, radiocarbon determinations subjected to Bayesian modeling. This combination has made it possible to revise chronological intervals that for decades depended excessively on textual or astronomical reconstructions.

The Egyptian civil calendar comprised 365 days: twelve months of thirty days and five epagomenal days, organized into three seasons of four months each. Because it lacked a regular intercalary day for much of pharaonic history, the civil calendar shifted by approximately one day relative to the solar year every four years. The so-called Sothic cycle of 1,460 Julian years is a chronological construct based on the relationship between this displacement and the heliacal rising of Sirius, but its historical application depends on the place and conditions of observation and should not be treated as an automatic dating mechanism.

A fundamental reference point for later Sothic chronology is the documented coincidence in 139 CE, not 139 BCE, between the civil calendar and the heliacal rising of Sirius within the framework used by modern reconstructions. Its retrojection has been important for certain periods, but it does not by itself provide exact dates for the Old Kingdom.

For this period, secure astronomical references are scarce and must be combined with royal chronology, archaeology, and radiocarbon evidence.

Specific regnal dates continue to carry margins of uncertainty. The picture has nevertheless changed with the new radiocarbon series. A study published in 2025 incorporated 48 high-precision determinations and combined them with legacy data and regnal durations within Bayesian models. Its results favor high chronological positions for the Old Kingdom and conclude that the so-called low chronology no longer has sufficient empirical support for the Old and Middle Kingdoms. This advance reduces some discrepancies, although it does not eliminate problems concerning regnal lengths, coregencies, successions, and the boundaries of periodization.³

1.2 Geographical Factors

Egypt developed within an ecological corridor defined by the Nile Valley and the broad northern Delta, surrounded for the most part by arid environments. The Egyptian opposition between *kemet*, the cultivable black land associated with alluvial deposits, and *deshret*, the red desert land, expresses a central physical and symbolic distinction. The Nilotic system, however, was not a closed linear space: it connected the Mediterranean, northeastern Africa, Nubia, the Eastern and Western Deserts, Sinai, and, through overland and maritime routes, the Levant and the Red Sea.

³Erdil et al., "Resolution of the High versus Low debate for Old and Middle Kingdom Egypt" (2025).

The annual Nile flood depended principally on seasonal rainfall in the Ethiopian Highlands feeding the Blue Nile and the Atbara, combined with contributions from the White Nile system. In Egypt, traditional agriculture relied above all on basin inundation, retaining and distributing water through works whose scale varied by place and period. These practices required coordination and maintenance, but the older hypothesis of a necessarily centralized hydraulic society can no longer serve as a sufficient explanation of the state. Cereal production was organized primarily around an annual cycle; gardens and particular crops could follow different regimes.

The Nile flows from south to north and forms part of a basin extending far beyond Egypt's borders. For the ancient Egyptians, much of its upper sources lay beyond their direct geographical horizon, although their practical knowledge of Nubia, the cataracts, and southern routes was considerable. Modern explanations of the flood distinguish among the different tributaries and catchment regions rather than attributing the river to a single Ethiopian source.

Ancient descriptions of the Nile's length and course, sometimes expressed in stadia and associated with Ethiopia, Libya, or Arabia, belong to Greco-Roman geographies and should be preserved as evidence of ancient perception, not as modern measurements. For historical analysis, its role as an axis of communication, transport, supply, and regional articulation within Egypt is more significant.

In addition to sustaining agriculture, the Nile articulated inhabited space and facilitated the circulation of people, goods, and information. Its course and branches conditioned the location of settlements and contributed to integrating separated regions within a common axis of communication.

The annual floods deposited sediment and enabled cultivation through basin systems, but their magnitude varied and their effects were not identical throughout the valley and Delta. Communities constructed and maintained dikes, canals, basin embankments, and other infrastructure to manage the water. The existence of these works reveals cooperation and administration, although it does not by itself demonstrate that the pharaonic state arose from a centralized need to control the river.

The river's cycles also provided recurrent temporal and spatial reference points. This regularity was incorporated into agricultural practices, calendars, and religious representations, without reducing the Egyptian worldview to an automatic consequence of the fluvial environment.

Herodotus, Diodorus Siculus, Strabo, and other Greco-Roman authors provide valuable testimony about the Nile and ancient images of Egypt, but they wrote many centuries after the Old Kingdom. Their accounts combine observation, information from intermediaries, literary tradition, and interests specific to their own contexts. They should therefore not be used without critical mediation to reconstruct conditions in the third millennium BCE; their information must be compared with contemporary archaeological, geomorphological, and documentary evidence.

Variability in the inundation could produce agricultural losses and damage to settlements and infrastructure, whether because of insufficient levels or exceptionally high floods. There is, however, no universal threshold in centimeters or meters that automatically translates a given Nile level into famine throughout Egypt. Effects depended on topography,

retention works, reserves, regional distribution, and the institutional capacity to mobilize food and labor.

The inundation moved through the valley from south to north, and its timing varied regionally. Agricultural fertility depended on the interaction of water, sediments, soils, and basin management. Salinization and drainage were problems of varying intensity, but it is not appropriate to describe in general terms a transformation of the red desert land into black land. Nor can productive space be reduced to a fixed proportion between the Delta and the valley, since cultivable potential changed with geomorphology, the hydrological regime, settlements, and infrastructure.

The expansion of agriculture was a long-term process combining adaptation to floodable zones, land clearance, basin management, the construction and maintenance of local canals, the use of tools, and the organization of household and institutional labor. Contemporary archaeology avoids presenting this development as a linear progression from a presumed primitive farmer toward a superior hydraulic civilization. Productive strategies varied by region, scale, and period.

The agricultural cycle was conceptually articulated through the seasons Akhet, Peret, and Shemu, associated respectively with inundation, emergence or growth, and harvest. Their correspondence with modern months was not fixed because the 365-day civil calendar shifted relative to the solar year. Accordingly, the equivalences July-October, November-February, and March-June are useful approximations for explaining the natural cycle, not invariable dates in the Egyptian calendar.

The exploitation of the flood supported surpluses capable of sustaining non-agricultural populations, institutions,

expeditions, and monumental projects. The relationship among surplus, urbanization, and the state was nevertheless historical and contingent, not a universal consequence of so-called civilized life. Papyrus had multiple uses in light boats, basketry, cordage, and as a writing support, and its documentary production was decisive for administration, although preservation of the material is highly uneven.

“The flooding of the Nile is a phenomenon that appears truly marvelous... (...). For while all other rivers begin to diminish at the summer solstice and continue invariably to fall throughout the following summer, this alone begins to rise at that time and increases so markedly in volume day by day that it ultimately floods almost all of Egypt. Thereafter it follows precisely the opposite process and, over an equal period of time, gradually decreases day by day until it has returned to its former level. And since the country is a plain, while the cities and villages, as well as the farms, stand upon artificial mounds, the scene comes to resemble the Cyclades. Most wild land animals are isolated by the river and perish in its waters, although a few escape by fleeing to higher ground; cattle and flocks, however, are kept during the inundation in the villages and farms, where fodder has been stored for them in advance (...).”⁴

This periodicity was reinforced by the sun, which, beneath an ever-cloudless sky, would meet the industrious Egyptian again each morning.

Every spring the river contracts within its channel and leaves the fields exposed to the warm breeze of the encroaching desert; yet every summer the river rises, overflows its banks, and gives renewed life to the fields through its moisture and fertilizing deposits. The Nile never ceases to perform its great life-giving work.

⁴ “*Diodoro Sículo: Descripción de la crecida del Nilo (I, 36,7-12)*”. in: Serrano Delgado, op. cit., p. 42.

The Egyptian climate was predominantly arid, with scarce precipitation across much of the valley and greater rainfall along the Mediterranean fringe. The historical significance of this setting lies in its interaction with the Nile regime, mobility through the deserts, and archaeological preservation, not in physiological characterizations such as a supposedly invigorating climate or broad assertions about the absence of disease. Paleoclimatology and geoarchaeology demonstrate significant variations throughout the Holocene, and modern conditions should therefore not be projected uncritically onto all pharaonic periods.

1.3 Mobility, Frontiers, and Regional Connections

The Eastern and Western Deserts, the Nubian cataracts, Sinai, and the Mediterranean imposed costs and conditioned routes, but they did not isolate Egypt from significant contacts. From the Predynastic and Early Dynastic periods onward, exchanges with Nubia and the Levant, the circulation of raw materials, movements of people, and expeditions to mining and desert zones are documented. Egyptian frontiers should be understood as spaces of interaction, surveillance, and negotiation rather than as absolute barriers.

External contact formed part of the economy and of political construction from an early stage. The presence of non-local raw materials, shared iconographies, ceramics, seals, and other materials demonstrates networks of varying intensity among the Nile Valley, northeastern Africa, and western Asia. Connectivity does not erase Egyptian cultural

specificity, but it requires replacing the older model of a civilization formed within a closed compartment with one based on selective appropriation, circulation, and indigenous regional development.

Navigation likewise cannot be characterized in terms of an Egyptian incapacity to venture to sea. Archaeological documentation from the port of Wadi el-Jarf, used at the beginning of Dynasty IV, demonstrates maritime organization in the Red Sea, state logistics, and long-distance expeditions. The Merer papyri, dated to the end of Khufu's reign, record work crews, transport, and administration connected with the royal project and constitute one of the most important contemporary administrative sources from the Old Kingdom.⁵

To the south, the cataracts and narrow stretches of the valley complicated navigation and transport but did not interrupt relations with Nubia. Expeditions, exchange, resource exploitation, conflict, and population movements repeatedly traversed these spaces. The southern frontier was therefore a strategic corridor whose political configuration changed over time.

The geographical setting offered relative defensive advantages, but it did not render Egypt immune to threats or influences. Archaeological evidence and, since 2025, the first published complete genome of a third-millennium BCE

⁵Pierre Tallet, *Les papyrus de la mer Rouge I. Le Journal de Merer (Papyrus Jarf A et B)*, MIFAO 136 (Le Caire: IFAO, 2017); idem, *Les papyrus de la mer Rouge II. Le Journal de Dedi et autres fragments de journaux de bord*, MIFAO 145 (Le Caire: IFAO, 2021).

Egyptian individual reinforce the need to study the valley's population within North African and eastern Mediterranean networks. That genome derives from a single individual and does not by itself represent the entire Egyptian population, but it constitutes additional direct evidence against models of absolute biological isolation.⁶

“The land of Egypt extends generally from north to south and is reputed to surpass, in no small measure, all other regions constituted as kingdoms in its natural resources and beauty of landscape. For on the west it is fortified by the Libyan Desert, full of wild beasts, which extends for a great distance along its frontiers and, because of its lack of rainfall and scarcity of every kind of food, makes passage through it not merely arduous but exceedingly dangerous. To the south, moreover, the same protection is provided by the cataracts of the Nile and the mountains flanking them; for from the country of the Troglodytes and the more distant parts of Ethiopia, over a distance of five thousand five hundred stadia, it is not easy either to navigate the river or to travel by land unless a person is equipped as a king, or at least on a very considerable scale. As for the parts of the country facing east, some are fortified by the river and others are surrounded by desert and by a marshy plain called Barathra. And between Coele-Syria and Egypt there is a lake, rather narrow but remarkably deep and about two hundred stadia in length, called Serbonis, which presents dangers to those who approach it unaware of its nature.”⁷

The passage from Diodorus Siculus is useful above all as evidence of an ancient perception of Egypt as a territory

6Adeline Morez Jacobs et al., "Whole-genome ancestry of an Old Kingdom Egyptian", *Nature* 644 (2025): 714-721, DOI 10.1038/s41586-025-09195-5. The study concerns a single individual, and the authors themselves caution against the limits of population representativeness.

⁷ “*Diodoro Siculo: El país egipcio (1, 30, 1-4)*” in: Serrano Delgado, op. cit., p. 41.

protected by natural barriers. His description of the western desert, the southern cataracts, and the eastern marshlands should not be transferred uncritically to the Old Kingdom, but it allows us to recognize the persistence of a geographical image in which accessibility, defense, and resources were closely interconnected.

1.4 The Two Lands: Political Geography and Territorial Duality

One of Egypt's most persistent political designations was the Two Lands, an expression that articulated the duality of Upper and Lower Egypt within a single monarchy. The formula does not imply that the two regions always remained independent entities or that the entire territory was the king's personal property. It expresses an ideology of totality constructed from geographical, administrative, and symbolic differences between the southern valley and the northern Delta.

From the perspective of the compiled rule, the Two Lands constitute an especially productive case. The phrase does not in itself contain political unification, but its recurrence in titulary, coronations, and royal representations makes it possible to treat dual unity as an operative presupposition. Each use did not need to reconstruct the historical process through which the southern valley and northern Delta came to be integrated under the same monarchy. The form already presupposed that relationship and made it available for new acts of legitimation. Its efficacy depended on institutional

repetition, even though the specific meanings and political conditions of that unity varied from reign to reign.

The proximity of the desert to inhabited places in Upper Egypt, in contrast to the broad expanses of fertile soil in the Delta, explains two factors bearing on the survival of evidence from ancient Egypt. In Upper Egypt the desert was always close at hand for burying the dead and constructing great temples; people lived and conducted their affairs on the black land, but they were buried in the protective sands at the foot of the hills, and their temples were built there.⁸

Archaeological preservation therefore introduces a decisive bias. Funerary evidence from Upper Egypt survives in far greater proportion than materials associated with the economy, labor, government, and everyday life, many of which were exposed to moisture and the degradation of alluvial soils. The abundance of mortuary evidence does not by itself demonstrate that Egyptian society was dominated exclusively by funerary concerns; it also reflects the unequal conditions under which the record was preserved.

Another discrepancy in our knowledge arises from the contrast between Upper and Lower Egypt. Most of the remains known to us come from the protective sands of Upper Egypt. The remains of the North have perished in damp soil, so that the part of Egypt that was in contact with Asia and the Mediterranean is precisely the part that tells us least. The materials that have reached us are limited in more than one sense, and consequently it is still more difficult to construct the history. The history of the Delta must in large part be inferred from materials originating in the South.

The destructive disintegration of the Delta's mud deposits becomes particularly consequential when we recall that the

⁸ WILSON, John A. "*La cultura egipcia*", Mexico, p. 35.

Delta was the principal locus of contact between Egypt and other major cultures.⁹

Differences between Upper and Lower Egypt should not be projected as a form of collective psychological dualism. Duality was a highly productive political and symbolic category, used in titulary, crowns, rituals, and representations of territory. Linguistic, material, and regional variations existed, but they changed over time and do not justify attributing homogeneous and opposing mentalities to the populations of north and south.

“I do not know what has taken me from my place. It was like a dream, as though a man of the Delta suddenly found himself in Elephantine, or a man of the marshes (of the North) in Nubia.”¹⁰

Texts contrasting the speech of the Delta with that of Elephantine constitute important evidence of regional awareness and of perceptions of linguistic difference. Nevertheless, their rhetorical character and date must be considered before they are used as evidence for two completely separate dialects throughout the entire pharaonic period. Egyptian linguistic variation was historical, social, and geographical, and its reconstruction depends on written corpora that do not transparently represent everyday speech.

“Your words are confused, and there is no interpreter who can explain them. They are like the words of a man of the Delta to a man of Elephantine”⁸.

There may have been other elements just as powerful; these will be considered below in a brief historical overview.

⁹ Ibid., p. 36.

¹⁰ *Source* in: Ibid., p. 323.

⁸ Ibid., p. 323.

The framework set out above allows a first consequence to be formulated: the integration of Egyptian territory cannot be explained by geography, irrigation, or isolation considered independently. Institutionalization began when these conditions were incorporated into political, ritual, and administrative languages capable of organizing regional differences and producing shared expectations of authority. The following chapter examines precisely this symbolic and cultural level, where the monarchy transformed cosmic order, ritual practice, and representation into resources of legitimation.

CHAPTER II

Religion, Culture, and Legitimacy

The second chapter examines the religious and cultural universe as a constitutive part of the political order, rather than treating it as a domain separate from administration. Theologies, cults, funerary practices, artistic production, and literature provided languages through which hierarchies, obligations, and forms of belonging were defined. The aim is to distinguish between long-term traditions and developments specific to the Old Kingdom, as well as between contemporary evidence and later descriptions. This distinction makes it possible to analyze pharaonic legitimacy without reducing Egyptian society to a homogeneous theocracy.

2.1 Cosmogonies, Cult, and Theological Plurality

“It is not the designs of men that are fulfilled, but the will of God.”
Ptahhotep.¹¹

Egyptian religion developed from local and supraregional traditions that changed over the course of millennia. The Greek terms *nome* and *tribe* should not be projected automatically onto Predynastic communities, nor can it be

¹¹ NACK, Emil, “Egipto y el próximo oriente en la antigüedad”, Alianza Editorial, p. 110.

assumed that each early political unit corresponded to a totemic clan with an exclusive deity. State integration fostered new relationships among cults, sanctuaries, and deities, but it did not produce a single, closed pantheon. Modern categories such as animism, henotheism, or polytheism may describe partial aspects, yet they are insufficient to explain the coexistence of gods, manifestations, names, and syncretic relationships. The *ba*, moreover, is not equivalent to a presumed universal soul present in every visible object, but forms part of a more complex Egyptian anthropological and theological vocabulary.

Herodotus, writing in the fifth century BCE, characterized the Egyptians as exceptionally religious. The observation is valuable for studying the Greek view of Egypt, but it cannot be universalized without regard to its context. For the Old Kingdom, the relationship among cult, kingship, production, architecture, and administration is evident in numerous contexts, although the intensity and forms of religious participation varied among the court, temples, local communities, households, and funerary cults.¹²

Egyptian cosmogonies do not constitute a single narrative. The Heliopolitan tradition places Atum and the Ennead within a process of emergence and differentiation from Nun; other formulations associated with Hermopolis, Memphis, and later centers organized creation and relationships among deities differently. The primeval mound, the emergence of light, the cosmic egg, and creation through thought and word belong to traditions that should not be conflated into a single

¹² Heródoto, *Historias*, Book II

sequence. Atum and Ra came to be closely associated and to form syncretic combinations, but they are not simply interchangeable names for the same god in every source. This theological plurality is a structural characteristic of Egyptian religion.

Cult centers developed their own theologies, whose significance changed historically. Heliopolis was central to solar forms of kingship; Memphis was associated with Ptah and a theological tradition known primarily through later evidence; Abydos acquired increasing importance for Osiris; Thebes attained its major political and religious prominence long after the beginning of the Old Kingdom. Kingship was related to a range of deities and cannot be reduced to universal descent from Ra. The title Son of Ra is attested from Dynasty IV and became more firmly established thereafter, as part of the evolution of royal titulary.

Egyptian religion should be understood as a historical system of overlapping cults, myths, rituals, and theologies. During the Old Kingdom, the growing importance of Ra and solar cults was associated with kingship, particularly from Dynasties IV and V onward, but this did not eliminate other deities or produce a stable hierarchy invariably headed by a single supreme god. Solar barques, the sun's daily cycle, and the struggle against forces of disorder received textual and iconographic elaboration at different moments. The relationship among Ra, Atum, and later Amun-Ra exemplifies historical syncretism rather than the linear replacement of one deity by another.

Horus was one of the fundamental deities of Egyptian kingship, and his falcon form appears from very early periods. His relationship with Seth cannot be reduced to a daily struggle between light and a demon of darkness.

Mythic cycles concerning Horus and Seth expressed conflict, legitimacy, territory, violence, and the reconstitution of order, and existed in numerous variants. Seth was a complex deity capable of fulfilling protective and royal functions as well as antagonistic ones. The king's identification with Horus formed part of titulary and monarchical ideology, but the ruler's divine nature must be analyzed within ritual and institutional contexts rather than as a simple and permanent equivalence between king and god.

2.1.1 Sacred Animals and Divine Representation

Egyptian religion integrated the animal world deeply into its theological symbolism, to the point that numerous gods were represented with zoomorphic elements, thereby establishing a distinctive and readily recognizable iconography. Gods were frequently depicted with human bodies and animal heads, although reverse hybrid forms - animal bodies with human heads - also existed, as did fully animal figures invested with sacred character. A prominent example of this iconography is the Sphinx, an image of Harmakhis (a solar form of Horus), with a lion's body and a human head, symbolizing strength governed by intelligence. The most common form in Egyptian religious art, however, was that of a god with a human body and an animal head, allowing the deity's attributes and functions to be identified visually. Thus Horus was represented with the head of a hawk or falcon, reflecting his connection with the sky and penetrating vision; Thoth, god of wisdom and writing, with the head of an ibis, a bird associated with meticulous thought; Anubis, protector of the necropolises and guide of souls, with the head of a jackal, a scavenging animal

that frequented the deserts where the dead were buried; Ptah, the creator deity venerated at Memphis, in the form of a bull; Isis, mother goddess and protectress, could appear with the head of a cow, symbolizing fertility; while Sekhmet, goddess of war and destruction, bore the head of a lioness, an expression of her devastating power. A single god could therefore assume multiple iconographic forms. Horus, for example, could be represented as a complete falcon, as a man with a falcon's head, as a falcon with a human head, or simply as a man. This versatility made it possible to express different aspects of divinity according to ritual or artistic context. Beyond these representative forms, animals themselves were objects of religious veneration. Some were regarded as living manifestations of the divine and received cult in special temples, where they were cared for by priests. Prominent among these sacred animals were the lion, crocodile, ox, ram, jackal, cat, hawk, ibis, and scarab (the dung beetle or scarab, a solar symbol of rebirth).

The sacred status of animals varied by region. Some were worshiped throughout Egypt, whereas others were considered sacred only in particular provinces or nomes. At Thebes, for example, the crocodile was an object of veneration, while at Elephantine it was hunted and killed. Similarly, the hippopotamus was regarded as divine only in certain areas of Upper Egypt. These animals were not merely sacred; harming them was considered a religious crime. Their death could bring severe punishment, and in some cases they were mummified and buried with funerary honors and offerings. Reverence and awe toward the animal world thus constituted an essential part of the spiritual imagination of ancient Egypt, reflecting a worldview that perceived nature as a living language of the divine. In sanctuaries, a living animal was kept for the faithful

to worship. One source, the Christian Church Father Clement of Alexandria, mocked this custom:

“If you enter a temple, a priest solemnly comes forward, chanting a hymn, and raises a veil to show you the god. What do you then see? A cat, a crocodile, a serpent, or some other animal. The god of the Egyptians appears: it is a wild animal wallowing on a purple tapestry.”¹³

At Thebes and Shodú, the priests kept a domesticated crocodile. They placed rings of gold or porcelain in its ears and bracelets on its legs. Strabo's traveler, who lived around the time of Jesus Christ, described his visit to the crocodile of Shodú as follows:

“Our host took cakes, roasted fish, and a drink made with honey, and then led us to the lake. The animal was lying on the bank. The priests approached it; two of them opened its mouth, while another placed in it first the cakes, then the fish, and finally the drink. The crocodile plunged into the water and went to lie on the opposite bank. Another foreigner arrived with the same offering as ours, and the priests took it, went around the lake, seized the crocodile once again, and made it swallow the offering in the same way.”¹⁴

At Memphis, one of the most important religious centers of ancient Egypt, a male goat was venerated, an animal that played a symbolic role within the local religion. This goat was associated with fertility and vital energy, symbolizing renewal and creation. Through this animal, a direct connection was sought with the natural cycles of life, death, and rebirth. At Heliopolis, by contrast, the center of the solar cult in ancient Egypt, a migratory bird was worshiped, generally identified in

¹³ *Clemente de Alejandría* in: SEIGNOBOS, C.H. “HISTORIA UNIVERSAL: Oriente y Grecia”, p. 46.

¹⁴ *Clemente de Alejandría* in: Ibid., p. 46.

Greek tradition as the phoenix. The phoenix was regarded as a symbol of rebirth and immortality because, according to legend, the bird was believed to arise anew from its own ashes after death. This mythological figure symbolized the eternal cycle of the sun, which was born, died, and reemerged each day on the horizon. Thus the phoenix, together with the solar cult of Ra at Heliopolis, represented eternity and cosmic rebirth, central foundations of the Egyptian worldview. Both animals, the goat of Memphis and the phoenix of Heliopolis, reflect the profound symbolism of death and rebirth that permeated Egyptian religion, linking earthly life with the unceasing solar cycle and cosmic regeneration.

The **Apis bull** was one of the most venerated sacred beings at Memphis, an animal that represented the fecundity of cattle and vital force. Its importance was directly related to its symbolism of power and fertility, qualities essential to Egyptian agricultural culture. Apis was regarded as an intermediary between the divine and human worlds, and his image was associated with the god Ptah, creator and patron of Memphis, giving him a fundamental role in the city's rituals. He was not an ordinary bull but had to display highly specific physical characteristics identifying him as the chosen animal: he had to be black, with a triangular white mark on the forehead, the figure of an eagle on the back, the image of a scarab wing on the tongue, and double hairs in the tail. These marks were not only signs of his divine nature but also symbols of protection, vitality, and wisdom. Legend held that Apis was born from a bolt of lightning descending from the sky, a direct manifestation of divine will. When priests identified an Apis bull, they installed him in a chapel near the temple of Ptah, where he received a special cult and a ceremonial life that included sacrifices, rituals, and celebrations. Egyptians believed that the presence of Apis ensured the prosperity of the land

and divine protection. Despite his sacred status, it was held that the Apis bull should not live beyond twenty-five years. If he reached that age, the cycle was brought to a close by a solemn ritual: the animal was drowned in a sacred spring and his body buried in a granite sarcophagus. This process of death and burial was accompanied by a ceremony of mourning and reverence, followed by the search for a new Apis who would continue the cycle of renewal and fertility for the community. The veneration of the Apis bull reflects the profound connection between the Egyptians and the natural cycle of life, death, and rebirth, in which the gods manifested themselves through nature itself as spiritual guides and protectors in every aspect of daily life.

When Thebes became established as the capital of ancient Egypt during Dynasty XI, the Theban god **Amun** underwent a theological transformation that placed him at the center of the religious imagination and the political apparatus of the state. Amun came to be conceived and represented as a perfect, eternal, and omnipotent being, credited with the capacity to create all things without himself having been created, which conferred upon him the distinction of “father of fathers” and “mother of mothers.” This conception made it possible, in certain contexts, for other deities to be regarded as subsidiary manifestations or variations of the same god, becoming consolidated in syncretic expressions such as Amun-Ra-Harmakhis, in which creative and solar attributes were integrated. The iconography accompanying the cult of Amun reinforced his cosmic authority. He was represented navigating the sky in a divine barque, an image symbolizing his dominion over universal order. In these representations Amun appears at the prow, armed with a spear symbolizing his power to dispel chaos, while the souls of virtuous men, evoked through the figure of the rowers, propel his journey across the celestial

vault. The image of a god at the helm further emphasizes the character of guide and guarantor of equilibrium attributed to him, revealing the Egyptian conception of the daily cycle of life, marked by dawn and sunset and by the constant renewal of the natural world. The process of theological syncretism affecting Amun involved the gradual fusion of his attributes with those of the solar god Ra, producing the composite deity Amun-Ra. This integration symbolizes the culmination of a worldview in which creative and regenerative power merges with the vital force of the sun, establishing Amun-Ra as the predominant deity of the Egyptian pantheon. The identification of the pharaohs as “Sons of Amun” legitimized their rule by directly linking terrestrial authority with a divine manifestation recognized as supreme. The cult of Amun likewise reinforced the centralization of power at Thebes and encouraged an articulation of the cosmos in terms of an immutable order, in which the regularity of the solar cycle and the organization of the universe reflected divine will. The hegemony of the Theban cult exerted a powerful impact on both the political structure and the religious ideology of ancient Egypt, demonstrating the close relationship between divinity and monarchy. Amun's preeminence was later compromised, however, by the destruction of Thebes at the hands of the Assyrians, which brought about a reconfiguration of the theological system and a relocation of the principal axes of power within the religious imagination, with Osiris remaining a central deity in other spheres of cult. The evolution of Amun's cult, from his conception as creator and protector to his fusion with the solar deity, constitutes a paradigmatic example of the adaptability and complexity of Egyptian religious thought, in which the synthesis of beliefs reaffirmed the intrinsic connection among the legitimation of state power,

the order of the cosmos, and the cultural identity of the Egyptian people.

2.1.2 Embalming and Preservation of the Body

The ancient Egyptians conceived death as a transition in which a vital essence of the individual remained active. This essence was known as the “double,” an immaterial entity manifested as a shadow or spectral figure reminiscent of the physical body but endowed with ethereal and intangible qualities. In many texts and iconographic representations, the “double” was identified with the soul and was at times symbolized by the image of a human-headed hawk, a figure evoking the soul's capacity to separate from the body and ascend at the moment of death. Within this worldview, the individual's survival depended on preserving the bond between the soul and its corresponding physical body, which was considered indispensable to sustaining existence in the afterlife. Complete dissociation from the mortal form was associated with the loss of identity and the impossibility of attaining immortality. For this reason, the complex ritual of embalming developed with the purpose of preventing decomposition of the corpse and thereby ensuring that the “double” possessed an unaltered physical support. The embalming process, imbued with religious and cosmological meanings, involved the application of techniques and substances that permitted the preservation of tissues and the incorporation of symbolic elements. Ritual intervention was understood as an essential service ensuring the continuity of cosmic order, reflected in the principle that equilibrium between the material and immaterial had to be maintained after death. Preservation of the body

responded not only to practical requirements of conservation but also to the objective of allowing the soul to reunite with its physical dwelling in the beyond, a central element in attaining eternal life. Meticulous in execution, this practice took form both in technical procedures and in complex rituals involving specialized priests. These rites, performed with extensive knowledge of the properties of materials and their associated symbolism, constituted an institutionalized response to the uncertainty generated by the dissolution of existence. Embalming consequently became a fundamental component of Egyptian religion, configured not merely as a funerary practice but as a manifestation of the human desire to transcend death and preserve identity through time, in a universe where the permanence of being depended upon continuity of physical form.

Herodotus describes the procedure as follows:

“In every city there are professional embalmers. When the relatives of the deceased bring the body to the embalmer, he shows them painted wooden models and asks which they desire. There are three classes at different prices, the most expensive model representing the god Osiris. Once the relatives have agreed upon the price, they leave, for the embalmer performs his work in his own establishment.

“In first-class embalming, he begins by removing the brain, drawing it out through the nostrils with a curved iron instrument and dissolving it with a liquid introduced into the head. He then opens the side, removes the intestines through the incision, washes them with palm wine, and sprinkles them with crushed aromatics. Next he fills the abdomen with myrrh, cinnamon, and other perfumes and sews it closed again. Thus prepared, the corpse is placed in natron for seventy days. After this period it is washed and wrapped in linen bandages coated with gum. It is then returned to the relatives, who have a wooden case made in the shape of the human body; the dead person is placed inside and the case is set upright in a chamber against the wall.

“For second-class embalming, cedar resin is injected with a syringe into the abdomen of the corpse, without making an incision or removing the intestines, and the opening is plugged to prevent the liquid from escaping. The body then remains for seventy days in natron, and when it is removed the liquid is released from the abdomen, carrying with it the intestines that it has dissolved. The natron has consumed the flesh, leaving nothing of the body but skin and bones. The embalmer returns the corpse without wrapping it.

“Third-class embalming is used for the poor. Only a liquid is injected into the body, and the corpse is placed in natron.”¹⁵

Corpses subjected to the rigorous embalming process were transformed into mummies, that is, preserved bodies that endured through time as testimonies to the transcendence of existence. These mummies were placed in elaborate wooden cases ornamented and painted with imagery reproducing the characteristic iconography of statues of the god Osiris. Conceived as symbolic replicas of the divine body, such cases served not only as physical receptacles for the deceased but also embodied the aspiration to perpetuate cosmic order and the continuity of the afterlife, sustaining the connection between earthly identity and eternal existence.

2.1.3 Funerary Cult and Continuity of the Deceased

The ancient Egyptians held that the deceased did not cease to exist after death but continued in a kind of parallel life in which the same needs and attachments that characterized the living remained active. This idea was expressed in the belief that the deceased's “double” - an immaterial and almost ethereal entity, at times represented as a shadow or specter resembling the body - persisted in the afterlife and, like the individual in life, required food, clothing, and shelter. Preparation for death

¹⁵ *“Heródoto”* in: SEIGNONOS, C.H. op. cit., p. 149.

therefore transcended the mere act of burial and assumed the character of a vital service ensuring the continuity of the deceased's identity. Whereas the less affluent sectors of society had to content themselves with burying the dead directly in the sand, wealthier strata invested resources in providing the deceased with an "eternal dwelling." This dwelling had a highly particular architectural and symbolic configuration, conceived at the dawn of civilization as a house or, at best, as a chamber intended to accommodate the vital essence of the dead. During the earliest dynasties the mastaba was employed, a funerary structure reproducing the terrestrial dwelling in miniature; by Dynasty IV, however, this shelter came to be regarded as insufficient, giving way to the construction of pyramids, monuments that fulfilled not only a sepulchral function but also served to consolidate the transcendent status of the deceased. Egypt's funerary landscape extended through areas near Memphis, where numerous pyramids were grouped together, some aligned like houses along a street and others dispersed across the territory. The most imposing housed kings, while smaller examples served for the burial of nobles and prominent individuals, since pyramid construction required substantial resources. Burial commonly took the form of an underground structure built beneath the sand or integrated into the rock, reached through a small chapel opening to the exterior. This chapel functioned as the only zone accessible to the living, whereas the interior, comprising a narrow, dark corridor and a final chamber in which statues of the deceased were kept - replicas intended to substitute for the mummy in the event of its destruction - was reserved exclusively for the repose of the dead. At times there was

also a shaft, elegantly built of dressed stone or cut into the rock, which could reach depths of between twelve and thirty meters. At its base, a small passage led to the deceased's true dwelling, a rock-cut crypt in which the sarcophagus - which might be made of reddish, black, or white stone - rested in perpetual silence. Workers responsible for descending the shaft placed beside the sarcophagus large pottery vessels filled with basic provisions such as water, dates, wheat, or even quarters of beef, thereby establishing a supply intended to meet the deceased's needs in the afterlife. Once these offerings had been deposited, the entrance to the passage was carefully sealed, preventing the living from entering the crypt and symbolizing the inviolability of the deceased's dwelling. In addition to material provisions, the cult of the dead included the periodic renewal of offerings in the external chapel, where fruit, fat, and incense were deposited and burned so that their fragrance might reach the funerary statues, creating a symbolic interaction between the world of the living and the realm of the dead. Over time the tradition evolved, and it came to be thought unnecessary to offer material objects themselves; instead, it was sufficient to present the deceased with an image or representation of what one wished to convey. This practice was embodied on chapel walls in paintings reproducing scenes of daily life: farmers working the land, laborers making clothing and footwear, carpenters and builders at work, or the deceased participating in activities evoking terrestrial life, such as sitting at table with his wife, hunting, or fishing in pools set within papyrus landscapes. On certain days family members sometimes gathered in the chapel to offer a funerary meal, an act performed in the conviction that the ancestor came

spiritually to share the banquet. The cult of the dead reached its fullest expression in the treatment of kings, who received a cult equivalent to that accorded the gods. Deceased pharaohs had priests specifically charged with guarding their chapels and celebrating funerary festivals, thereby reaffirming the conception of kingship as a form of divine continuity.

2.1.4 Judgment of the Dead and Funerary Ethics

A time came when the Egyptians ceased to believe that the soul remained in the tomb where the body had been placed. They came to think that all souls gathered beneath the earth, in the place where the sun sets. In that subterranean country, the kingdom of the West, the god Osiris ruled and admitted souls only after judging them. Upon leaving the body, the soul entered dark galleries and was then carried in a boat along an underground river. Along the way it encountered demons of terrifying appearance that attempted to tear it apart, but the gods Anubis - the god of the dead, represented with a jackal's head and a human body, who in the cult of the dead oversees the embalming of corpses and is always the guardian of cemeteries, as well as one of the most important gods of the afterlife - and Thoth - god of wisdom and the division of time, patron of scribes, who in the realm of the dead acted as interpreter and was represented with the head of an ibis - guided and defended it. These two deities participated in the judgment of the dead.

At last the deceased arrived before the tribunal. Osiris presided, surrounded by forty-two assessors charged with determining whether the dead person had committed any of

the forty-two principal sins.¹⁶ The person's deeds were placed upon the scales of justice, and according to whether they weighed heavily or lightly the soul was condemned or acquitted. A condemned soul fell into a dreadful place, where it was scourged, buffeted by storms, tormented by scorpions and serpents, and ultimately annihilated. The soul that had justified itself still underwent further trials and assumed new forms - a golden hawk, a phoenix, a lotus, and so forth. It had to escape evil spirits that took the form of crocodiles or serpents. At last it was admitted into the company of the gods and thereafter enjoyed an eternally happy existence in the shade of sycamores, in an atmosphere refreshed by northern breezes, eating at Osiris's table dishes prepared by a goddess and breathing divine perfumes. The Egyptians wished the soul, at the moment it came to judgment, to be able to plead its case before Osiris. They therefore placed beside the mummy, within the coffin, a small book, the Book of the Dead, indicating everything the soul had to say to Osiris and do in order to keep the demons at bay.

It was to address Osiris in the following terms:

“Homage to you, Lord of truth and justice! I have come to you, O my lord, to behold your perfections. I know your name and the names of the forty-two gods who are with you.”¹⁷

It was then required to justify itself:

“I have committed no fraud against men. I have not tormented the widow. I have not lied before the tribunal. I have not been idle... I have not done what is abominable to the gods. I have not taken provisions or wrappings from the dead. I have not altered measures

¹⁶ The forty-two counselors also represented all the cities of Egypt. Class notes.

¹⁷ Summarized passages, taken from the *Libro de los muertos*, chapter CXXV, Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1979, Havana.

of grain. I have not usurped land. I have not sold with false weights or falsified the balance. I have not hunted sacred herds in their pastures, nor caught divine birds in nets, nor fished for sacred fish. I have not cut off a canal. I have not rejected the god in his procession. I am pure, I am pure, I am pure!"¹⁸

The soul was required to repeat the same statements forty-two times before the other gods and then enumerate its good deeds:

"He has reconciled himself with God through his love; he has given bread to the hungry, water to the thirsty, clothing to the naked, and a boat to the traveler detained on his journey. He has offered sacrifices to the gods and funerary meals to the dead. Deliver him; do not speak against him before the lord of the dead, for his mouth is pure and his hands are pure."¹⁹

Almost every tomb from Dynasty IX onward possesses a copy of this book. Passages from it were often reproduced on walls, on statues, and even on coffins.

2.2 Material Culture and Symbolic Production

2.2.1 Society, Labor, and Material Life

Most of the population participated in an agrarian economy, but the structure of landholding was more diverse than the older model in which all land was assumed to be state or communal property. There were royal estates, funerary foundations, properties connected with cult institutions, household units, and forms of private tenure or transfer documented from the Old Kingdom. Peasants and laborers

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

were subject to varying fiscal and labor obligations, and the surviving evidence derives primarily from institutional and funerary contexts, requiring caution against generalizations about the life of the population as a whole.

Every year, peasants were required to bring part of the harvest to the king's granaries. The scribe describes the peasant's lot as follows:

“Have you not imagined the existence of the villager who cultivates the land? The collector is on the quay occupied with collecting the rent from the harvest; beside him are agents armed with sticks, black men carrying palm rods. They all shout: ‘Give us grain!’ If the villager has none, they stretch him full length upon the ground, bind him, drag him to the canal, and plunge him in headfirst.”²⁰

The organization of labor in the Old Kingdom combined households, villages, estates, cult institutions, and state mobilization. The Crown could recruit contingents for construction, transport, quarrying, expeditions, and other tasks through service obligations, but this did not amount to absolute and permanent control over the entire labor force. Large monumental projects demonstrate a high degree of logistical capacity: hierarchically organized teams, supervisors, provisioning, accounting, and worker rotations. Evidence from Giza and administrative archives supports models of organized labor characterized by varying degrees of dependency, rather than the image of masses of slaves constructing the pyramids. *Corvée* labor, institutional obligations, specialized work, and other forms of dependency must be distinguished analytically.²¹

²⁰ Source in: SEIGNOBOS, C.H., op. cit., p. 65.

²¹Brian Muhs, *The Ancient Egyptian Economy: 3000-30 BCE* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Juan

Wisdom texts and satires of the trades provide important information about representations of labor, but they are not neutral descriptions of social structure. The so-called *Satire of the Trades*, or *Instruction of Dua-Khety*, transmitted in Middle Kingdom and later manuscripts, exalts the scribal profession through a deliberately negative presentation of other occupations. It cannot be used as direct evidence that all peasants lacked plots of their own or that all land belonged to the pharaoh. Its value lies in revealing a literate ideology of the profession and the hierarchical relationships that this tradition sought to emphasize.

2.2.2 Craft Production and Specialization

Egyptian craft production encompassed stone carving, woodworking, pottery, faience, metallurgy, weaving, basketry, shipbuilding, and the manufacture of luxury objects. In the Old Kingdom, linen was the dominant textile; wool existed, whereas cotton should not be projected as a customary material of this period. Copper and its alloys played a central role in tools and objects, while iron was exceptional and did not form the basis of early pharaonic metallurgy. Gold, carnelian, lapis lazuli, turquoise, feldspar, and faience, among other materials, were common in jewelry; rubies, sapphires, and emeralds should not be presented as a typical Old Kingdom repertoire. So-called Egyptian faience is a glazed siliceous material, not porcelain. Papyrus, for its part, was used as a writing support and as a raw material for various objects, and the finds from Wadi el-

Carlos Moreno García, ed., *Ancient Egyptian Administration* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2013).

Jarf demonstrate that administrative documents on papyrus were already circulating in Dynasty IV.

2.2.3 Architecture and the Organization of Space

Egyptian architecture combined mudbrick, wood, stone, and mixed-material construction. Preservation bias favors stone tombs and temples, whereas settlements and domestic mudbrick buildings have survived far more unevenly. Old Kingdom monumental architecture reached an extraordinary scale in the complexes of Saqqara, Dahshur, Giza, and Abusir. Construction with massive blocks does not constitute an absolute technical mystery: quarries, ramps in different contexts, tools, transport systems, work crews, and logistical chains are known, although debate continues regarding specific procedures at individual monuments. Settlement archaeology has also corrected the older image of Egypt as an essentially non-urban civilization and now permits the study of houses, neighborhoods, production installations, and towns alongside funerary monuments.²²

2.2.4 Sculpture and Representation

Egyptian sculpture, like its architecture, reflects the importance of eternity and divinity in Egyptian culture. Its essential

²² Nadine Moeller, *The Archaeology of Urbanism in Ancient Egypt: From the Predynastic Period to the End of the Middle Kingdom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Richard Bussmann, *The Archaeology of Pharaonic Egypt* (2023).

characteristics include hieratic formality, rigidity, frontality, and cubic forms, all elements intended to represent the immutable essence of the figures, principally pharaohs and other important individuals. Sculpture was not conceived as a naturalistic representation of the human figure, but as an eternal image intended to preserve the spirit of the represented person for posterity. The sculptural process in ancient Egypt began with the carving of a rectangular block of stone, upon which the figure was drawn on the front and on the two lateral faces. The resulting statue was intended to be viewed primarily from the front, since its purpose was not to be appreciated from every angle but to convey an idealized image of the represented person, in which rigidity and symmetry were essential. This mode of representation, emphasizing frontality and the hieratic style, sought to capture the essence and spirit of the individual, especially in representations of the pharaohs. A classic example is the seated statue of Pharaoh Khafre, which embodies the elements that defined Egyptian royal sculpture. Throughout Egyptian history, paired figures and sculptural groups were also produced in which the deceased appeared together with members of the family. The principal materials used in Egyptian sculpture were stone, wood, and, to a lesser degree, metal. Sculptural surfaces were painted, and the eyes were often inlaid with pieces of another material, such as rock crystal, to lend greater realism. An interesting feature of Egyptian sculpture is the production of works representing laborers in their various occupations or women performing domestic tasks, thereby depicting aspects of Egyptian daily life. These works, like statues of pharaohs and prominent individuals, were also intended for tombs. At the end of Dynasty IV, a new sculptural posture was introduced: the scribe seated on the ground with crossed legs, which became a symbol of intellect and wisdom and presented a more

asymmetrical yet equally static figure. Another important innovation was the bust portrait, which offered a more realistic representation of the figure. Relief sculpture, for its part, fulfilled two essential purposes: glorifying the pharaoh in temples and preparing the spirit of the deceased for the journey into eternity in tombs. Reliefs are fundamental to understanding Egyptian daily life. They depict a range of activities, including hunting, herding, boatbuilding, and food preparation. These reliefs were not intended to portray specific moments, but rather to display occupations and activities in a timeless manner, with an emphasis on eternity. Middle Kingdom sculpture marked a transition toward greater realism. Although the earliest works of this period imitated those of the Old Kingdom, as Dynasty XII progressed sculpture began to show greater interest in reality rather than idealizing figures to the point of transforming them into gods. Portraits of pharaohs such as Amenemhat III exhibit a realism not previously encountered, with more detailed bone structure and a more human representation of the royal figure, moving away from the rigid style of earlier periods. In the New Kingdom, sculpture acquired new dimensions. The austere realism of the Middle Kingdom and the stylization of the Old Kingdom were replaced by a more refined and elegant style in which delicacy was combined with a profound sense of grace. Portraits of pharaohs and courtiers were works imbued with tenderness and sensitivity, as can be seen in depictions of Nefertiti, whose painted limestone head is regarded as one of the masterpieces of Egyptian sculpture. During the reign of Amenhotep IV, better known as Akhenaten, sculpture underwent a revolution influenced by the pharaoh's new religion centered on the solar god Aten. At first, art displayed an almost caricatural realism, but over time it softened, developing an aesthetic that moved away from traditional hieratic formality toward a more human

and delicate mode of representation. In conclusion, Egyptian sculpture is one of the most representative artistic manifestations of Egyptian civilization. From its rigid and frontal forms to moments of greater realism and sensitivity in the New Kingdom, Egyptian sculpture consistently reflected the intention to create eternal images designed to preserve the souls of the dead and glorify the pharaohs as divine beings.

2.2.5 Decorative Arts

The decorative arts of ancient Egypt played a fundamental role in both the daily and spiritual life of the Egyptians, reflecting the importance of beauty, functionality, and symbolism. In ceramics, a significant evolution can be observed from the Predynastic Period, when rich and detailed decoration predominated, to a more restrained style under later dynasties. Pottery of the Old and Middle Kingdoms became more functional, with polished and undecorated vessels, although it continued to display a wide variety of forms and types. These objects were intended for use in everyday life and were distinguished more by utility than by ornamentation. Jewelry, however, remained one of the most sophisticated forms of decorative art. Made from precious materials such as gold and semiprecious stones, Egyptian jewelry incorporated animal and vegetal designs with symbolism associated with nature and protection. The skill of Egyptian goldsmiths is evident in the variety and quality of their designs, ranging from necklaces, bracelets, and rings to pectorals and diadems. Such objects served not only as adornment but also possessed ritual and spiritual value and were used in the funerary equipment of pharaohs and nobles. Egyptian furniture, although poorly

preserved, is known through depictions in tombs and wall reliefs. These representations reveal the design of chairs, beds, stools, armchairs, and tables conceived with a pronounced concern for comfort and aesthetics. Although few physical examples of furniture from the period survive, reliefs provide a clear idea of how such objects appeared in daily life. One of the Middle Kingdom's major contributions to the decorative arts was the introduction of granulation in jewelry, a technique involving the application of small metal granules to surfaces of gold or silver to create complex and detailed patterns. Glazed material also became highly important in the manufacture of amulets and small figures used in religious and funerary rituals. During the New Kingdom, decorative objects attained an unprecedented level of sophistication and refinement. Everyday articles belonging to the royal court and Egyptian nobility were made from precious materials such as alabaster, ebony, gold, ivory, and semiprecious stones and exhibited impressive technical skill. The funerary assemblage discovered in the tomb of Tutankhamun is one of the most notable examples from this period. In producing these objects, Egyptian craftsmen demonstrated not only mastery of metals and stones but also the capacity to create decorative pieces that were both functional and deeply symbolic. One of the most significant developments in the decorative arts of the New Kingdom was the flourishing of glass production. Egyptians of this period pioneered glass manufacture, developing techniques that allowed them to produce objects of great beauty and vivid color. Glass was used not only for amulets and figures but also for small vessels, jars, and other decorative objects characterized by vibrant

coloration and complex designs. In summary, the decorative arts of ancient Egypt reflect a distinctive combination of functionality, beauty, and symbolism. From utilitarian pottery to jewelry and luxury furniture, and from ritual to funerary objects, Egyptian creations fulfilled practical functions while also carrying profound religious and cultural meaning. Their ornamental richness and the use of vivid colors in painting and decoration demonstrate the Egyptians' appreciation of beauty and their capacity to create works of art that endured across the centuries.

2.2.6 Painting and the Visual Program

Egyptian painting played a crucial role in the culture and spiritual life of ancient Egypt, especially in tombs and on sarcophagi. Across successive dynasties, pictorial art remained one of the most significant forms of artistic expression, serving both religious purposes and the perpetuation of the memory of the dead. The tombs of nobles were often decorated not only with sculpted reliefs but also with intricate paintings depicting scenes of daily life, rituals, and religious symbols. One of the most notable characteristics of Egyptian painting is its emphasis on precision and detail. Local artists, although working within conventions established by royal workshops, employed great exactitude in their drawings, which were often linear and sought to capture the essence of the represented subjects rather than their realistic appearance. The tombs of Aswan and others in the Theban region provide outstanding examples of this style, displaying the work of local artisans who adhered to the artistic conventions of the period.

Painting was also an important means of decorating rectangular wooden sarcophagi, which in many cases were covered with vivid scenes representing the life of the deceased, the passage into the afterlife, and the everyday activities that would be required for eternal existence. Through these sarcophagi, artists created highly stylized representations of life along the Nile, emphasizing the wealth and tribute reaching Egypt, as well as the work of artisans and life in royal workshops. A common theme in Theban tombs, already known in the Old Kingdom, was the depiction of the deceased hunting or fishing among the papyri of the Nile. Such scenes were regarded as essential to ensuring that the deceased was prepared for the afterlife, displaying both status and a connection with nature and the Nile's life cycle. Egyptian painting was characterized by a style that, although it persisted with considerable continuity for more than three thousand years, reflected stability and order in Egyptian life. This artistic approach rested on the need to preserve eternally the essence of the person or object represented, which explains the hieratic and static character of the images. Rather than attempting to capture reality as it appeared, Egyptian painting sought to transmit an idealized image capable of enduring beyond time and change, in accordance with the principles of cosmic and natural order governing the life of the country. Egyptian art in general was intrinsically linked to the state, religion, and the pharaoh, who was regarded as the intermediary between gods and humans. Consequently, most artistic manifestations were intended to glorify divinity and pharaonic power. Painting in this context had not merely an aesthetic function but was charged with profound religious and cultural symbolism aimed at guaranteeing the continuity of divine and human order through an idealized and eternal image.

The conception of art as something “useful” and “effective,” rather than merely beautiful, together with the limited emphasis placed on change or novelty, helps explain the relative stability of Egyptian style throughout its history. Art was intended to preserve cosmic order rather than to reflect the variability of human nature or everyday reality. In this sense, Egyptian art is characterized by rigidity and hieratic formality which, although they may appear static to the modern viewer, were designed to fulfill a profound and transcendent purpose: the preservation of eternity.

2.3 Literature and Cultural Transmission

Ancient Egyptian literature, extending from the Old Kingdom to the Greco-Roman period, is remarkable for its richness and diversity. Over the centuries, the Egyptians developed a literary tradition encompassing diverse genres and a wide range of subjects, reflecting their worldview, religious beliefs, daily life, morality, and ideals of kingship and justice. A fundamental characteristic of Egyptian literature is its use of literary devices such as **simile**, **metaphor**, **alliteration**, and **equivocation**, which lend depth and nuance to the works. These devices were employed not only in literary compositions but also in funerary inscriptions, religious hymns, and wisdom texts.

2.3.1 Forms and Functions of Literature

The literature of ancient Egypt, recognized for its diversity and complexity, can be divided broadly into two major fields: religious and secular literature. Both reflect a worldview deeply connected to religion, morality, and the social structure of pharaonic Egypt. The range of genres and subjects extends from religious poetry to

scientific treatises, historical chronicles, legal texts, and instructional narratives. The authors of these works, generally drawn from the upper strata of officials and scribes, wrote for an equally educated audience that not only enjoyed literature as entertainment but also employed it as an instrument of education and political propaganda. Egyptian religious literature constitutes one of the cornerstones of ancient Egyptian literary production. This category includes hymns dedicated to various deities, mythological writings, rituals, and an extensive corpus of funerary texts. The Pyramid Texts, the earliest surviving Egyptian literary testimony, constitute a paradigmatic example of funerary literature. Inscribed on the walls of royal pyramids, they served not only as guidance for the deceased on the journey into the afterlife but also as a means of ensuring divine intervention in the ruler's protection. These texts proclaimed hymns to the gods and detailed daily offering rituals fundamental to religious life and belief in immortality. In the Middle Kingdom, religious literature continued to develop through numerous hymns to the king and the deities as well as important ritual texts. Alongside this religious production, the conception of funerary inscriptions changed with the appearance of the Coffin Texts. These compositions, incorporating spells and incantations intended to ensure the protection of the deceased, were painted on coffins and became an expression of the intersection of magic and religion within Egyptian funerary tradition. The field of secular literature encompasses a wide range of forms, from mythological stories to scientific treatises. Among the most representative works are the Instructions attributed to viziers and sages, which functioned as moral and

ethical guides for government officials. A prominent example is the Instruction of the Vizier Ptahhotep, which through a series of maxims offers lessons on justice, wisdom, and proper conduct in administration. This type of literature was directed toward young scribes and officials, who were taught through repeated copying and recitation of such compositions; these works often also served political propagandistic purposes by reinforcing loyalty to the ruler and dynasty. Narrative likewise occupied an important place in Egyptian literature. During the Middle Kingdom, works such as the Tale of Sinuhe emerged, recounting the story of an official who, following the death of Pharaoh Amenemhat I, flees to Syria and becomes a wealthy and important man. The work is not merely an adventure narrative but also a reflection on identity, exile, and human destiny. Alongside it stand other popular tales, such as the Tale of the Eloquent Peasant, which emphasizes the rhetorical skill of a man who secures redress through eloquence after his donkeys are taken from him, thereby revealing the importance accorded to speech in Egyptian society. The scientific literature of ancient Egypt is equally significant, particularly in the fields of medicine, mathematics, and astronomy. Surviving papyri such as the Ebers Papyrus on medicine and the Rhind Mathematical Papyrus testify to a civilization possessing highly developed practical knowledge in these areas. The Egyptians developed applied mathematics for the construction of pyramids and temples, as well as medical practices based on observation and experience. Although these texts do not possess the systematic form of modern scientific treatises, they demonstrate a remarkable capacity for solving practical problems and a high level of

knowledge across several disciplines. With regard to historical texts, it is important to note that throughout successive dynasties the practice of recording military victories and pharaonic achievements on stelae and temple walls increased. During the New Kingdom, pharaohs such as Ramesses II left detailed accounts of their campaigns, especially the Battle of Kadesh against the Hittites, celebrated not only on monuments but also in poetic narratives exalting the king as a divinely guided leader. Such historical texts became a form of political propaganda used to strengthen the image of the pharaoh as protector of Egypt and guarantor of divine order in the world. Biographical literature likewise played a prominent role, particularly through texts recounting the lives and achievements of notable individuals. These biographies not only commemorated their subjects but also served as instruments for teaching lessons about life, morality, and virtue. The evolution of Egyptian literature reflects, in many respects, changes in the country's political and social structure. From the highly ritualized texts of the Old Kingdom, where death and the afterlife dominated written production, to the more philosophical and narrative works of the Middle and New Kingdoms, a diversification of genres and themes is evident. Despite the extraordinary duration of Egyptian civilization, its literature retained notable continuity in style and purpose: it served religion, the state, and education. Change and innovation were not treated as values in themselves; rather, the maintenance of tradition, stability, and order constituted prevailing ideals. The literature of ancient Egypt was among the oldest and most sophisticated traditions of the ancient world, reflecting the religious beliefs as well as the social, political, and

scientific concerns of one of history's most influential civilizations. Through their texts, the Egyptians sought not only to explain the world around them but also to secure survival in eternal life, perpetuate the glories of the state, and teach future generations the values considered essential to maintaining equilibrium and order in society.

Religion and culture therefore did not constitute a secondary covering placed over an already formed political apparatus. They supplied categories, practices, and repertoires through which authority could be recognized, remembered, and reproduced. To understand how those repertoires became articulated with concrete institutions, it is necessary to return to the process of state formation. The following chapter examines that transition from the Predynastic Period through the first dynasties and shows how symbols, writing, administration, and territory began to operate within a common monarchical structure.

CHAPTER III

State Formation and the Early Dynastic Period

The third chapter reconstructs the processes that preceded the consolidation of the Old Kingdom. The Early Dynastic Period is approached as a phase of institutional experimentation in which territorial unification, writing, sealing, early taxation, royal cemeteries, and networks of officials acquired increasingly stable forms. The analysis avoids treating unification as a single and definitive event; instead, it examines how a series of political and administrative practices gradually transformed regional diversity into a monarchy capable of reproducing authority on a supra-local scale.

3.1 Background and Transition to the Early Dynastic Period

3.1.1 The Predynastic Period and the Background to Unification

The Early Dynastic Period is not synonymous with the Predynastic Period. The term is conventionally applied to the Early Dynastic age, especially Dynasties I and II, whereas the Predynastic Period encompasses earlier processes of the fourth millennium BCE. The transition between the two was not an instantaneous break but a phase marked by the intensification of social hierarchy, competition among regional centers, the expansion of exchange networks, the

development of administrative practices, and the consolidation of kingship.

Sites in Upper and Lower Egypt, and ceramic sequences in particular, were fundamental to the construction of the relative chronology of the Predynastic Period. Current terminology frequently uses Naqada I, II, and III for phases that appear in older historiography as Amratian and Gerzean. Ceramic seriation must be combined with stratigraphy, absolute dating, funerary practices, settlements, and exchange networks. The evidence reveals regional differences and contacts with Nubia and the Levant but does not justify describing a single, linear cultural evolution from south to north.²³

During Naqada III, processes of political concentration intensified and signs of early administration and writing appeared. Unification should not be conceived as a single event precisely dated to around 3200 or 3100 BCE, but as a process unfolding over several generations in which centers of Upper Egypt expanded their sphere of action and incorporated northern territories. Labels, seals, ceremonial palettes, royal tombs, and other materials document this transformation.

Narmer occupies a central position in the transition to Dynasty I, and the Narmer Palette has become one of the principal modern emblems of unification. The image of a king who definitively unified Egypt in a single campaign, however, simplifies a much longer process. The identification of the Menes of later tradition with Narmer or Aha remains debated and should be presented as a

²³ CASTILLOS, Juan José. *"El período Predinástico en Egipto"*, Ediciones MAAT, Montevideo, 2002, pp. 89, 90.

historiographical problem rather than as a secure equivalence.

The historian J. J. Castillos notes that the emergence of the Egyptian state cannot be attributed to a single factor but resulted from a series of diverse and complex processes. As Egyptologists have investigated this period more deeply, control of trade routes has been recognized as one important factor in the formation of the Egyptian state, since such routes were fundamental to prosperity and access to valuable resources. The desire to control them stimulated the ambitions of regional rulers who gradually extended their power and influence, contributing to the unification of Egypt and to the foundations of the hierarchical and centralized structures that would characterize the Egyptian polity.

Exchange networks contributed to the growth of regional centers and to access to copper, stone, timber, prestige goods, and products originating in Nubia, the Eastern Desert, Sinai, and the Levant. Trade may have favored accumulation, alliances, and competition, but state formation cannot be explained by control of commercial routes as a single cause. Current evidence points to an interaction among economy, conflict, ritual, kinship, specialized production, administration, and the construction of royal ideologies.²⁴

Before the unification of Egypt, regional rulers exercised considerable power over their respective territories. Although independent of one another, these local leaders interacted with increasing frequency through both competition and cooperation. Trade routes and struggles over essential resources such as metals, precious stones, and foodstuffs played a fundamental role in the expansion of their influence.

²⁴ CASTILLOS, Juan José. *op. cit.*, p. 87.

Alongside military confrontation, alliances among different regions were recurrent and encouraged the exchange of knowledge, technologies, and cultural practices. The power of regional rulers rested not only on military force but also on their ability to mobilize resources, control trade, and maintain an equilibrium in relations with local elites. This dynamic produced networks of alliances that, although initially disparate, gradually became consolidated under figures of greater authority. Such figures acquired increasing legitimacy, reinforced by religion, ritual, and symbolic practices that contributed to the creation of a collective identity and a sense of unity among the populations of the Nile Valley. Although fragmented and progressive, this process was essential to the emergence of central authority. As regional rulers gained power, their territories slowly began to merge within broader systems of domination. Competition for control of Egypt ultimately gave way to forms of compelled collaboration among the principal leaders, who increasingly recognized that unification around a single central authority would strengthen the country against external threats and facilitate the consolidation of political and economic power.

3.2 Development of the Egyptian State

3.2.1 Dynasties I to III: Unification of the Two Lands

The unification of Upper and Lower Egypt was continually reworked by pharaonic ideology as a foundational act ritually renewed by the king. Modern historiography distinguishes this representation from the historical reconstruction of the process. Menes belongs to a later royal tradition, and his identification with Narmer or Aha is not

secure. Institutions of the earliest dynasties reveal increasing integration but also regional diversity. Terms such as feudal princes or a stable council of ten great men of the South should not be projected onto the third millennium without specific documentary support.

The earliest dynasties developed royal patrimonies and institutions, sealing systems, accounting, expeditions, royal cemeteries, and networks of officials. The concentration of resources was important, but it did not immediately produce an immutable state structure lasting three thousand years. Administration, titulary, relations between center and provinces, forms of tenure, and cults changed repeatedly. Pharaonic continuity resulted from successive reformulations of monarchy and its institutions, not from the freezing of a model created by the earliest kings.²⁵

Sealing systems provide a second field of application. A seal did not reargue the authority of the king, an office, or a responsible official each time it authenticated a container, a door, or a record. It identified provenance, competence, and responsibility through a recognizable form. In this sense, part of authority could shift from the physical presence of the sovereign or official to reproducible marks capable of circulating through storerooms, expeditions, and offices. The compiled rule makes it possible to describe this displacement without converting it into a modern bureaucracy: what becomes stabilized is a procedure of institutional recognition, not necessarily the administrative structure in its entirety.

²⁵ PIRENNE, Jaques. "Historia de la civilización del Antiguo Egipto", p. 96.

3.3 Religion and Legitimacy in the Early Dynastic Period

Early Egyptian kingship was expressed through a complex relationship between the sovereign and the divine. The Horus name linked the king with the falcon deity and constitutes one of the oldest elements of titulary, but it need not be derived from a presumed totemic falcon clan. Nor can legitimacy be explained by claiming that a king of Upper Egypt declared himself detached from all geography in order to be accepted by Lower Egypt. The documentation reveals an ideology integrating the Two Lands, victory over enemies, the maintenance of maat, and the association of the sovereign with various divine powers. The king's divine status was relational and ritual, while his effective authority depended on institutions, officials, and communities.²⁶²⁷

Royal titulary displays an analogous mechanism. Names and epithets were not merely descriptions of the sovereign but formal positions that inserted each king into previously codified relationships with Horus, the Two Lands, and political and cosmic order. Succession changed the individual occupying the throne, but the form made the continuity of the royal function recognizable. In terms of the compiled rule, this mechanism did not eliminate political negotiation or the need for legitimation, but it reduced the necessity of deriving anew, from first principles, what being king was institutionally required to mean.

²⁶Lisa K. Sabbahy, *Kingship, Power, and Legitimacy in Ancient Egypt: From the Old Kingdom to the Middle Kingdom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

²⁷ For “El origen divino del soberano,” see Serrano Delgado, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

Conversely, kings were subject to rigorous obligations: poor harvests, a dissatisfied population, ill health among the people, or a decline in the river's inundation could be attributed to the hostile action of other gods, whom the pharaoh had to propitiate in order to save his land. The person of the king was regarded as the dynamic center of the world; the slightest failure on his part could disturb the whole. He therefore had to adopt the greatest precautions, and his entire life was to be regulated down to the smallest details. Illness and famine could render a king unfit, since the vigor of the sovereign depended upon the health of his people and of Nature. Such was the foundation of the absolutism posited by the King-God, which after a long evolution was strengthened in the coronation ceremony inaugurated by the Memphite kings. This dogma constituted a fundamental incentive in conceiving the unification of the kingdom. The Egyptians did not long concern themselves with questioning it, for, lacking a perceived need to formulate precise categories, they found it easy to move from the human to the divine and to believe that the pharaoh was a God ruling among mortals.

3.4 Early Central Institutions and Administrative Organization

Our knowledge of the administration of Dynasties I and II remains limited, but seals, labels, tombs, and titles document an organization undergoing rapid development. It is not appropriate to describe it as a patriarchal sovereignty administering the country as the private property of a family. The participation of royal relatives was important, but it coexisted with officials who were not necessarily kin,

storage institutions, estates, and offices whose specialization increased over time.²⁸

The activity of craftsmen and the new craft tradition emerging at the beginning of Dynasty I should also be noted. As the Egyptian state, the court, and the hierarchy of officials expanded, the pharaohs began to employ growing numbers of full-time specialists, thereby creating a broader market for specialized products and services, which in turn facilitated a high degree of specialization. The need to coordinate these activities encouraged the development of numerous administrative specialties connected with royal government. Within the general system, craftsmen were²⁵ Seals from the first two dynasties show that numerous official titles had already appeared by this period in forms that would subsequently be retained. subject to the supervision of scribes and bureaucrats responsible for provisioning them and coordinating their activities. Egypt now possessed a king and a capital; a religion was taking shape together with a state administration and the agricultural, industrial, and commercial resources of a great population. In short, a *modus vivendi* announcing a developed society. Yet it took the kings of the first two dynasties more than two centuries to organize this sophisticated administration, which ultimately displaced the power of the feudal nobility. Such administrative organization was essential, since Egypt's wealth rested upon gold mines, booty obtained in campaigns of conquest, the productive capacity of the population, and the fertility of the soil. Officials were responsible for organizing labor efficiently, anticipating the timing and level of the river's inundation, and ensuring that agricultural production benefited the country through the assessment and collection of taxes. The central government

²⁸ Pirenne. *op. cit.*, p. 100.

used part of the food surplus and manufactured products for foreign trade. At the same time that Egypt opened its commerce outward, it had to protect itself from dangerous nomadic groups of the Libyan regions, the Troglodytes, and the Nubians, who, attracted by its wealth, lost no opportunity to enter the Nile Valley. To protect the country from such incursions, the pharaohs of the earliest dynasties surrounded it with fortifications and employed military expeditions to maintain security.

3.5 Foreign Relations of Early Dynastic Egypt

As the Egyptian state consolidated its internal unity during the Early Dynastic period, its foreign policy also underwent a significant shift that marked the beginning of expansion in several directions. Egypt's external relations, in both commercial and military terms, became stronger, allowing the country to participate in networks of exchange and extend its influence into neighboring regions. From the earliest dynastic period, Egypt established significant maritime connections with distant centers such as Byblos, a Phoenician city fundamental to the trade in timber and other products, and with Sumer, facilitating exchanges of goods and knowledge. These connections were not confined to maritime routes but also extended to caravan routes crossing the Delta toward Sinai and Palestine. Such routes were essential to trade and interaction with the peoples of Asia and reflected Egypt's economic as well as cultural expansion. Caravans traveling along these routes connected Egypt with other major civilizations and enabled access to products and resources unavailable locally. To the west, Egypt maintained commercial relations with the populations of the oases and the regions of

Cyrene, in what is now Libya. These peoples supplied Egypt with valuable resources such as livestock, meat, hides, and cheese, which entered the Egyptian market and further diversified the products available in the country. This commerce benefited Egypt while also consolidating an interregional network of relations through which it could exercise influence in surrounding areas. In political and military relations, the available documents indicate that Egypt's relations with its neighbors during this period were both peaceful and conflictual. Although the causes of particular conflicts cannot always be established with certainty, it appears that the Egyptians were not invariably the initial aggressors. In many cases, wars began in response to incursions or threats from nomadic groups or neighboring peoples. The need to protect the frontiers of the Egyptian state and maintain control of trade routes was probably an important factor motivating these confrontations. Egyptians therefore adopted defensive measures to secure their borders and maintain stability within their domains. Although information on the military strength of Egypt under the earliest dynasties is limited, the state clearly possessed substantial coercive capacity to defend its territory and sustain regional predominance. During the reign of Narmer, for example, an important alliance with the Libyans of the Marmarican coast is documented. This coalition was significant in conflict with the southern Egyptians, who despite their efforts were defeated. The defeated southern Egyptians and their Libyan allies were compelled to pay tribute to the pharaoh. Prisoners of war, including Libyans, were brought before the king, as depicted on the well-known ivory plaques associated with Menes, where captives are shown parading before the pharaoh and can be identified by distinctive physical features: a hanging braid, a lock over the forehead, and a pointed beard. Such representations function not only as

evidence concerning the appearance of defeated populations but also as declarations of Egyptian authority and power over enemies. Egypt's external expansion during Dynasties I to III was thus marked by a combination of diplomacy, commerce, and military conflict. Its capacity to establish exchange relations with distant societies and control key trade routes reflected its growing influence in the ancient world. In addition, the ability to organize effective military responses to external incursions consolidated Egypt's position as a regional power. The earliest dynasties laid the foundations of a strong and expanding state with firm control over its territories and a network of international relations favorable to its economic and political development.

From the earliest dynasties, Egypt established significant commercial relations with Libyan and Nubian groups. Among the goods exchanged, the Egyptians obtained livestock, dairy products such as curds and cheese, and a substance known as "essence of Libya," highly valued in the Egyptian context. This "essence" was so prized that it appeared in offering lists for meals dedicated to kings, gods, and divinized dead. Such exchange reflects not only the importance of commerce in the early Egyptian economy but also the manner in which foreign products became integrated into the ritual and religious life of the Egyptian state, symbolizing the wealth and diversity of Egypt's external relations. Nubians, by contrast, are mentioned as defeated enemies on commemorative tablets associated with Menes, and Khasekhem, a pharaoh of Dynasty II, lists them among captives he led away. Although sufficient evidence does not exist to confirm offensive military campaigns in Nubia during the first three dynasties, relations between Egypt and Nubia were clearly complex and included policies of subordination, though not necessarily through direct warfare. In the east, the earliest Egyptian kings of the Early Dynastic

period pursued an expansion aimed not only at defense against nomadic groups but also at gaining access to resource-rich territories such as the copper mines of Sinai. Exploitation of these mines, which became a state undertaking, reflected the monopoly exercised by the pharaohs over natural resources. Inscriptions relating to this activity detail the organization of work at the mines, including the supervision of technicians, soldiers, and sailors responsible for ensuring both the security of operations and the transport of minerals. The Early Dynastic monarchy proved effective in organizing the exploitation of these resources, profoundly transforming the country's material, political, and industrial life. Control of trade routes toward Asia through Sinai and the Isthmus of Suez was likewise fundamental to securing the flow of goods such as pine timber, essential minerals, and agricultural products. To protect these routes and guarantee safe passage for caravans, Early Dynastic pharaohs dispatched short military expeditions against nomadic groups attempting to plunder merchandise. These expeditions sought to restore order and ensure that goods essential to Egyptian development reached the country safely, thereby consolidating monarchical power and its asserted right of conquest, justified primarily through force.

3.6 Writing, Art, and Architecture in the Early Dynastic Period

Political unification and the growth of administration were closely related to the expansion of writing, but writing was not simply an automatic consequence of an already formed state. The earliest inscriptions appear in contexts of labeling, ownership, ritual, accounting, and royal representation. Their development enabled new ways of recording goods, people, origins, and obligations while simultaneously

transforming the institutional capacities of power. This does not imply absolute and uniform royal authority over every community.²⁹

The Early Dynastic dynasties herald, in every domain, the arrival of the classical period that would open with Dynasty IV.

3.7 The Pharaoh and Society in the Early Dynastic Period

The management of water and land was important to the economy, but it does not constitute a hydraulic superstructure capable by itself of explaining the emergence of monarchy. In the Predynastic and Early Dynastic periods, known irrigation works were articulated with settlements and landscapes at local and regional scales. State formation must be analyzed together with competition among centers, warfare, exchange, cults, specialized production, and administration.

3.8 End of the Early Dynastic Period and Transition to the Old Kingdom

Dynasty III conventionally marks the beginning of the Old Kingdom, not a stage preceding it. The reign of Djoser and the Step Pyramid complex at Saqqara represent a transformation in the scale of royal architecture and resource mobilization. Dynasty IV expanded these processes through the great projects of Snefru and Giza, but it should not be presented as the starting point of the Old Kingdom.

The construction of the Step Pyramid at Saqqara was not merely an architectural achievement; it also reflected the consolidation of a political ideology centered on the pharaoh

²⁹ WILSON, John A. op. cit., p. 90.

as intermediary between gods and humans. This pyramid, representing a further stage in the evolution of royal tombs, symbolized the pharaoh's ascent to divinity and his eternal permanence. The importance of pyramid construction can also be seen in the fact that it was designed to ensure the stability of the kingdom even after the monarch's death, reflecting a conception of power that transcended the earthly realm. Despite significant advances in administration and architecture, however, Djoser's reign was also marked by certain challenges. Dynasty III, although successful in many respects, was relatively brief, and its monarchs did not definitively consolidate the political system established under Djoser. Djoser's successor, Sanakht, ruled for a short period without leaving a lasting legacy, while Neferkare, presented here as the last pharaoh of the dynasty, did not establish the political stability that his predecessor had begun to construct. The scarcity of detailed information on these reigns and the rapid changes in dynastic succession suggest a degree of internal instability at the end of Dynasty III. This discontinuity and lack of political continuity led into the transition to Dynasty IV, inaugurated by Snefru, one of the most important pharaohs in Egyptian history. Snefru not only consolidated the political unity that had been threatened at the end of Dynasty III but also initiated a period of splendor during which pyramids became one of the most emblematic features of Egyptian civilization. Under Snefru, Egypt experienced an architectural and political renewal that laid the foundations for the monumental projects that followed, including the pyramids of Khufu, Khafre, and Menkaure. Snefru's reign was not merely a period of prosperity but also one of innovation. It was during his rule that the first attempts were made to construct true smooth-sided pyramids, including the famous Bent Pyramid at Dahshur, which represented an important advance

in building technique. Although this pyramid did not achieve the intended form, it marked a significant step toward the architectural refinement reached in Dynasty IV. Snefru's accession represented not only a dynastic change but also a shift in political and social outlook. Dynasty IV inaugurated a period in which pharaonic power attained new levels of absolutism. In contrast to earlier dynasties, the pharaohs of Dynasty IV consolidated a more centralized structure of government with an effective administration managing both the economy and the security of the kingdom. In his divine role, the pharaoh not only guaranteed political stability but also ensured cosmic order, thereby possessing unquestionable authority. In summary, the transition from Dynasty III to Dynasty IV was a complex process marked by the consolidation of political and administrative structures fundamental to the development of the Old Kingdom. Djoser's reign and the creation of the Step Pyramid symbolize the centralization of power and the consolidation of an increasingly hierarchical state system. The figure of Imhotep and the institutionalization of the office of vizier were essential to administrative stability, while Snefru's accession to Dynasty IV represented not only the end of the Early Dynastic age but the beginning of a period of splendor and stability that would define the Old Kingdom at its height. Although obscure in many details, the transition was a fundamental stage in the formation of absolute pharaonic power and the construction of Egypt's architectural and political legacy.

3.9 Historical Projection: Synthesis of Later Periods

First Intermediate Period - The end of the Old Kingdom and the First Intermediate Period can no longer be satisfactorily interpreted as a sudden collapse followed by generalized anarchy. Memphite authority fragmented and regional centers increased in importance, but archaeology documents continuities, new forms of local power, and significant territorial differences. Political changes coincided with environmental stresses in some regions, although recent paleoclimatic research calls into question the idea of a single global 4.2 ka climatic event capable by itself of explaining the transformation. The relationship among Nile variability, taxation, provincial networks, royal succession, and institutional reconfiguration must be treated as multicausal.³⁰

Middle Kingdom - The Middle Kingdom is usually dated from reunification under Dynasty XI to the end of Dynasty XII or the beginning of Dynasty XIII, depending on the periodization employed. Mentuhotep II reunified the country, and Dynasty XII developed new forms of administration, settlement, and external projection. Dynasty XIII displays important continuities with the Middle Kingdom, but many chronological schemes place it wholly

³⁰Nicholas P. McKay et al., "The 4.2 ka event is not remarkable in the context of Holocene climate variability", *Nature Communications* 15 (2024), DOI 10.1038/s41467-024-50886-w; Erdil et al. (2025).

or partly within the Second Intermediate Period; it should therefore not be stated without qualification that the Middle Kingdom uniformly encompasses Dynasties XI to XIII.

Second Intermediate Period - Hyksos rule was not the result of a sudden invasion by a homogeneous foreign people that destroyed Dynasty XIII. The power of Dynasty XV emerged in the eastern Delta, particularly at Avaris, within a context of long-standing presence and mobility of populations of Levantine origin and of Egyptian political fragmentation. Different centers of power coexisted during the period, including rulers at Thebes and in other regions. The reunification at the beginning of Dynasty XVIII resulted from conflicts among these entities and was not simply the expulsion of a newly arrived external occupier.

New Kingdom - The New Kingdom, Dynasties XVIII to XX, was the period in which Egypt most clearly developed imperial territorial rule in Nubia and a sustained military policy in the Levant. Akhenaten's reform cannot be reduced to a monotheism fully equivalent to modern conceptions or to a foreign policy of isolation; the Amarna Letters demonstrate that international diplomacy remained active. Tutankhamun was not the last king of Dynasty XVIII: he was succeeded by Ay and Horemheb. Ramesses II fought at Kadesh and later concluded a treaty with Hatti. The earliest known Egyptian mention of Israel appears on the Merneptah Stele, around 1208 BCE, not in the texts of the Battle of Kadesh. War chariots, horses, and decorations such as the golden flies belong to New Kingdom contexts and should not be projected onto the army of the Old Kingdom.

Third Intermediate Period - This period was characterized by plural political configurations rather than simply by decline under foreign rulers. Dynasties of Libyan origin and the Kushite Dynasty XXV participated fully in pharaonic political culture and ruled as kings of Egypt. During Dynasty XXI, a monarchy at Tanis coexisted with a powerful priestly institution of Amun at Thebes, with complex relationships between the two. Assyrian expansion altered the balance during the seventh century BCE, and the sack of Thebes in 663 BCE was a decisive episode. Psamtik I subsequently consolidated Dynasty XXVI and a renewed political unity within an intensely connected Mediterranean and North African setting.

Late Period - The Late Period, conventionally Dynasties XXVI to XXXI, combined archaizing restorations, institutional innovation, extensive Mediterranean activity, and successive changes of sovereignty. The conquest by Cambyses II in 525 BCE inaugurated the first Achaemenid domination, but Egypt recovered its independence in 404 BCE under Dynasty XXVIII and retained native dynasties until the second Persian conquest of 343 BCE. Alexander the Great entered Egypt in 332 BCE, ending Achaemenid rule rather than an uninterrupted continuity of native pharaohs since 525. The Ptolemaic period integrated Macedonian forms and pharaonic traditions within a new Mediterranean political order.

The Early Dynastic Period established several conditions that the Old Kingdom would develop on a larger scale: territorial kingship, mechanisms for identifying offices, systems of

recording and sealing, networks of mobilization, and a political memory of unification. Dynasty III did not create these practices from nothing, but it did mark a transformation in their scale and institutional density. The final chapter examines how these elements were combined during Dynasties III to VI to produce one of the most complex state formations of the third millennium BCE.

CHAPTER IV

Institutional Consolidation of the Old Kingdom

This chapter constitutes the analytical core of the study. Drawing on sources of different types and dates, it examines how the Old Kingdom monarchy articulated central and provincial administration, taxation, cults, foundations, expeditions, labor, the circulation of goods, and official careers. The central question is not whether the state was absolute or weak, but rather which mechanisms made authority operational, delegable, and reproducible. Representations of kingship are therefore contrasted with decrees, seals, archives, titles, autobiographies, institutional landscapes, and archaeological evidence.

4.1 Sources and Problems of Reconstruction

In the analysis of Egyptian history during this period, various ancient sources play a crucial role in understanding the political, **religious**, and social dimensions of Egyptian monarchy. Some of the most relevant are outlined below:

1) **The Memphite Theology:** This work is fundamental to understanding the religious and political conception of Ancient Egypt, particularly the geographical duality that characterized the Egyptian kingdom. It explains the relationship between the deities Horus and Seth, who represent Upper and Lower Egypt respectively. Horus, initially sovereign of the lower part of the country, later receives recognition as

king of all Egypt following the intervention of Geb, who grants him supremacy over Upper Egypt, until then under Seth's dominion. This narrative reveals not only territorial division but also the mythical background underlying the unification of the country under a single king, the pharaoh. The theology has not only religious value but also reflects the political conception of Egyptian monarchy as legitimated by divine power.

2) The Ramesseum Dramatic Papyrus: This papyrus, dated to the reign of Sesostris (around 1971 BCE), is an important source for examining relations between the pharaoh and Egyptian deities, especially Horus, Osiris, and Seth. The papyrus dramatizes the interaction and conflict among these gods, thereby reflecting both the religious worldview and the conception of the pharaoh as intermediary between gods and humans. The work emphasizes the influence and power of these deities within the legitimation of the pharaoh and the connection between his reign and divinity, a relationship regarded as essential to Egypt's political stability.

3) The Pyramid Texts: These texts, inscribed in the subterranean sections of royal pyramids, are among the earliest examples of Egyptian religious literature. Although their language appears archaic, they demonstrate a profound body of funerary beliefs and rituals. They refer to Osiris and Seth, two major deities of the Egyptian pantheon, and to their relationship with the death and resurrection of the pharaoh. The texts perform not only a religious but also a political function, affirming the supremacy of the pharaoh as a god after attaining immortality in the afterlife. This renewed valuation of the pharaoh beyond death reinforces the image of the sovereign as a divine being whose rebirth guarantees the well-being of the country.

4) Manetho: Manetho was an Egyptian priest who lived during the Ptolemaic dynasty, and his work *Historia de Egipto* or *Crónica egipcia* is one of the most important sources for the study of Egyptian history. Although the complete text has not survived, substantial fragments of Manetho's work were preserved in the writings of later authors such as Flavius Josephus, Eusebius, and others. Manetho divided Egyptian history into dynasties, and his work represents one of the earliest systematic attempts to organize the chronology of the pharaohs. It is valuable not only for the historical data it contains but also because it offers a perspective shaped by the Hellenistic context: it was written in Greek and reflects the ways in which Egyptian history was presented in that period. The *Historia de Egipto* has been of enormous assistance to modern scholars by providing a chronological framework and an interpretation of key events in Egyptian history.

5) The Coffin Texts: The Coffin Texts are a collection of funerary inscriptions dating to the First and Second Dynasties of the Middle Kingdom. These inscriptions occur principally on the coffins of nobles and members of the court and play a fundamental role in understanding Egyptian religious beliefs. They reflect concepts of life after death and the various transformations an individual was required to undergo in order to attain eternity. These texts also reveal details concerning the role of the pharaoh in society and the importance of divine intercession in ensuring cosmic order. Like the Pyramid Texts, the Coffin Texts emphasize the intrinsic connection between kingship and divinity and the necessity of securing the rebirth of the monarch and his followers.

6) The Papyrus of Ani: The Papyrus of Ani is one of the most complete and best-preserved examples of the Book of the Dead, a corpus of funerary texts that developed throughout

the New Kingdom. This papyrus concerns the judgment of the soul in the afterlife and offers a rich view of beliefs regarding existence after death, final judgment, and the process of attaining immortality. The work **contains** the formulas and spells that a soul was required to recite in order to overcome obstacles in the afterlife, as well as the demanding trials it had to face before Osiris, god of death and resurrection. The Papyrus of Ani is crucial to understanding Egyptian spirituality and relations with the gods, while also illustrating the manner in which religion and politics were intertwined to guarantee protection of the pharaoh and the perpetuity of divine order.

Although varied in format and content, these sources are fundamental to understanding the religion, politics, and culture of Egypt during the dynastic periods. Through them we can observe how pharaonic legitimacy was constructed, how life after death was conceptualized, and how relationships between deities and monarchs were crucial to the development of a distinctive structure of power that would endure for millennia.

4.2 Unification and Dynastic Consolidation

The unification of Egypt under the figure of the pharaoh marks a momentous process in both political and religious terms. Sanmartín and Serrano Delgado emphasize that Egyptian monarchy was not only the foundation of state organization but also the core of its religious system and its understanding of the world. This proposition is particularly visible in the Old Kingdom, one of the most emblematic phases of pharaonic rule. During this period the foundations of kingship were consolidated, and the pharaoh attained an almost divine status, surrounded by profound respect and devotion among his people. Historical sources, particularly the monumental

mausoleums constructed in honor of the pharaohs, underscore the immense admiration commanded by the royal figure in Dynasties III and IV. Pharaohs were viewed as mediators between gods and humans, as living embodiments of divinities upon earth. Indeed, as scholars have noted, at no earlier point was the pharaoh understood so strongly as a “living god” as during the Old Kingdom. Throughout this phase of consolidation, the defining elements of royal status were refined, many of which would remain substantially stable for millennia. Royal nomenclature was completed, implying recognition of the pharaoh not only as political leader but also as a divine figure charged with maintaining cosmic order and guaranteeing the prosperity of the country. The unification of Egypt was therefore not merely a process of territorial consolidation under a single monarch, but a transformation involving profound integration between political and religious power. The pharaoh not only brought all the lands of the Nile under his authority but also assumed responsibility for preserving equilibrium between humans and the gods, a crucial element in the stability of the country. Egyptian monarchy thus transcended the mere exercise of temporal power to become a fundamental pillar of the Egyptian worldview, in which the stability of the kingdom depended directly on the pharaoh and his capacity to maintain divine order. Devotion to the pharaoh, belief in his divine power, and the consolidation of his image as intermediary between the human and divine worlds formed a coherent complex that endured across dynasties. Unification under the pharaoh was consequently much more than a political act; it was a symbolic and religious achievement that contributed to Egyptian stability over many centuries and

established a model of governance central to the identity of the Egyptian state as a whole.³¹

Religious dogmas in ancient Egypt were key instruments in consolidating and reinforcing the historical process through which a Central Authority gained control over a network of political communities established from remote antiquity. These communities, dispersed throughout the territory, were held together not only by political power but also by a ritual system that legitimated the figure of the pharaoh. In this context, the king was responsible for religious ceremonies in provincial temples, a function reflecting the intimate connection between monarchy and the divine dimensions of government. This spiritual connection makes it impossible to conceive the pharaoh's role as a merely political office: the theology supporting his power pointed toward a conception of the king as a divine figure whose function transcended terrestrial administration. The prominence and consistency with which divine theology was proclaimed in Egypt argue against viewing monarchy as a merely secular political system. Centralization involved not only territorial control but also the incorporation and unification of religious beliefs affirming the pharaoh's divine status. The realities of terrestrial power therefore had to be perceived on multiple levels, both politically and in the king's role as intermediary between gods and humans. This conception not only consolidated royal power but also reflected the need for a rationalization of government capable of maintaining social and cosmic order. The period between the Old and Middle Kingdoms was marked by an evolution in the conception of monarchy. In both periods the pharaoh was essential to Egyptian life, but the concept of monarchy acquired greater depth during the Middle Kingdom. Many

³¹ SANMARTIN, Joaquín. SERRANO DELGADO, José M. *"Historia del Antiguo Egipto"*, Madrid, Akal, 1996, p. 266.

Middle Kingdom texts, including works in which a pharaoh advises his son and successor, explicitly express the political character of monarchy. These introspective texts transmit not only advice on preserving power but also reflections on its loss, revealing an awareness of difficulties inherent in royal administration. One major difference between the Old and Middle Kingdoms lies in the centrality attributed to Ma'at. Whereas the Old Kingdom is characterized here by a conception of royal power as nearly absolute and largely unquestioned, the Middle Kingdom introduces deeper reflection on the exercise of power. Ma'at, translatable as "Justice" or "Truth," encompassed a broader conception referring to the ideal state of the universe and society. Personified as the goddess Ma'at, this cosmic force was regarded as eternal, but its maintenance in the human world depended upon the pharaoh. The king therefore had to act as guarantor of cosmic justice, ensuring order and equity within the kingdom. Pharaonic responsibility was not only political but moral: the sovereign was expected to restrain arbitrary uses of power, acting as a natural moral regulator rather than depending upon more formal institutional controls. In this sense, Middle Kingdom monarchy was defined not only by its capacity to govern but also by its obligation to maintain a just equilibrium in both the terrestrial and divine spheres. The concept of Ma'at reached particular prominence during the Middle Kingdom, when it was regarded not merely as a cosmic principle but as a concrete responsibility of the pharaohs. By fulfilling it, the pharaoh ensured the stability of the universe and the perpetuity of social order, reflecting an important shift from the conception of absolute and divine power associated here with the Old Kingdom. The difference lies in the fact that, whereas the Old Kingdom may appear as an age of unquestioned royal absolutism, the Middle Kingdom

introduces critical reflection on the exercise of power, linking divine justice with terrestrial governance and reinforcing the need for a morality capable of limiting abuses of royal authority.

It is highly probable that the transition from Dynasty II to Dynasty III in Egypt occurred peacefully and without major social or political convulsions, following a recurrent dynamic in the country's history. Such transitions primarily affected the royal family, a pattern that would recur over the centuries. The absence of a legitimate heir from the principal line, as may have occurred with the dynasty of Khasekhemwy, could have permitted the accession of a member of a collateral branch of the royal family, such as the son of a lower-ranking wife or secondary consort. This kind of dynastic change was not unusual in Egypt and has often been interpreted, by Egyptians and by historians such as Manetho, as a natural process within dynastic politics. From the Egyptian perspective, although monarchy was regarded as divine, the accession of a new pharaoh frequently depended on circumstances within the royal family, including the absence of a direct and legitimate successor. The accession of a member of a collateral branch was therefore not necessarily understood as a coup d'état but rather as continuity within a dynastic system, even when it entailed the establishment of a new dynastic line. This phenomenon is also reflected in the work of Manetho, who organized Egyptian history into dynasties, a classification that enables the identification of successive phases of political change. The dynastic division as conventionally understood today is not a strictly political description but a means of organizing historical knowledge and identifying different phases of the kingdom, many of which were defined by precisely such familial changes within the monarchy. The passage from Dynasty II to Dynasty III can thus be interpreted

not as the result of a political or social crisis but as an internal transition within the royal family consistent with the norms and expectations of the Egyptian political context.

The first ruler of Egypt's Dynasty III was Sanakht, a king whose reign remains historically obscure because few records concerning him survive. The lack of documentation has encouraged speculation about his role, and his figure was probably overshadowed by the reign of his successor, Djoser, who became a landmark in the history of Ancient Egypt. Djoser stands out not only for his achievements but also for the profound impact of his reign on the development of the Egyptian state, leading both later Egyptians and modern interpretations to regard him as a major founder figure of the Old Kingdom. Djoser's reign represented a turning point in the history of dynastic Egypt. The importance of his rule is reflected in the prominence later Egyptians accorded him as a key figure in the consolidation of centralized monarchy and in the development of monumental structures symbolizing pharaonic power. This is evident in texts and traditions referring to him across the centuries. The Turin Papyrus, one of the most important documents for pharaonic chronology, gives particular prominence to his name, highlighted in red ink, a feature interpreted as marking a genealogical change and recognizing the importance of a monarch associated with the beginning of a new era. Djoser's image as a foundational ruler of the Old Kingdom rests not only on political and administrative developments but also on the architectural vision represented by the famous Step Pyramid at Saqqara, the first of its kind and a major advance in Egyptian engineering. Designed by his vizier Imhotep, the pyramid constituted a crucial step toward the monumental architecture that would characterize subsequent royal construction and helped consolidate the pharaoh's position as a transcendent and divine

figure in Egyptian society. Thus, although Sanakht's reign remains enveloped in uncertainty and limited evidence, Djoser emerges as a transformative monarch whose reforms helped lay foundations for the splendor of the Old Kingdom and whose image endured in Egyptian cultural memory for centuries.³²

The list of pharaohs of this dynasty provided by Manetho is as follows:

“(Dynasty III)³¹

Fr. 11. (from Syncellus). From Africanus.

Dynasty III comprised nine kings of Memphis.

1. Necherophes³², who reigned for 28 years. During his reign, the Libyans rebelled against Egypt, and when the moon increased extraordinarily in size, they surrendered in terror.

2. Tosorthros³³ reigned for 29 years. During his reign lived Imuthes³⁴, who because of his medical skill enjoyed among the Egyptians a reputation equivalent to that of Asclepius and who invented the art of building with dressed stone. He also devoted himself to literature.

3. Tyreis reigned for 7 years.

4. Mesocris reigned for 17 years.

5. Soyphis reigned for 16 years.

6. Tosertasis³⁵ reigned for 19 years.

7. Aches reigned for 42 years.

8. Sephuris reigned for 30 years.

³² SANMARTÍN, Joaquín. SERRANO, José Miguel. op. cit., p. 258. ³¹ Datable from 2780 BCE to 2720 BCE. ³²

Possibly a name of Khasekhemwy.

³³ Djoser I “The Holy One”.

³⁴ Imhotep of Memphis, Djoser’s physician and architect, who was later elevated to divine status.

³⁵ Possibly Djoser II.

9. Kerpheres³⁶ reigned for 26 years.

The total was 214 years.

The total number of years for the first three dynasties,
according to Africanus, was 769.”³⁷

Although the innovation of systematically using dressed stone in monumental construction has traditionally been attributed to Djoser, this development should not be treated as an absolute turning point in the architectural history of Ancient Egypt. While Djoser was unquestionably the first pharaoh to construct a stone pyramid, specifically the famous Step Pyramid at Saqqara, he was not the first ruler to employ stone blocks in building. Such construction had already been used by his predecessor Khasekhemwy, a pharaoh of Dynasty II, who employed squared stone blocks in his structures. Khasekhemwy left no monuments comparable in scale, but evidence for construction techniques during his reign suggests the use of stone for architectural purposes in some projects. Granite blocks are also documented in earlier Dynasty I constructions, such as the funerary temple associated here with Udimu, dating to one of the earliest dynastic reigns. Such temples were of considerable significance and used stone to emphasize the permanence and sacred character of royal tombs. Durable materials such as granite were employed in these temples and other structures to reinforce monumentality and the divine power of the pharaoh. Thus, although Djoser is distinguished by the monumentality of his Step Pyramid and the massive-scale use of dressed stone, he cannot be regarded as the first Egyptian ruler to employ stone in monumental construction, since both Khasekhemwy and rulers of Dynasty I also used stone in their buildings. Djoser nevertheless represents a major advance in architectural organization and planning, because his pyramid became the precursor of the

great pyramids of Dynasty IV, including the famous pyramid of Khufu.³⁸

4.3 Political and Administrative Organization

The economy of the Old Kingdom rested upon agriculture in the valley and Delta, but its operation cannot be reduced to a centralized hydraulic system. Records and archaeology reveal a combination of estates, settlements, funerary foundations, offices, granaries, labor teams, and transport networks. The Crown possessed a remarkable capacity for mobilization, although its reach depended upon officials, institutions, and communities distributed throughout the territory.³³³⁴

Egyptian administration developed mechanisms of accounting, storage, taxation, and large-scale labor mobilization, but describing them as a homogeneous bureaucratic apparatus of exploitation obscures regional and chronological differences. Subsistence crises could be related to low Nile levels, distribution problems, conflict, or institutional failures, but there is no evidence for a simple model in which declining irrigation automatically produced famine and state collapse.

33 Bussmann, *The Archaeology of Pharaonic Egypt* (2023); Moreno García, ed., *Ancient Egyptian Administration* (2013).

³⁴ WILSON John A. op. cit., p. 160. 36

²⁵ Neferkere II.

²⁶ “MANETÓN” in: “Historia de Egipto”. Translation, introduction, and notes by César Vidal. Alianza Editorial, Madrid, Spain, 1993, 1998, 2003, p. 58.

²⁷ VIDAL, Cesar. op. cit. p. 59.

The Old Kingdom and Middle Kingdom constitute distinct phases of pharaonic centralization separated by the First Intermediate Period. Absolute chronologies are being revised through radiocarbon dating and Bayesian modeling, and dates should therefore be handled as conventional ranges rather than immutable boundaries. Continuity between the two periods is important, but so too are transformations in kingship, provincial administration, settlement, and economy.³⁵

Old Kingdom foreign relations were denser than suggested by the older model of protective natural frontiers. Egypt maintained expeditions and contacts with Nubia, Sinai, and the Levant, and evidence from Wadi el-Jarf demonstrates maritime capability and state logistics as early as Dynasty IV. Merer's journals document the transport of limestone toward Akhet-Khufu and an administration organized through work teams and hierarchical supervisors. Foreign policy combined exchange, provisioning expeditions, state presence, and violence, without a simple division between initial isolation and later expansion.³⁶³⁷

The conquest of Nubia involved control of caravan routes and the oases of the Western Desert. Harkhuf, governor of Elephantine and buried at Qubbet el-Hawa, undertook three journeys with this objective. In his autobiography, which decorates the façade of his tomb, he relates that on two occasions he reached the land of Yam “by the route of Elephantine,” but on the third occasion he took a different route:

³⁵ Ibid., p. 127.

³⁶ Tallet, *Les papyrus de la mer Rouge I* (2017); Tallet, *Les papyrus de la mer Rouge II* (2021).

³⁷ SANMARTIN, Joaquín. SERRANO, José Miguel. op. cit., pp. 264-265.

CREATION OF AN EMPIRE

“The Majesty of Merenre, my lord, sent me together with my father, the Sole Companion and Lector Priest Iri, to Yam, to open the route to this land. I did it in seven months; I brought from there every kind of beautiful and rare gift. I was exceedingly praised because of it. His Majesty sent me a second time, alone. I departed by the route of Elephantine and descended through Irtjet, Makher, Terers, and Irtjetj in the space of eight months. I brought products of that country in great quantity, the like of which had never before been brought to this land. I descended as far as the vicinity of the residence of the prince of Setju and Irtjet and explored those foreign lands. I could not discover that any Companion or Chief of Interpreters who had previously gone to Yam had done this.

“Then His Majesty sent me a third time to Yam. I departed from the nome of Thinis by the oasis route. I found that the prince of Yam had gone to the land of Temehu to strike the Temehu, at the western corner of the sky. I went after him into the land of the Temehu and pacified him, so that he worshiped all the gods for my lord. (...) Afterwards, when I had pacified this prince of Yam, south of Irtjet and north of Setju, I encountered the prince of Irtjet, Setju, and Wawat... I descended with three hundred donkeys loaded with incense, ebony, bekenu-oil, sat (?), panther skins, elephant tusks, throwing sticks, and every kind of good gift. When the prince of Irtjet, Setju, and Wawat saw how strong and well-provisioned was the troop of Yam that had come with me to the Residence, together with the soldiers who had been sent with me, then this prince escorted me and gave me cattle and rams...”³⁸

Egypt's opening toward Africa and the upper Nile continued during the long reign of Pepi II, a pharaoh whose prolonged tenure allowed the country to consolidate and expand its external relations. Under his rule, foreign trade became a key activity, particularly through the importation of strategic resources that were scarce or absent in Egypt but essential to the development of Egyptian economy and culture. Foreign commerce was regarded as a state enterprise, implying centralized control over exchanges involving highly valuable products from diverse regions. Important imports included

³⁸ “*Autobiografía de Herkenj*” in: SERRANO DELGADO, José. op. cit., p. 75.

timber from Byblos, in present-day Lebanon, used for beams and structural elements and essential to the construction of temples and other large buildings. Egypt also imported incense and myrrh from Punt, identified here with a region on the Somali coast and renowned for aromatic resources important in religious ritual and daily life. Gold, ebony, and ivory were likewise obtained from Nubia, another highly valued region that supplied Egypt with precious materials for luxury objects, jewelry, and other high-value goods. Such trade occurred not only through peaceful exchange but also through military expeditions that secured commercial routes and access to strategic resources. The technical skill of Egyptian craftsmen attained an exceptional level, particularly in ceramics and hard-stone working, as reflected in the production of high-quality objects and monuments. Occupations initially regarded as specialized skills became hereditary over time, permitting the transmission of knowledge and techniques across generations. Specialized labor thus contributed to the flourishing of Egyptian civilization in architecture, art, and manufacture. The maintenance of the state structure and the pharaoh's mortuary cult, however, represented a considerable fiscal burden for the agricultural working population that formed the foundation of the Egyptian economy. Sustaining a highly organized administrative and military apparatus, financing extensive trading expeditions, and supporting monumental construction, especially temples and royal tombs, required enormous resources. The pharaoh's mortuary cult, including the construction of monumental funerary structures such as pyramids and mastabas together with associated rituals, constituted a major field of state expenditure. This fiscal pressure fell upon agricultural workers, who formed the productive base of society and were often required to surrender substantial portions of their harvest as tribute to the

pharaoh, clergy, or aristocracy. Taken together, this situation reflected a hierarchical and centralized society in which the pharaoh, in his role as living god, stood at the center of both economic and religious activities, and in which the efficiency of the Egyptian bureaucratic and administrative system was crucial to maintaining order and prosperity but could also generate social tensions because of the fiscal burden borne by the least privileged sectors of the population.

During Dynasty V, contacts with neighboring regions continued and diversified. Representations and materials associated with expeditions to the Levant, Nubia, and possibly Punt must be analyzed alongside earlier evidence, since international connectivity did not begin with this dynasty. Relations with the Aegean during the third millennium require particular caution and should not be presented as a consolidated diplomatic network equivalent to that of the New Kingdom.

The sociopolitical organization of the Egyptian people was based from an early stage on a deeply integrated conception of the religious and economic spheres, particularly in relation to the primary source of subsistence: the Nile. The divinization of the river as an essential element of daily life and prosperity reflected an Egyptian worldview in which nature and divinity were intrinsically connected. The Nile not only guaranteed harvests through its annual floods but was also regarded as a divine gift, a manifestation of the will of the gods. This conceptual framework established a hierarchy in which political, administrative, and religious authority was concentrated in a single figure: the pharaoh. The organization of power in Egypt rested on the belief that the pharaoh was mediator between gods and humans and therefore represented the unity of terrestrial and celestial dimensions. His supreme authority encompassed not only government of the state but

also control over religious affairs, the pharaoh being understood as an embodiment of the divine upon earth and his power, accordingly, as unquestionable. The pharaoh was associated with the "Great House" (per-aa), an expression referring to the royal residence and, by extension, to the institution of kingship. His figure occupied the center of cosmic order and was charged with maintaining Ma'at - justice and cosmic order - in society, in both terrestrial and divine spheres. This conception of pharaonic authority allowed the monarch to exercise control over the economy through management of land and Nile resources, over administration through a complex bureaucracy of officials, and over religion through supervision of ritual and relations with the gods. Veneration of the pharaoh as divine played a crucial role in maintaining this system. The pharaoh did not merely govern but was regarded as a living god, and this divinity constituted the basis of his political power. His divine character endowed him with a moral authority that encouraged acceptance and reverence among his people, while the pharaonic figure became a symbol of the country's stability and prosperity. Egyptian society thus structured its worldview and government around the principle of divinized power, a system in which political, administrative, judicial, and religious authority was concentrated in the pharaoh, who represented the union of humans and gods and guaranteed the well-being and order of both state and cosmos.

Participation in the construction of pyramids and temples in ancient Egypt carried profound spiritual and cosmic significance. Building such colossal monuments responded not only to material or political needs but was imbued with religious and ritual character as a form of divine service. According to Egyptian beliefs, the land and people belonged to the gods, and the pharaoh, as the earthly representative of

Horus, acted as intermediary between humanity and divine order. As Wilson argues, the labor and materials invested in each pyramid represented not only an enormous expenditure of resources but also a continual affirmation of service to the king as an absolute priority of the Egyptian state. Pyramids, temples, and funerary monuments were not merely buildings but tangible manifestations of the relationship between the gods and the pharaoh, created to guarantee the continuity of cosmic order and the stability of Egypt. Construction itself formed part of a sacred process intended to preserve the equilibrium of the universe and ensure that the pharaoh could fulfill his divine mission. The pharaoh, divinized as Horus on earth, bore the primary responsibility of maintaining Ma'at, cosmic order and justice. This order encompassed not only Egypt's social and political structure but also natural laws, the movement of celestial bodies, the seasons, and, fundamentally, the cycle of the Nile inundation. The flood, understood as a divine phenomenon bringing fertility to Egypt, depended within this worldview upon proper cosmic equilibrium and upon the pharaoh's action in guaranteeing that the Nile's waters arrived at the proper time and in the appropriate quantity. The pharaoh was regarded as maintainer of universal harmony, and every act of construction or sacrifice performed in his name was understood as a contribution to that larger cosmic order. The thousands of peasants and laborers involved in building these monuments performed not merely physical work but participated in a ritualized activity which, within the Egyptian conception, contributed to the prosperity and well-being of the people and land. It was an act of collective devotion, a shared effort carried out in the name of the pharaoh that helped secure a favorable relationship between Egypt and the gods. These monuments, intended to endure for millennia, represented not only the glory and eternal succession

of the pharaoh but also the continuity of the cosmic order sustained through the proper relationship between humans and gods. In summary, for the Egyptians the construction of pyramids and temples was not merely a material undertaking but a religious and cosmic act intended to secure the perpetuity of divine order in the universe, the prosperity of Egypt, and the transcendence of the pharaoh. Participation in these great projects was understood as collaboration with the gods in guaranteeing universal equilibrium and national well-being. Throughout Egyptian history, the pharaoh exercised supreme authority over all aspects of administration, although daily responsibilities were delegated to the vizier and an expanding bureaucracy of officials. This concentration of power was understood not merely as a question of administrative efficiency but as a manifestation of the king's divinity, since as representative of the gods on earth he was regarded as the uniquely legitimate bearer of authority.

Royal ideology placed the sovereign at the center of political and ritual order, but the state cannot be defined as the king's personal property, nor can the pharaoh be treated as an omnipotent living divinity in a literal sense. Government operated through offices, titles, estates, expeditions, archives, seals, and officials whose distribution and competencies changed over time. The absence of a surviving legislative code does not imply an absence of administrative writing: the Abusir and Wadi el-Jarf papyri,

decrees, seals, and records demonstrate substantial use of written documentation.³⁹⁴⁰

Decrees, seals, dating formulas, and titles reveal the administrative dimension of the same phenomenon. A document could put a decision into effect through a recognizable combination of date, issuer, addressee, order, and authentication. Its institutional effect did not depend on each recipient reconstructing the cosmological or political foundations of sovereignty, but on recognizing the form as valid within a chain of authority. This is particularly visible in exemption decrees, provisioning orders, and royal correspondence. The compiled rule is not equivalent to automatism: a command could be negotiated, disobeyed, or reinterpreted. It describes the form through which the state made authority transportable.

The pharaoh, the axis of all activities of the Egyptian state, was vested with absolute power and clearly elevated above the rest of the population. His position was not only political but also religious, since, as son of Ra, the solar god, and embodiment of Horus, the falcon god, his authority extended to every aspect of Egyptian life. This divinization of the pharaoh endowed his government with sacred character, and he received divine cult through artistic representations showing him with divine attributes such as the falcon and the solar disk framed by horns, symbols of his direct connection with the gods.

39 Juan Carlos Moreno García, ed., *Ancient Egyptian Administration* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2013); Tallet, *Les papyrus de la mer Rouge I* (2017).

⁴⁰ SANMARTIN, Joaquín. SERRANO, José Miguel. op. cit., p. 267.

Egypt's sociopolitical organization was deeply structured by a rigid division of classes that not only reflected social hierarchies but also responded to the need to control and organize the lives of the pharaoh's subjects down to the smallest details. Within this system, the land and resources of Egypt belonged to the pharaoh, who, as representative of the gods upon earth, maintained absolute control over the country. This structure of power operated through a strict administrative hierarchy in which officials, recruited principally from among scribes and the educated, played a crucial role in implementing royal decisions.

Old Kingdom priesthoods formed part of networks of service connected with temples, funerary cults, and offices that could be held by members of the administrative elite. There was no single autonomous and uniform priestly class whose political strength can be projected indiscriminately backward from later periods. The organization of cults and their relationship with the Crown varied according to deity, sanctuary, region, and dynasty.

The relationship between kingship and priesthoods must be studied institutionally. Temples and foundations received goods, personnel, and land, but such transfers could reinforce ties with the Crown just as they could generate local resources. The expansion of cult institutions during Dynasties V and VI does not by itself demonstrate increasing royal dependence upon a clergy organized as a separate power.

Pharaonic ideology attributed to the king an exceptional capacity to maintain maat and to act as the center of the political community, but formulas of omnipresence or omnipotence are theological or rhetorical categories, not literal descriptions of governmental operation. Authority

was enacted through delegation, communication, inspection, ritual, and chains of officials.⁴¹

Administrative expansion into provinces and resource zones may be described as territorial intensification or internal integration, but the term internal colonization requires caution because it may introduce modern categories that do not correspond to the documented relationships. The process included settlements, estates, public works, expeditions, and appointments of officials, with different results according to region.

The lives of peasants, hunters, and fishermen in Old Kingdom Egypt were marked by severe hardship and profound social inequality. Although Egypt depended heavily upon agriculture for its subsistence, peasant conditions were extremely difficult, as reflected in literary texts such as the "Satire of the Trades." This work offers a stark representation of the everyday difficulties faced by the lower social strata.

Soldiers in peacetime, although belonging to a social class above the peasantry, also participated in civil tasks such as excavating irrigation canals or transporting stone for royal tombs. Such activities not only contributed to the functioning of the state but also illustrate the multifaceted role of soldiers within Egyptian society. Since Egypt was fundamentally agrarian, the countryside depended on a large labor force cultivating wheat, barley, and other crops essential to popular subsistence and to the maintenance of the economic system. Peasant life, however, was exhausting and harsh. The "Satire of the Trades" presents a somber image of their physical and psychological condition. The peasant is portrayed as worn down by labor, dressed in rags, and afflicted by illness, conveying a life devoted to arduous work under precarious

⁴¹ WILSON, John A. *op. cit.*, p. 125.

conditions. The image of the peasant as one who lives “among lions” reflects the constant tension and risk of his labor, while fingers and arms that “ooze and stink” convey the severity of his physical condition. Hunters and fishermen, although performing equally important activities, did not escape hardship. The hunter is portrayed as living with frustration caused by lack of means, such as a net for catching birds, and the text reflects his anger and desperation. For fishermen, work on the river was dangerous because of the constant threat of crocodiles, revealing the degree of physical risk associated with fishing in the Nile. The statement that the fisherman is “unable to say, ‘There is a crocodile!’” conveys the fear and uncertainty of living continually close to danger. The concluding expression “It is God's will!” suggests profound resignation before adverse circumstances. However great their efforts, peasants, hunters, and fishermen could not escape a difficult existence marked by poverty, extreme labor, and uncertainty. This satirical poem constitutes not only a social critique of workers' conditions but also a reflection on fate and human suffering, recalling the presence of social division and structural inequality within Egyptian society despite the magnificence of its civilization. In another sense, the work also exposes the hierarchy and exploitation inherent in the system, since peasants and other laborers sustained and provisioned the governing and religious elites while their everyday lives remained in the shadow of elite opulence. Text of the Satire of the Trades:

The peasant spends the whole day lamenting; his voice is
hoarse like the croaking of a crow.

His fingers and arms ooze and stink excessively.

He is exhausted from being in the mud,

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Rags and tatters are his clothing.

He fares as well as one who finds himself among lions:

Sick, he must lie upon the marshy ground.

When he leaves the field and reaches his home after
nightfall,

He is completely exhausted by the journey.

.....
The hunter suffers exceedingly

Whenever he lies in wait for birds. When the flocks pass
above him, he remains there saying, "If only I had a net!"

But God does not give one to him,

And he becomes angry with himself.

.....
Let me also tell you about the fishermen,

Their occupation is the worst of all. They labor in the river,
surrounded by crocodiles;

They are always lamenting.

And yet the fisherman is unable to say, "There is a
crocodile!"

For fear has blinded him.

When he emerges from the swiftly flowing waters,

He exclaims, "It is God's will!"⁴²

Forms of labor dependency in Egypt were diverse and changed over time. Modern categories such as slave, serf, free worker, and wage laborer do not correspond exactly to every Egyptian term. For the Old Kingdom, labor obligations, personnel dependent upon institutions, prisoners of war, and contingents mobilized by the state are

⁴² "Sátira de los Oficios" in: DONADONI, Sergio (DIR). "El Hombre Egipcio", Alianza Editorial, Madrid, Spain, 1991, p. 37.

documented. There is no basis for asserting generally that slaves received wages, could bring claims of mistreatment before courts, or that poverty regularly led to self-enslavement during this period. Nor can pyramid construction be explained through slave labor: archaeological and administrative evidence points instead to organized teams, specialists, dependent personnel, and forms of compulsory service provisioned through state institutions.

For the Old Kingdom, the issue is not to decide whether slavery existed in a single classical sense, but to reconstruct concrete categories of dependency. Military campaigns could produce captives, and inscriptions celebrate their incorporation as persons and resources controlled by the authorities. It cannot be assumed, however, that all such captives were assigned to pyramid construction or that they constituted the basis of the economy. The autobiography of Weni documents campaigns and the capture of enemies at the end of Dynasty VI, but it must be read as the self-representation of a high official rather than as a complete inventory of the labor system.

“This army has returned in peace, after destroying the land
of the sand-dwellers.

This army has returned in peace,

After plundering the land of the sand-dwellers.

This army has returned in peace,

After carrying away their troops as prisoners in great
numbers.”⁴³

⁴³ “*Autobiografía de Uni*” in: Ibid., p. 221.

The numbers of captives and livestock recorded in royal annals such as the Palermo Stone form part of a rhetoric of royal accounting and pose problems of preservation and interpretation. They should not automatically be converted into demographic calculations or treated as proof that thousands of captives were employed specifically on pyramids. Campaigns attributed to Snefru document the monarchy's capacity to represent and record booty, persons, and livestock, while the importation of cedar and other timbers demonstrates the importance of connections with the Levant. The specific labor functions of captives must be determined case by case.⁴⁴⁴⁵

The arrival of fleets loaded with timber, cedar, and coniferous wood, possibly from Syria, is also recorded.”⁴⁶

The pharaoh, however, was not the only holder of forced laborers. Historical evidence indicates that in Lower Egypt such dependents were also assigned to various functions in temples and private residences. These practices suggest an organization of compulsory labor that extended beyond centralized state control into a socioeconomic structure in which local elites, including priests and nobles, also had access to this form of labor.

These statements and others can be examined below in the record of Snefru's reign:

“The Reign of Snefru according to the Palermo Stone
(Dynasty IV)
(...)”

⁴⁴ Soris is translated as Snofru or Sneferu.

⁴⁵ “Manetón” in: “Historia de Egipto”, Translation, introduction, and notes by VIDAL, Cesar. Alianza Editorial, S.A., 1993, 1998, 2003, Madrid, Spain, p. 61.

⁴⁶ SANMARTIN, Joaquín. SERRANO, José Miguel. op. cit., p. 265.

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(Year 4(?)). The year of... Snefru... Second occasion of the Census of Silver and Lapis Lazuli. (Height of the Nile): 3 cubits.

(Year 5(?)). The year of the Appearance of the King of Upper Egypt in the Per-Ur shrine and of the Appearance of the King of Lower Egypt in the Per-Un shrine, and of the making of a copper statue of Horus Neb-Ma'at...

(Height of the Nile): 3 cubits, 5 palms.

...

(Year 13(?)): The year of constructing, with meu-wood, a dua-tawy vessel of 100 cubits and 60 barges of 16 (oars)(?). Striking Nubia and taking prisoners, namely 4,000 men and 300 women, together with 200,000 head of large and small livestock. Construction of the wall of Upper and Lower Egypt called "The Mansions of Snefru." Transporting 40 ships loaded with cedar wood.

(Height of the Nile): 2 cubits, 2 fingers (?).

(Year 14(?)): The year of constructing 35 Mansions, together with enclosures (?) for 122 cattle. Construction of a 100-cubit dua-tawy ship of cedar and two 100-cubit dua-tawy ships of meru-wood. Seventh occasion of the census.

(Height of the Nile): 5 cubits, 1 palm, 1 finger.

(Year 15(?)): The year of erecting "Exalted Is the White Crown of Snefru upon the Southern Gate" and "Exalted Is the Red Crown of Snefru upon the Northern Gate." Manufacture of cedar doors for the royal palace.

Eighth occasion of the census.

(Height of the Nile): 2 cubits, 2 palms, 2 fingers and 3/4.

...

(Year...): The year of the Appearance of the King of Upper Egypt and of the fourth occasion of the "Running of the Apis Bull." Manufacture of a gold statue of Horus Neb-Ma'at to honor the gods. Bringing from Libya 1,100 captives and 13,100 head of large and small livestock. Going to the Building of the fortress...(?). (...)”⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Piedra de Palermo: "El reinado de Snefru", in: SERRANO DELGADO, José. op. cit., page

Dynasty IV is unevenly documented, but excavations and recent discoveries have substantially changed the picture. To the Palermo Stone, monumental complexes, and seal archives can now be added the Wadi el-Jarf papyri, which provide contemporary documentation from the end of Khufu's reign and make it possible to observe work teams, accounting, transport, and relationships among the port, Tura, and Giza.

According to Africanus, Manetho recorded the exact duration of Dynasty IV, including the years ruled by each of its kings:

“(Dynasty IV)⁴⁸

Fr. 14. (from Syncellus). According to Africanus.

Dynasty IV comprised eight kings of Memphis belonging to a different lineage:

Soris reigned for 29 years.

Suphis⁴⁹ reigned for 66 years. He erected the Great Pyramid, which Herodotus says was built by Cheops. Suphis became hostile toward the gods. He also composed the Sacred Book, which I acquired during my visit to Egypt because of its fame.

Suphis⁵⁰ reigned for 66 years.

Mencheres⁵¹ reigned for 63 years.

Ratoises⁵² reigned for 25 years.

Bicheris reigned for 22 years.

Sebercheres⁵³ reigned for 7 years.

Thamphthis reigned for 9 years.

The total was 227 years.

⁴⁸ Datable, according to Manetho, from 2720 BCE to 2560 BCE.

⁴⁹ Translated as Khufu.

⁵⁰ Khafre.

⁵¹ Menkaure.

⁵² 57 According to VIDAL, Cesar, *op. cit.*, Ratoises may be a corruption of Radedef and, consequently, may correspond to Pharaoh Djedefre. p. 61.

⁵³ Shepseskaf.

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The total number of years for the first four dynasties after the Flood was 1,046 according to Africanus.”⁵⁴

According to Syncellus, in the Armenian version of Eusebius, it is possible to expand our knowledge of the duration of Dynasty IV and the number of rulers who governed Egypt during this period. It is important to note, however, that this testimony presents significant discrepancies with the version of Julius Africanus. Such divergences, frequently encountered in ancient sources, arise in large part from differences of interpretation and from the methods through which historical accounts were transmitted. Manetho's work, one of the principal sources for Egyptian history, is itself known through writings of later authors from different periods, introducing a substantial element of variability into the historical reconstruction of Egyptian dynasties.

It is therefore understandable that discrepancies occur from one author to another in dates and, at times, in the number of pharaohs assigned to individual dynasties. These differences reflect not only the limitations and fragmentation of the original sources but also the evolution of Egyptian historiography over time and the variety of interpretations to which it has been subjected. Ancient historians, like their successors, tended to modify and adapt chronicles to fit the political and cultural perspectives of their respective contexts, producing significant variations in accounts of dynastic duration and succession. The following passage permits comparison with the version quoted above:

“Fr. 15 (from Syncellus). According to Eusebius.

⁵⁴ “Manetón”, in: “Historia de Egipto”, op. cit. p. 61.

Dynasty IV comprised seventeen kings of Memphis belonging to a different lineage.

The third of these kings was Suphis⁵⁵, the builder of the Great Pyramid, which

Herodotus says was built by Cheops...

No event of importance has been recorded concerning the remaining kings.

The reign amounted to 448 years.

The total number of years for the first four Dynasties after the Flood was

1,195 according to Eusebius.”⁵⁶.

The forms Suphis, Khufu, and Cheops do not designate different individuals, but rather different linguistic traditions for the same king of Dynasty IV. The issue, however, should not simply be attributed to errors by modern translators. Manetho's original work was lost, and its contents are known through fragments and epitomes transmitted by later authors; the Greek forms of Egyptian names passed through several stages of copying and transmission. Manethonian data are therefore essential to the history of Egyptian chronology but must be compared with contemporary documentation.

The biblical narrative of Joseph belongs to a literary and religious tradition whose composition and context are much later than the Old Kingdom. It cannot be used as direct evidence for reconstructing slavery, the trade in persons, or administration in the third millennium BCE. Its importance for the cultural history of Egypt and biblical reception is distinct from its value as a contemporary source for the Old Kingdom economy.

⁵⁵ *Sufis*, better known as Khufu.

⁵⁶ op. cit. (21). “*Manetón*”, in: “*Historia de Egipto*”. op. cit., p. 62.

The funerary texts known as the Book of the Dead belong primarily to the New Kingdom and later periods and do not constitute a direct source for Old Kingdom labor institutions. Terms formerly translated as slave, serf, or servant require philological and chronological analysis. An isolated phrase cannot reconstruct a general legal status or establish equivalence with classical slavery.

The traditional expression translated in some works as living dead or living persons to be killed should not be presented as a literal and universal definition of the Egyptian word for slave. Terminology relating to personal dependency varied by period and context, and its interpretation remains debated. For the Old Kingdom, it is safer to distinguish among captives, institutional personnel, compulsory laborers, dependents, and servants according to the specific documentation rather than merging them into a single legal class.

4.4 Territorial Integration and Internal Colonization

The process of Egypt's internal colonization refers not only to territorial expansion but also to a profound administrative reorganization that consolidated central power and extended pharaonic influence throughout the country. This phenomenon can be regarded as a continuation and expansion of the process of political unification initiated during the Naqada II period and culminating in the consolidation of the kingdom under a single pharaoh. At this stage, the king not only represented divine power but, in order to ensure the effectiveness of government, was also required to move personally through the territory accompanied by his court and the "Following of Horus."

This continual movement of the pharaoh and his entourage had two principal objectives: tax collection and direct supervision of the redistributive economy. In this context, the pharaoh performed not only a political but also an essential administrative function, since the economic organization of the kingdom depended upon the efficiency of systems for storing and distributing goods, particularly agricultural produce. The king's presence in different regions likewise helped ensure that central power remained continuous and effective and that territories did not fragment or establish autonomous powers. Over time, this process of centralization produced a more complex and stable administrative structure. Functions initially performed personally by the pharaoh, such as collecting tribute and supervising harvests, were gradually delegated to officials and institutions. These servants of the state, responsible for local supervision and resource management, represented an early form of centralized bureaucracy in Egypt. Such delegation marked an important change in the exercise of power: rather than depending upon the pharaoh's constant physical presence, government came increasingly to rely on an administrative network acting under royal authority while operating with greater autonomy within defined geographical limits. This model of centralized administration enabled more efficient management of Egypt's extensive territory, helping ensure that wealth, particularly agricultural produce, was collected and redistributed and that pharaonic power remained intact across generations. Through this process of "internal colonization," Egypt consolidated its political and administrative unity, extended central authority over diverse regions, and developed a system in which different parts of the country were subordinated to a common structure of power alongside the increasing professionalization of public administration.

To develop this point further, it is important to note that from the earliest dynasties Egyptian administration was structured into several departments performing key functions in state management. During the Early Dynastic Period, at least four or five major departments already existed and laid the foundations of the Egyptian administrative apparatus. Some were fundamental to the centralization of power and to the development of the country's redistributive economic model. One of the most important was the "Treasury," responsible for collecting tribute. This office administered taxes collected primarily in kind, in a system based on agricultural products and other economically valuable goods. It is possible that this tributary cycle was biennial, corresponding to harvests and agricultural economic activity. The Treasury was involved not only in collection but also played a crucial role in storing and redistributing the goods received. Another key department was the "Granary," sometimes referred to as the "Double Granary," responsible for storing and distributing agricultural products. This department helped ensure an efficient and orderly food distribution system, essential to Egypt's social and economic stability. In addition to storing goods for daily consumption, it preserved surpluses to cover national needs during periods of scarcity. Other offices were devoted specifically to providing meat for the palace and for religious cult, particularly liturgical offerings. Sacrificial victims constituted an integral part of religious ceremonies and royal provisioning, and resources and supplies were organized specifically for this purpose. A further crucial dimension of Egyptian state organization was the exploitation of new lands. Certain offices were responsible for settling new populations and organizing cultivation in areas requiring development or recently brought under Egyptian control. This process was fundamental to increasing agricultural production and

expanding territory under Egyptian authority, while also creating new sources of tribute for the state. These departments therefore reflected not only a sophisticated centralized administration but also the requirements of a state that sought, through the centralization and organization of resources, to consolidate its power, maximize economic production, and maintain social stability across a territory as extensive and diverse as Egypt.

Among the high officials who played key roles in the administration of Old Kingdom Egypt were several offices of considerable importance. One of the most prominent was the "Overseer of the Great Mansions," whose principal function was associated with the administration of justice. This official supervised courts and ultimately helped guarantee application of the state's laws. The office was fundamental to the management of internal conflicts and the resolution of disputes arising within Egyptian society.

Another highly important office was the "Overseer of Royal Documents (or Decrees)," associated with the government's extensive diplomatic and documentary activity. This official was responsible for drafting, preserving, and administering royal decrees, essential instruments of communication between the pharaoh and the various sectors of the kingdom. He also coordinated external relations and ensured that royal decisions were officially documented, reflecting both the centralization of power and the importance of bureaucracy in Egyptian government.

The "Overseer of the Granaries," or "Double Granary," was directly connected with the storage and distribution of agricultural products, one of the most important functions within the economic administration of the kingdom. The office

was responsible for the exploitation and productivity of palace lands, conferring considerable power within the state apparatus, particularly in the management of food resources essential to the country's economic and social stability.

There was also an "Overseer of the Treasury," responsible for managing state resources, including the collection of tribute and the administration of the pharaoh's goods. This office was crucial to ensuring that the kingdom's revenues were efficiently administered and used to finance major state works and projects, including religious monuments and military expeditions.

The central figure in the administration of the Old Kingdom, however, and the holder of the most important and authoritative office, was the vizier. This high official was responsible for supervising all areas of state administration and representing the pharaoh in a range of functions. The vizier was effectively the head of the Egyptian bureaucracy and in many contexts was regarded as second in authority only to the pharaoh. His power and influence were fundamental to the functioning of government and the stability of the kingdom. Over time, the vizier became a key figure in the management of the Egyptian state, supervising both internal affairs and diplomatic relations with other kingdoms. His importance will be examined in greater detail in a later section.⁵⁷

Royal authority was exercised to a substantial degree through representation and delegation, but such delegation did not produce an identical administrative chain in every region. Officials combined court titles, economic responsibilities, temporary missions, and local offices. The

⁵⁷ SANMARTIN, Joaquín. SERRANO DELGADO, José M. op. cit., p. 268.

relationship between title and function must be reconstructed from specific contexts, since extensive titulary does not automatically correspond to a perfectly departmentalized modern bureaucracy.

Provincial administration acquired increasing importance during the Old Kingdom, particularly in the management of resources, personnel, expeditions, and connections with the Residence. The territory, however, was not from the beginning divided into a stable system of nomes identical to that known from later periods. Provincial units and titles evolved, and the word nome is a modern convention derived from Greek for translating changing Egyptian administrative realities.

Alongside climatic difficulties, fluctuations in the Nile's flow represented one of the greatest obstacles to the development of the Egyptian productive system. Since the country's economy depended upon agriculture, and agriculture in turn upon Nile inundation, variations in river discharge had profound effects on economic stability. Agricultural production, and consequently the capacity to generate surpluses for storage and redistribution, was directly conditioned by the regularity of the floods, which determined not only the fertility of the land but also the food supply.

Administration had to respond to variations in harvest and supply but could not control climatic factors. Granaries, estates, and redistributive networks could mitigate shortages, although their reach and effectiveness are difficult to quantify. The capacity to store and mobilize grain was an important institutional instrument, not a guarantee of stability against every fluctuation of the Nile.

"I was lenient, benevolent, and beloved, a governor adored by his subjects. There was no sister of a common man whom

I wronged, no widow whom I oppressed, no peasant whom I rejected, no herdsman whom I failed to assist. There was no poor person in my community, no one who went hungry while I governed. When years of scarcity came, I sowed all the fields of my province. I gave to the widow as well as to the married woman and did not consider whether I gave much or little. Then great Niles came, bearing barley and emmer and abundant in every good thing, but I did not collect the arrears of harvest tribute.⁵⁸

What is significant in this passage, beyond the apparently charitable behavior, is the essential role played by food distribution during years of scarcity, especially when Nile floods were low and resources became limited within Egyptian communities. Such behavior, which at first may appear idealized or even improbable, had an important underlying economic rationale: control of agricultural production and exploitation of land in order to guarantee survival and social stability. Food redistribution responded not only to humanitarian need but also reflected a mechanism of resource control and management indispensable to the functioning of the state. This process, together with the reference to collection of tribute destined for the Royal Residence, constituted a foundation of the Old Kingdom economy. By implementing a structure intended to secure provisioning and redistribution, the Egyptian state sought to consolidate stability. This required an efficient administrative system capable of organizing the agrarian economy and ensuring that products reached populations in need, thereby reducing the risk of disturbance or social instability. According to Egyptological interpretations, economic considerations were among the principal factors driving the development of the Old Kingdom. The Egyptian state needed mechanisms enabling it to sustain itself, including efficient management of natural resources, particularly land. It is possible that in early conceptions the

⁵⁸ *"Amenemhet"*, in: DONADONI, Sergio (DIR). op. cit., p. 40.

pharaoh was regarded as the sole legal proprietor of land; more recent research, however, suggests that in certain contexts land could be transferred or acquired by private individuals and that some contracts permitted land to be encumbered with obligations. This indicates that landholding did not belong exclusively to the pharaoh and that, in practice, land could be distributed or granted for exploitation by officials and private persons. Within this economic framework, royal lands leased to officials also played a significant role. Through exploitation of these lands, the king obtained resources that could subsequently be assigned to temples or individuals as part of a system of donations sustaining religious institutions or funding funerary revenues. This organization of territory not only consolidated pharaonic power but also contributed to the economic and social stability of ancient Egypt. Agricultural activity followed the rhythm of the Nile inundation. When the river returned to its normal level, peasants sowed the fields. Sowing was relatively simple, with seed scattered over the inundated ground and pressed into the soil by animals. Where the ground was insufficiently moist, peasants used tools such as the plow or hoe to prepare the soil before sowing. Afterward, labor could concentrate on gardens near the river or canals, where climate and proximity to water facilitated cultivation. This agricultural system based on Nile inundation not only sustained food production but also supported the continuity of Egyptian wealth, which depended to a considerable degree on effective management of water and agricultural resources.

“The flooding of the Nile is a phenomenon that appears truly marvelous to those who have seen it and quite incredible to those who have merely heard of it. (...) ...the entire nation, when it knows that the river has ceased to rise

and has begun to fall,... immediately knows in advance how great the next harvest will be..."⁵⁹

Alongside crop cultivation, animal husbandry, hunting, and fishing played a key role in the Egyptian economy, complementing the agricultural production that constituted the principal basis of wealth. Egyptian property units, whether royal, clerical, or owned by wealthy private individuals, functioned as largely self-sufficient economic entities. Despite this self-sufficiency, all were subject to the payment of levies, a system that ensured the continuity of the administrative structure and the centralized provisioning of the state.

Agricultural prosperity depended on the Nile regime and on the maintenance of local and regional infrastructure, but not on a single nationwide irrigation system directed from the palace. Labor obligations, taxation, estates, and communities participated in different ways in the management of fields and water. Agricultural organization must therefore be reconstructed at the regional scale, without turning pharaonic centralization into an explanation for every canal or dike.

The Turin Papyrus, a source of valuable information on the history of Egypt, mentions King Djoser, who ruled for approximately nineteen years and left his mark on the administration of the country. A text associated with this period, known as the "Famine Stela," describes a period of famine during his reign, illustrating the country's vulnerability to natural disasters and the difficulties involved in resource management. In this text, Djoser laments the poor condition of the country as a result of food shortages, a situation that reflected Egypt's dependence on the Nile floods and the state's capacity to manage resources in times of crisis. The king

⁵⁹ *Diodoro Sículo I, 36, 7-12*, in: SERRANO DELGADO. op. cit., p. 42.

nevertheless finds an effective solution to bring the famine to an end, thereby illustrating not only his ability to manage resources under conditions of scarcity, but also his capacity to preserve order and stability during a period of severe difficulty.

Provisioning crises reveal the interaction between environmental variability and institutional capacity, but the sources do not permit the establishment of a mechanical relationship among Nile levels, administrative failure, and nationwide famine. Autobiographical and literary testimonies frequently employ the provision of food as a moral argument for good government and must therefore also be analyzed as discourses of legitimation.

"My heart was greatly afflicted, because for seven years the Nile had not risen at the proper time. Grain was scarce, the seeds were dried up, everything available for food existed only in small quantities, and everyone saw their hopes frustrated. They could scarcely even walk: the child wept, the young man was dejected, and the elderly, whose hearts were sorrowful, sat upon the ground with their legs bent and their hands resting upon them. Even the courtiers suffered privation; the temples were closed, and the sanctuaries lay beneath the dust. In short, everything that exists struggled in affliction."⁶⁰

Upon investigating the records, he discovers the source of the inundation and the influence exerted upon it by Khnum, the ram-headed lord of Elephantine. According to the account, he makes an offering to this god, who appears to him in a dream and promises:

⁶⁰ "Estela del Hambre", in: GRIMAL, Nicolas, *"Historia del Antiguo Egipto"*, Madrid, Akal, p. 92.

"I shall cause the Nile to rise for you; there shall no longer be a year in which the inundation is insufficient for any region. Flowers shall spring forth..."⁶¹

The so-called Famine Stela, which situates a seven-year crisis in the time of Djoser, was inscribed during the Ptolemaic period, more than two millennia after the king to whom it attributes the episode. It cannot be used as contemporary evidence for Djoser's policies or for a historical investigation conducted by his court. Its value lies instead in showing how a community and an institution of a later period constructed authority, memory, and rights through the prestigious figure of an Old Kingdom sovereign.⁶²

The autobiographies of high officials of Dynasties 5 and 6 display an increasingly elaborate presentation of careers, merits, and relations with the king, but they do not in themselves constitute a direct measure of the weakening of the monarchy. Their greater visibility also reflects changes in funerary practices, titulary, and elite self-representation. Transformations in central power must be inferred by combining these texts with administrative evidence, provincial archaeology, and economic documentation.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 92.

⁶²The Famine Stela is a Ptolemaic text from the island of Sehel that projects its narrative back to the reign of Djoser. For the historical framework of the Old Kingdom, see Marc Van De Mieroop, *A History of Ancient Egypt*, 2nd ed. (Wiley-Blackwell, 2021), and Bussmann, *The Archaeology of Pharaonic Egypt* (2023).

4.5 Central and Provincial Administration

During the Old Kingdom, Memphis and the Memphite Residence were central to the monarchy, although urban archaeology requires a distinction among the city itself, palace complexes, and the different settlement foci of the region. References to Dynasties 12 and 13 belong to the Middle Kingdom and subsequent periods and therefore should not be used to describe a continuous evolution of Old Kingdom administration.

With regard to social structure, Egyptian society was clearly stratified into three principal groups:

1. The educated men: This group consisted of individuals who exercised authority derived directly from the pharaoh. They were the most privileged members of society and occupied the highest positions in the administration, priesthood, and court.
2. The subordinate groups: This group included those who worked in the administration under the authority of the educated men. Many of these individuals performed intermediate roles in government, the military, or the temples, but always under the direction of the former.
3. The illiterate peasantry: At the base of the social pyramid were the peasants, who constituted the majority of the population and were responsible for the agricultural production that sustained the Egyptian economy. They often lacked access to education and were subject to the consequences of governmental decisions and fluctuations in the conditions of the Nile.

Old Kingdom administrative documentation is fragmentary, but it can no longer be characterized as so

scarce that institutional reconstruction is impossible. Titles and inscriptions are complemented by the Abusir papyri, the documents from Wadi el-Jarf, seals, temple archives, and settlement contexts. These sources reveal hierarchies and offices, but also variability, overlapping competencies, and changes between dynasties.

The study of institutions in ancient Egypt has focused principally on the analysis of official and court titles, since these reflect the functions and responsibilities of individuals within the structure of the state. Titles not only identified each person's role but also help to explain how the administration was organized, how power circulated, and how tasks were distributed within the social hierarchy. By concentrating on these titles, scholars have sought to reconstruct a detailed picture of the structures and hierarchies of Egyptian society, thereby providing a clearer understanding of governmental organization and of the key roles within the state apparatus. This approach also reveals the interdependence of administrative and religious functions, since many individuals who held important administrative offices simultaneously occupied significant religious positions, underscoring the close connection between temporal and religious power in Egypt. The analysis of titles therefore extends beyond the identification of official responsibilities to the study of power structures, the distribution of resources, and the organization of society as a whole.

Government service naturally constituted a fundamental source of income for individuals, and this income was not limited to what was required to meet daily needs but could also include allotments of land, goods of various kinds, and other valuable resources that helped secure the economic stability of public servants. Such benefits constituted a form of compensation extending beyond a simple salary and reflected

the close relationship between administrative and economic power in ancient Egypt. In this sense, service in the "Royal Administration" (hereafter, the Administration) may be regarded as the principal source of income for individuals, particularly for those who held significant offices or belonged to the state bureaucracy. The administrative structure was therefore deeply connected to the distribution of resources, reinforcing the monarchy's control over the material dimensions of everyday life. Through the management of land and goods, officials secured their own welfare and that of their families, establishing a direct relationship between the exercise of power and access to the means of subsistence. Nevertheless, occasional references are made to other forms of income, often characterized as "private" or "personal." These supplementary revenues derived from activities not directly connected with the Royal Administration, such as trade, the exploitation of natural resources, or the practice of crafts and artisanal occupations. Although these sources of wealth were secondary in comparison with revenues derived from public service, they were not entirely separate from the social and political context of ancient Egypt. Indeed, some private activities could possess an element of legitimacy or operate under state sponsorship, particularly when the resources they generated strengthened the power of the administrative elite or were connected with religious and funerary practices, which occupied a central place in Egyptian society. This economic panorama emphasizes the importance of public service as a fundamental pillar of the social and economic structure, while also revealing the complexity of economic relations in ancient Egypt, where the distinction between public and private was not always as clear as it may appear in a modern society. The state administration not only guaranteed political order but also shaped the distribution of wealth, and the ruling class was deeply

intertwined with the economic structures that enabled it to maintain its dominance.

At present, information concerning individual wealth in ancient Egypt remains limited and, in many cases, difficult to interpret. It is important, however, to note that this lack of clarity may result more from the scarcity of detailed documentation than from an absence of evidence for personal wealth. Private "commercial" activity was seldom recorded in tomb inscriptions, which generally concentrated on emphasizing an individual's merits in relation to service to the sovereign, his role in the administration, or his association with the divine. Such inscriptions therefore provide a selective view of economic life, focusing primarily on the public and ceremonial dimensions of existence rather than documenting in detail the commercial or private activities that may have occurred beyond the circles of power. Private ownership of land as immovable property is more clearly documented from the beginning of Dynasty 4, during the reign of Sneferu. One of the most significant testimonies is the so-called Metjen Text, which provides early evidence for the transfer of land to high-ranking individuals. From this point onward, private landholding is mentioned occasionally throughout the history of pharaonic Egypt. Such ownership reflected not only the accumulation of wealth but also control over productive resources, thereby conferring significant economic and political power upon landholders. Over the centuries, many such properties assumed the legal form of a "pious foundation," a mechanism through which owners could dedicate their assets to religious or funerary purposes. These foundations not only served to secure the spiritual welfare of individuals or their families in the afterlife but could also function as vehicles for consolidating economic power. In some cases, they attained such dimensions that they may be

described as genuine "agro-industrial complexes," capable of producing goods on a large scale and satisfying the demands of regional markets. These complexes not only produced essential commodities but also manufactured luxury goods and import substitutes accessible principally to the elite. In this sense, private estates did not merely fulfill a function of self-sufficiency; they also played an important role in the circulation of goods whose value or exclusivity contributed to the maintenance of social hierarchies. These regional markets, managed by landholding elites, facilitated the circulation of both ordinary and luxury products, fostering an economy that, although grounded in agriculture, became increasingly diversified and specialized. This system of "pious foundations" and "agro-industrial complexes" illustrates the close interrelationship among economy, religion, and politics in ancient Egypt. Wealth was understood not merely as material possession but also as a means of securing social stability and maintaining control over relations of power within society.

It is certainly the case that the Egyptian Administration played a crucial role in regulating and securing the resources required for the maintenance of the court and for the execution of projects initiated by the sovereign. In a centralized system such as that of Egypt, the state controlled not only administrative and religious policy but also the material foundations that sustained political and social power. The economic resources of Egyptian society derived principally from agricultural and pastoral production, which constituted the natural basis of the Egyptian "traditional economy." This productive foundation was essential not only for the subsistence of the population but also for monumental construction, infrastructure projects, and the financing of the activities of the pharaoh and his court.

With regard to the distribution of immovable property, it appears to have been divided into three relatively well-defined categories, each with a specific purpose and function within the economic and political system of ancient Egypt:

a) **The "lands of the Crown"**: This type of property was directly under the control of the pharaoh, who used it to generate resources for financing the state administration and public projects. These lands were essential to the centralized economy, since their exploitation secured the revenues required to maintain the bureaucracy and military apparatus, as well as the splendor and grandeur of the royal court. Crown lands were devoted principally to the production of food and other vital resources and were administered by high-ranking officials.

The institutional economy combined land, estates, settlements, rights to revenues, and personnel. The categories of royal, temple, and private property were not fixed and mutually exclusive compartments. Evidence for private transfers and patrimonial rights from the Old Kingdom onward requires abandonment of the claim that all land belonged legally to the pharaoh.⁶³

c) **"Private property"**: Although much of the land was under the control of the state or religious institutions, a sector of private property also existed and was held by individuals or families. Such private property was subject to "taxes" imposed by the Administration, indicating that, although individuals could hold land, it was not wholly autonomous and remained within the framework of state authority. Taxes, which could

⁶³ Muhs, *The Ancient Egyptian Economy* (2016), especially his discussion of property, transfers, and institutional obligations from the Old Kingdom onward.

take the form of agricultural produce or other goods, enabled the state to continue functioning and to maintain its control over society while also securing resources for the projects of the pharaoh and his court. The existence of these three forms of property reflects the complexity of the economic system of ancient Egypt, in which the state played a central role in regulating resources and administering land, while private property and pious estates provided limited scope for the personal accumulation of wealth, always within a framework subordinated to central authority. This system contributed to the maintenance of social order and directed resources primarily toward the needs of the ruling elite, while simultaneously ensuring the operation of the religious institutions that legitimized that power.

According to Sanmartín and Serrano, from Dynasty 5 onward a practice that must have existed earlier became increasingly widespread and visible: revenues from temples or religious patrimony were initially redirected under the sovereign's control to remunerate state officials. This practice, which reflects a close relationship between civil and religious administration, became progressively more firmly established, and officials not only accumulated civil titles but also occupied priestly offices or positions. The practice became sufficiently entrenched that, even in the First Intermediate Period and the Middle Kingdom, official titles inherited from the Old Kingdom continued to be used as positions involving primarily liturgical responsibilities. This connection between civil and religious power reflects not merely an administrative practice but also an ideological model in which service to the sovereign was understood as a profoundly sacred act. The rulers of this period, particularly during Dynasties 5 and 6, increased donations and endowments to deities and sanctuaries, a policy that appears to have been encouraged by this administrative

and religious dynamic. Such donations performed an economic function by providing resources to temples and religious institutions, but they also possessed symbolic and political significance by reinforcing the legitimacy of royal power. By granting land and resources to temples, the pharaohs sought not only to strengthen religious infrastructure but also to consolidate their relationships with priests and local elites, thereby creating a system of mutual support between the monarchy and religious institutions. Dynasties 5 and 6, in particular, are characterized by an increase in offices connected with the cult of the deceased pharaoh and by religious service centered on the royal pyramid. This phenomenon served a dual purpose: on the one hand, maintaining and compensating officials and courtiers and, on the other, strengthening ties between the monarchy and the aristocracy. As noted above, these ties were gradually weakening over time, making the role of religion and royal cult all the more significant as mechanisms of social and political cohesion. From an ideological and religious perspective, this interweaving of civil and priestly offices had a deeper purpose: to emphasize the sacred conception of service to the king, intrinsically linked to the Egyptian conception of the state. In Egyptian thought, the pharaoh was not merely a temporal ruler but also a divine figure, and service to his person was regarded as a religious and transcendent act. The juxtaposition of civil and religious roles therefore reflected not only the practical organization of power but also the fundamental conception of the state as a sacred organism in which political and religious authority were not separated but inseparably intertwined. This ideological model, which reinforced the sovereign's authority while also grounding the monarchy as a divinely ordered institution, was

characteristic of the Egyptian worldview, in which cosmic and social order were profoundly interconnected.⁶⁴

In this context, one of the most important aspects of fiscal collection was the accurate assessment of the "wealth" of private individuals. The Palermo Stone, a fundamental source for understanding the administrative mechanisms of ancient Egypt, mentions the Biennial Census, a procedure conducted to assess the economic resources of society. This census included not only immovable assets such as land but also movable property, as reflected in Royal Decrees. According to these texts, the census encompassed a wide variety of natural resources, including canals, lakes, water wells, and trees, which were regarded as productive assets and were therefore subject to fiscal assessment.

This process of assessing and recording wealth was crucial because it enabled the Egyptian state to obtain a detailed picture of the resources available within its territory, which was essential for the allocation of taxes. Taxation within this system was not limited to tangible assets; obligations could also be discharged in kind, whether in grain, hides, gold, or other products, or through compulsory labor, a common form of levy in many ancient societies. The possibility of paying taxes in kind or through labor reflected Egypt's agrarian and economic structure, in which control over land and natural resources was fundamental to the maintenance of the state and the court. The fiscal census was initially conducted every two years, and in later periods an annual requirement was established. It served not only fiscal purposes but also the maintenance of an organized system of social and economic control. On the basis of this inventory of assets, the state could determine the taxes to be paid by the country's different

⁶⁴ Ibid., pp. 269-270.

provinces and regions, implying a clear centralization of power and wealth in the hands of the pharaoh and his administration. If sources from later periods are accurate, the taxes collected were paid principally from the provinces to the state, suggesting a progressive system of leasing these resources. In other words, the provinces, through their local officials, were responsible for ensuring compliance with fiscal obligations and could in many cases lease tax collection to third parties. Such arrangements involved a degree of administrative delegation that allowed the central state to retain control over resources without directly managing every aspect of fiscal collection. In summary, the Biennial Census and the precise assessment of private wealth were key mechanisms in the economic and fiscal functioning of ancient Egypt. The complexity of this system, which included taxation in kind and the delegation of administrative functions at the local level, reflects a highly organized and centralized structure that contributed to the stability of the state and the sustainability of its monumental and administrative projects.⁶⁵

Corvée is the conventional term for forms of compulsory labor imposed by institutions and authorities. In the Old Kingdom it could be employed for construction, transportation, expeditions, maintenance, and other tasks. It should not automatically be equated with slavery, nor should it be assumed to have affected the entire population in identical ways. Exemption decrees are particularly valuable because they show precisely that such obligations could be institutionally defined, limited, and negotiated.

The reach of the administration was extensive, but not universal in the sense of supervising every aspect of economic and social life. The documentation reveals areas

⁶⁵ WILSON, John A., *op. cit.*, pp. 129, 130.

of intensive intervention alongside domestic and local activities that were less visible to the state. The absence of records should not be interpreted as evidence of control, and the abundance of titles should not be converted into a modern organizational chart without verification of concrete functions.

The older interpretation according to which the absolute success of the Dynasty 4 monarchy inevitably produced relaxation and decline must be abandoned as a causal model. The transformations of Dynasties 5 and 6 included changes in cults, royal architecture, provincial administration, the composition of the elite, and the distribution of resources. None of these processes, taken individually, demonstrates a linear loss of royal power.⁶⁶

Egypt's agricultural resources were organized into three principal types of property, reflecting the economic and political structure of the state:

a) **Crown Properties:** These lands were directly under the pharaoh's control and were administered to secure the resources required for the maintenance of the court and the execution of major state projects. Royal lands were fundamental to economic stability because they provided the material basis for government and pharaonic initiatives.

b) **Properties of Pious Foundations:** Lands belonging to religious foundations, although in principle administered for pious purposes, were linked in more subtle ways to the Crown. These foundations, which enjoyed certain privileges, functioned as relatively autonomous institutions, but their

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 138.

relationship with central authority was strategic, since the pharaoh granted land and fiscal exemptions to temples as part of his religious and economic policy. Although temples enjoyed a degree of immunity and autonomy, their role in maintaining social and religious order kept them within the sovereign's sphere of influence.

c) **Private Properties:** These lands belonged to individuals, generally members of the elite, and were subject to taxes payable to the state. Private property in Egypt, although more limited than royal or temple lands, played an important role in the economic structure because individuals could generate wealth through agriculture and trade, while remaining obliged to fulfill their fiscal responsibilities toward the administration.

One of the key aspects of tax collection was the assessment of the country's wealth. The Old Kingdom Exemption Decrees suggest that the state possessed a careful system for evaluating and classifying individual assets, so that taxation applied not only to land but also to other forms of property. Such assessment was crucial to the maintenance of the fiscal system because it enabled the government to collect the resources required for the support of the court and the execution of its projects, including the construction of monuments and temples. The government could also impose compulsory labor, conventionally known as *corvée*, requiring individuals to work on Crown lands, infrastructure construction, or even defense-related tasks such as military service. This compulsory labor formed part of the state's fiscal demands and served both economic and symbolic purposes by reinforcing the pharaoh's authority over the population. A network of government agencies distributed throughout the country probably existed to administer and supervise resources. Through bureaucratic procedures, these agencies

assessed wealth and ensured that both religious foundations and private properties fulfilled their fiscal obligations. Local authorities throughout Egypt were responsible for monitoring the operation of these resources, implying an extensive network of supervision and regulation. A second fundamental dimension of Egyptian government was the administration of law and justice, grounded in the concept of Ma'at, cosmic justice and divine order. Ma'at referred not only to natural and social equilibrium but also to the idea that the pharaoh was the guarantor of this order. In this context, judicial functions were not entrusted exclusively to a specialized professional body; individuals occupying positions of authority, including administrative officials, could exercise judicial responsibilities. This suggests that judicial authority was decentralized and distributed across a broad range of public officials. The capacity to judge and enforce the law was not a privilege reserved for specialist judges but an extension of the authority held by those in leadership positions, reflecting a holistic conception of power in which justice formed an integral part of the general administration of the state.

Within Egyptian government, judicial and administrative decisions, often regarded as separate in modern conceptions, were frequently made collectively. This reflects a conception of authority that was less formally differentiated and more flexible, in which functions were not divided into categories as sharply defined as those found in contemporary governmental structures. Although it has not been possible to establish with certainty whether a legal or customary code systematically regulated conduct, the records suggest that decisions were based on broader principles of justice and equity, shaped by the need to preserve social order and the pharaoh's authority. The absence of a clearly formalized distinction between a penal code and a judicial system governed by written rules points to

a tradition of governance characterized by flexibility and adaptability. Agents of the central government, whose functions evolved over time, played a crucial role in state administration. Across the centuries, the names and functions of administrative offices in the Old Kingdom changed substantially in comparison with those of the Middle Kingdom, adapting to new governmental realities. One of the most significant and enduring offices, however, was that of the vizier, a position that emerged in Dynasty 4 and became increasingly consolidated over time. The vizier was regarded as the highest official responsible for administrative, fiscal, and judicial affairs and occupied a position close to the pharaoh, working in direct collaboration with him. In its early form, the office was associated with princes of royal blood, which gave it considerable political importance and proximity to central power. During Dynasty 4, Pharaoh Sneferu assigned this function to prominent members of the royal family, such as Nefermaat, Hemunu, Kawab, and others, who not only managed the day-to-day operations of government but also supervised bodies of officials responsible for carrying out administrative tasks. In this role, the vizier controlled and supervised the state's entire administrative structure. Such oversight was fundamental to ensuring that the pharaoh's decisions and projects were properly implemented. Viziers also supervised fiscal activities, ensuring the collection of taxes and resources necessary to sustain the state and its institutions, including the court and major pharaonic projects. Beneath the vizier developed a hierarchical administrative structure that began to take clearer form during Dynasty 4 and achieved greater stability and formalization in Dynasty 5. This system of ranks was intended to regulate relations of authority and ensure that administrative functions were clearly defined. Over successive dynasties, however, and particularly toward the end

of Dynasty 6, some ranks began to lose their operational significance and became increasingly honorific titles or indicators of status rather than functional positions carrying direct responsibilities. This development reflects changes in the administrative structure of the Old Kingdom, in which the concentration of power in the figure of the pharaoh and the centralized organization of government produced greater bureaucratic formalization, while retaining a degree of flexibility in the use of titles and ranks.

The differences between Dynasties 4 and 5 reveal changes in cult organization, titulary, and administration, but these should not be described as a single planned reform where the sources do not support such a conclusion. The evolution of funerary priesthods, solar temples, and pyramid names reflects adjustments in the construction of royal memory and the management of foundations. At the same time, continuity in the careers of officials underscores that dynastic change did not entail a complete rupture of institutions.⁶⁷

Dynasty 5 according to Manetho, in the version of Julius Africanus:

"(Dynasty V)⁶⁸

Fr. 18. (from Syncellus). According to Africanus.

Dynasty V consisted of eight kings of Elephantine:

Userkeres⁶⁹ reigned for 28 years.

Sefres⁷⁰ reigned for 13 years.

Neferkeres⁷¹ reigned for 20 years.

⁶⁷ GRIMAL, Nicolás. *"Historia del Antiguo Egipto"*, op. cit., p. 82.

⁶⁸ Datable from 2560 BCE to 2420 BCE.

⁶⁹ Userkaf.

⁷⁰ Sahure.

⁷¹ Neferirkare Kakai.

CREATION OF AN EMPIRE

Sisires⁷² reigned for 7 years.

Keres⁷³ reigned for 20 years.

Ratures⁷⁴ reigned for 44 years.

Menkeres⁷⁵ reigned for 9 years.

Tankeres⁷⁶ reigned for 44 years.

Onnos⁷⁷ reigned for 33 years.

In total, they reigned for 248 years⁷⁸.

Together with the 1,046 years already mentioned for the first four dynasties, this makes a total of 1,294 years."⁷⁹

The relationship between the king and his officials in ancient Egypt reflects a system of patronage and mutual dependence expressed through the term "Imakhu." This word, which is difficult to translate with precision, represents the obligation of officials to work for the sovereign in exchange for the resources necessary for their subsistence. In essence, this system implies that the entire country theoretically belongs to the king, and his servants, the officials, owe their labor to the Crown, which guarantees their maintenance in return for loyalty and service. This relationship underscores the centralization of power under the pharaoh, who was not only a political leader but also the central figure in social and economic organization.

The title commonly translated as Chancellor of the God appears in contexts of expeditions and royal service, but its functions were not necessarily identical in every period.

⁷² Shepseskare or Neferefre.

⁷³ Khaneferre.

⁷⁴ Nyuserre Ini.

⁷⁵ Menkauhor or Akauhor.

⁷⁶ Djedkare Isesi.

⁷⁷ Unas.

⁷⁸ Actually 218 years. It is possible that the reign of Oteo, the first monarch of Dynasty 6, is being counted, which would indeed produce a total of 248 years.

⁷⁹ "Manetón", in: "Historia de Egipto". op. cit. p. 63.

Each mission is better reconstructed from the complete titulary, location, and documentary context rather than by transforming an ancient title into a permanent ministry with fixed competencies.⁸⁰

"It is the wife of a priest of Re... who is pregnant with three children of Re... It has been said concerning them that they will perform this excellent office throughout this entire land and that the eldest among them will occupy the office of 'Greatest of Seers' at Heliopolis": His Majesty's heart then became troubled because of this. And Djedi said: "What is the meaning of this mood, O sovereign, life, prosperity, health, my lord!... Is it because of the three children? Yet I said: first your son, then his son, and only afterward one of them." His Majesty then said: "At what time will Ruddjedet give birth?" (Djedi replied:

"She will give birth on the fifteenth day of the first month of winter." (...)

One day it happened that Ruddjedet began to suffer labor pains, and the delivery was difficult. Then the Majesty of Re, lord of Sahebu, said to Isis, Nephthys, Meskhenet, Heket, and Khnum: "Go, please, and assist Ruddjedet in giving birth to the three children who are in her womb and who will perform this excellent office throughout this entire land. They will build your temples, provide for your altars, and cause your tables of divine offerings to flourish" (...)⁸¹

The Westcar Papyrus is a literary composition preserved in a manuscript substantially later than the Old Kingdom, although its narratives are set in earlier reigns. The account of the miraculous birth of the first kings of Dynasty 5 cannot be read as a historical record of the succession or as literal evidence of Re's intervention. Its importance lies in its

⁸⁰ WILSON, John A., op. cit., p. 138.

⁸¹ *Papiro Westcar*, "Los orígenes maravillosos de la V Dinastía", in: SERRANO DELGADO, José. op. cit., p. 68.

literary construction of legitimacy, dynastic memory, and the relationship between kingship and divinity.⁸²

The account then relates Ruddjedet's delivery:

"Then a child rushed into her arms, a child one cubit long; his bones were firm, his limbs were covered in gold, and his headdress was of genuine lapis lazuli. They washed him, cut his umbilical cord, and placed him upon a bed of brick. Then Meskhenet approached him and said: 'He is a sovereign who shall exercise kingship throughout this entire land.' Finally, Khnum filled his body with health. (...) These goddesses then departed after having attended the delivery of the three children and said: 'Rejoice in your heart, Reuser. Look, three children have been born to you.' And he said to them: 'Ah, my ladies! What can I do for you? Please give this sack of barley to your porter and accept it as payment for beer.' Khnum then took up the sack of barley, and these gods departed for the place from which they had come..." (Westcar Papyrus, "The Marvelous Origins of Dynasty V")⁸³

This passage from the Westcar Papyrus, centered on the birth of three children endowed with divine characteristics, is relevant to the construction of a narrative concerning the interconnection of the divine, political, and religious spheres in Egypt's Dynasty 5. The account not only emphasizes the divine legitimation of the future rulers but also underscores the role of the gods in human affairs, particularly in the context of kingship and administrative power. The birth of these children with supernatural characteristics, such as limbs covered in gold

⁸²Sabbahy, *Kingship, Power, and Legitimacy in Ancient Egypt* (2020); Bussmann, *The Archaeology of Pharaonic Egypt* (2023).

⁸³ Ibid. p. 68.

and headdresses of lapis lazuli, symbolizes their exceptional destiny. The intervention of Meskenet, the goddess associated with destiny and birth, who proclaims that the child will become a sovereign exercising kingship throughout the land, reinforces the idea that Egyptian kingship possessed not merely an earthly foundation but a divinely sanctioned one. The children born under the influence of these gods are not simply heirs to the throne; they embody the connection between gods and human beings, a fundamental bond in Egyptian politics and religion. Moreover, the use of gold and lapis lazuli in describing the children symbolizes their nearly transcendent nature, and the narrative suggests that their destiny is determined by divine will, thereby conferring legitimacy upon their future political authority. This emphasizes the Egyptian perception that monarchs and other figures of power acted as instruments of the gods on earth. The presence of Khnum, the creator god who grants health to the child, further illustrates the idea that the gods were directly responsible for the well-being and vitality of rulers, reinforcing the connection between political power and divinity. The detail that Re, the solar god, upon receiving news of the birth, rewards the goddesses with a sack of barley symbolizes the reciprocity characterizing relations between the divine and human spheres. Sacrifices and offerings to the gods constituted an essential element of both the economic and religious systems, and the beer mentioned here, produced from barley, may be interpreted as a common offering with an important place in religious celebrations and ritual practice. The apparently trivial gesture of providing payment for beer may likewise be read as reinforcing the idea that Egyptian society was deeply integrated with the divine order, in which even symbolic payment to the gods participated in maintaining cosmic and political equilibrium. Within the administrative and

religious developments of Dynasty 5, this passage illustrates how divine function and earthly administration could be combined to guarantee order and the legitimacy of power. The divinely characterized children represent not only the destiny of kingship but also transitional figures between earthly and divine realms, reaffirming the fundamental role of the priesthood in Egyptian political structuring. The narrative likewise emphasizes how, in Dynasty 5, the figure of the pharaoh and his environment were inextricably linked with religion, both to secure social order and to consolidate divinely legitimated power.

The account of the children's birth in the Westcar Papyrus reflects fundamental aspects of Egypt's Dynasty 5, particularly the growing importance of the solar cult of Re and the interaction between the divine and earthly spheres. The fact that the birth is assisted by several deities associated with fertility and childbirth (Isis, Nephthys, Meskhenet, Heket, and Khnum) underscores the role of the gods in vital and creative processes, a feature directly paralleled by the centrality of the cult of Re during this period. The cult of Re was reflected in royal titulary, as pharaohs adopted solar titles such as "Son of Re," thereby claiming divine legitimacy. In this context, the construction of solar temples became an established practice, as each new pharaoh was expected to erect a temple dedicated to Re, thereby consolidating his divine authority. The Westcar Papyrus illustrates this relationship between the pharaoh and the divine by presenting the birth of a sovereign as both a sacred act and a symbol of the connection between the divine and earthly worlds. The passage is also connected with administrative and religious changes that occurred throughout Dynasty 5. The introduction of more structured hierarchies and the appearance of new administrative titles, such as "Overseer of Upper Egypt" and "Administrator of a Royal

Estate," reflect processes of centralization and governmental organization in which the cult of Re played a prominent role. It is also important to note the shift that occurred toward the end of the dynasty, when solar temples were abandoned during the reign of Djedkare, marking a change in religious and administrative policy toward a greater emphasis on the pyramid and its funerary functions and producing a reorganization of cults and priesthoods. This analysis reveals developments in both political structure and religious organization and illustrates the interrelationship between administrative change and religious practice in the context of Dynasty 5.

Egypt's Dynasty 5 was marked by a series of significant changes in both the political and religious spheres. One of the most notable was the adjustment of the hierarchical system, which, as noted, was modified by almost every ruler of the dynasty, with the exception of Pepi I, who retained the system of his predecessor. This phenomenon underscores the dynasty's tendency to experiment with the centralization of power and administrative organization while also reflecting the growing influence of the priesthood and the pharaoh's relationship with the gods.

The most visible change in the religious sphere was the relocation of the royal necropolis. Whereas the early pyramids of Dynasty 4, including that of Khufu at Giza, were constructed on the Giza Plateau, from the reign of Sahure, one of the early pharaohs of Dynasty 5, the royal necropolis shifted northward to the region of Abusir. This movement had not only architectural implications but also reflected a new religious and political orientation: the pharaoh became more closely associated with the cult of Ra and solar ideology, symbolized by the construction of solar temples and pyramids oriented toward this cult. The decision to relocate the royal necropolis to Abusir may also be interpreted as part of a political strategy

to consolidate power in a new region, thereby reinforcing governmental centralization and control over surrounding areas. The new location, closer to the capital, allowed greater accessibility and control over northern territories while facilitating connections with the solar temples whose cult had become institutionalized during Dynasty 5. This relocation of the royal necropolis thus reflects a shift in the focus of Egyptian politics and religion and may be understood as a symbol of the transition toward a more divinized form of power in which the pharaoh became more closely associated with the gods, particularly Ra, the solar deity.

The list of Dynasty 6 transmitted under the name of Manetho must be read with caution. Manetho's work was composed in the Ptolemaic period and survives only fragmentarily through later authors. Its reign lengths, names, and anecdotes are useful for the history of the chronographic tradition, but they require comparison with contemporary Egyptian sources and cannot be used as a direct administrative record of the Old Kingdom.

"(Dynasty VI)

Fr. 20

Dynasty VI consisted of six kings of Memphis:

1. Otoes⁸⁴ reigned for 30 years. He was murdered by his spearmen.
2. Fios⁸⁵ reigned for 53 years.
3. Metusufis⁸⁶ reigned for 7 years.
4. Fiops⁸⁷, who began to reign at the age of six and continued until the age of one hundred.

⁸⁴ Teti or Atoti.

⁸⁵ Pepi I.

⁸⁶ Merenre I.

⁸⁷ Pepi II.

5. Mentesufis⁸⁸ reigned for 1 year.
6. Nitocris⁸⁹, the noblest and most beautiful woman of her time, of graceful form, the builder of the third pyramid⁹⁰, who reigned for 12 years.
7. The total is 203 years⁹². Together with the 1,294 years already mentioned for the first five dynasties, they amount to a total of 1,497 years."

In Dynasty 6, the reign of Unas marks a significant turning point in the religious and administrative organization of Egypt. One of the most notable changes was the restructuring of the priesthoods of the Pyramid Complexes, with the abolition of the office of "priest of the King" and the exclusive adoption of the title "priest of the Pyramid." This change affected not only priesthoods associated with the reigning pharaoh but, for the first time, also the cults of earlier kings, suggesting a reevaluation of the funerary cult and the pyramid as a divine entity independent of the living monarch. This development reflects an evolution in the concept of royal divinity, shifting from the individual figure of the king toward a more collective and symbolic focus associated primarily with his tomb and the cult of funerary deities.

In administrative affairs, Teti introduced significant reforms in the management of Upper Egypt. He centralized authority in the hands of a single governor who exercised complete control over one province, while the rest of the region continued to be administered through a centralized structure. This administrative reorganization not only improved administrative efficiency but also strengthened the pharaoh's

⁸⁸ Merenre II.

⁸⁹ According to VIDAL, Cesar, op. cit.: "The Neit-Okre of the Turin Papyrus. Her reign very possibly ended, or was at least followed by, a period of anarchy, something similar to what occurred with Queen Scemiofris at the end of Dynasty 12.", p. 65.

⁹⁰ According to Cesar Vidal, there may have been confusion with Queen Khentkaus, the daughter of Menkaure. p. 238.

⁹¹ "MANETON" in: op. cit. p. 65.

⁹² Actually 197 years.

authority by establishing more direct control over the territory and increasing the central influence of royal power.

Teti is also recognized for his foreign policy, which continued the course established under Dynasty 5 by maintaining favorable relations with Byblos, Punt, and Nubia. This reflects the stability of Egypt's internal government and its capacity to project power abroad, an indication of the country's strength and prosperity during his reign. In the economic sphere, particular attention has been given to wage laborers who participated in major projects such as the construction of Teti's tomb, representing a significant development in labor organization, since this is presented as the earliest known record of salaried workers in Egyptian history.

With the accession of Pepi I, Dynasty 6 continued a policy of strategic alliances. His marriage to two daughters of a prominent Upper Egyptian family highlights his interest in strengthening ties with the region and consolidating his power. Under Pepi II, however, a process of decentralization becomes visible, particularly in Upper Egypt, where regional governors acquired greater administrative autonomy. This process of decentralization appears to have favored relatives of the young pharaoh, especially Pepi II's uncles.

During the reign of Pepi II, changes can be observed in the distribution of offices and in the importance of provincial elites, but there is no single demonstrated sequence leading from an increase in honorific titles to administrative ineffectiveness. The long duration of the reign, succession, family networks, funerary institutions, and provincial conditions must be evaluated together. Titles could change in function or prestige without this necessarily amounting to bureaucratic collapse.

The end of Dynasty 6 represented a profound political transformation, but it cannot be presented as the inevitable result of a linear administrative decline. Fragmentation of central authority coexisted with continuity in settlements and regional centers of power. Current explanations combine succession dynamics, taxation, provincial networks, economic change, and possible environmental pressures without accepting any single cause.

Wilson's observation concerning the role of the vizier in Dynasty 5 as the sole "Seal-Bearer of the King of Lower Egypt" is crucial for understanding the centralization of power in Egyptian administration. This high-ranking official was responsible for supervising the movement of official consignments and goods throughout Egyptian territory, reflecting close oversight of the circulation of commodities and resources. The concentration of this authority in a single individual underscores the pharaoh's position as the supreme authority within a rigid administrative system in which the vizier ensured that the sovereign's decisions were efficiently implemented throughout the country. Toward the end of Dynasty 5 and the beginning of Dynasty 6, however, there was a proliferation of officials of comparable rank, the so-called "seal-bearers," indicating an expansion of the administration and increasing governmental complexity. This phenomenon reflects the growth of bureaucracy and the need to delegate responsibilities in a context in which the demands of the kingdom had become more extensive and exacting. In the case of the governor of Upper Egypt, the transformation of this figure into a kind of viceroy for the more distant part of the kingdom is a clear indication of structural change in political organization. During Dynasty 6, the governor acquired greater importance by assuming responsibility for an extensive and strategically important province. This process shows how

power came to be distributed beyond the royal court and may be interpreted as a form of decentralization. By the end of Dynasty 6, the appearance of numerous local governors bearing the title "Governor of Upper Egypt" signals a significant change in the country's administrative structure. These governors, possessing honorific titles and powers extending beyond their own domains, acquired increasing authority, at times surpassing the boundaries of their own provinces. This phenomenon reflects an erosion of centralized control by the pharaoh, as local rulers began to exercise functions that would previously have belonged to central authority. The process of decentralization is evident, and as local governors gained greater power, their claims to autonomy likewise increased. This development reveals not only a proliferation of honorific functions but also the emergence of a more fragmented and autonomous administration. As a consequence, the pharaoh's power became more diffuse, while local rulers increasingly made decisions affecting their own regions, complicating Egyptian administration and multiplying functions. This decentralizing process, combined with the transformation of functional titles into honorific ones, produced a situation in which local authority began to compete with central power. Such dynamics contributed to the fragmentation of the state and to growing regional autonomy, a factor that probably contributed to political destabilization during the final stages of Dynasty 6, when royal authority became increasingly diffuse and difficult to control.

Changes in administration and social organization during Egypt's Dynasties 5 and 6 appear to have resulted from a series of interrelated political, socioeconomic, and religious factors whose complexity is still not fully understood. The close relationship between religious offices and administrative functions is a key factor in understanding how these

transformations were structured. Many offices, particularly within the administration, were connected with religious institutions that possessed temple properties. These temples, dedicated to divine cults, represented a crucial source of income for officials, increasingly important in relation to royal lands, which had constituted the economic basis of power in earlier periods.

A significant aspect of this transformation was the marked reduction over time in the size of officials' tombs. The phenomenon becomes particularly evident in Dynasty 6, when the tombs of lower-ranking officials, for example, disappeared from the major court cemeteries of Memphis beginning in the reign of Unas. This tendency has been interpreted as evidence that senior officials were no longer able to maintain their subordinates with the resources previously available to them. The change may have been related to economic pressures generated by temples and to shifts in the distribution of revenues, which reduced officials' capacity to finance the elaborate tombs that had served as displays of wealth and social status. The relationship between possession of titles and accumulation of income was fundamental to this process. Although officials may have held more titles, each potentially providing an additional source of income, this did not necessarily mean that they were materially "wealthier." Wealth was not expressed solely through tomb size but also through the continuity of the mortuary cult, implying that religious status and the perpetuation of memory in funerary cults were central dimensions of an individual's legacy. This situation reflects a transformation in the conception of wealth, which ceased to be exclusively material and became more closely connected with religious recognition and the continuity of divine cult through temple institutions. The contrast between the relative stability of political and administrative personnel

and changes within the ruling family also deserves attention. Whereas administrative and political officials remained comparatively stable, with organizational structures recurring across reigns, the family dynamics of the pharaohs were considerably less stable. Changes within the royal family, particularly through coregencies and family alliances, reflected dynastic fragility and the importance of political alliances within the structure of power. In conclusion, administrative changes during Dynasties 5 and 6 reflect profound transformations in Egypt's economic, religious, and political systems, in which religion and funerary cult played central roles. The decline in visibly displayed material wealth in burials and the concentration of resources in temples indicate a restructuring of Egyptian society in which bureaucracy and religious officials acquired greater prominence, while the royal family and political stability began to experience internal changes and tensions.

a. Analysis of the administrative and theological structure of pharaonic Egypt, particularly during Dynasties 5 and 6, reveals a close interrelationship between political administration and religious cult that contributed to the stability and effectiveness of government. In this respect, it is possible to identify a framework explaining how the Egyptian Crown ensured the maintenance and welfare of its officials by linking their subsistence both to religion and to royal authority. This system developed around several interrelated axes:

b. Shared source of resources: Officials received their sustenance during life from the same resources allocated to their funerary cult. This mechanism does not imply that provision was identical in both cases, but it does indicate a direct relationship between services rendered to the king and rewards received, both during life and after death.

c. Reciprocal relationship between monarch and officials: The hierarchical structure linking the king and his officials was based on a relationship of service and remuneration. The monarch, as a divine figure, rewarded officials according to their position within the administration, establishing a dynamic in which service to the king secured recompense through the allocation of resources.

d. Proportional remuneration: The quantity of resources assigned to each official was directly related to his position within the administrative hierarchy. The higher the rank, the greater the remuneration received, thereby ensuring that senior officials enjoyed greater benefits both during life and after death through their funerary cults.

e. Resources derived from pious foundations: The income supporting officials would not have derived from royal lands alone, but from pious foundations established by the Crown and originating in the cult of a particular deity. This model reflects a transition toward a more institutionalized system in which resources were allocated to temples and cults and subsequently redistributed to officials as remuneration for their services.

f. Priest as official: Officials were understood not only as administrators of the state but also as priests serving the deities. This is reflected in the close relationship between administrative and religious titles, which is significant for understanding the integration of political and religious functions in Egyptian government. An official not only performed state duties but also played a role in the administration of divine cults.

g. Support of temples and administration: The pious foundations established by the pharaohs supported not only divine cults but also officials, contributing to their maintenance. The financial system of the state was therefore

deeply connected with religion, with resources allocated both to cultic activity and to the pharaoh's administration.

h. The official as funerary priest: During the reign of Neferirkare Kakai, officials increasingly appear as funerary priests of the deceased king, implying an important change in the administrative system. This development was connected with the cult of Osiris, who became established as the personification of the deceased king and as a central figure of mortuary cult.

i. Proliferation of offices and competition for them: As the dynasty progressed, offices within the administration proliferated, generating considerable competition among individuals seeking to obtain such titles. Since each office entailed income associated with offerings and goods belonging to divine cults, individuals competed to secure a greater number of titles and therefore additional sources of provision.

j. This framework illustrates how Egyptian administration, through Royal Theology, established a system interrelating religion, politics, and economy. The model guaranteed not only the stability of royal power but also the continuity of the administrative structure over time, with a clear centralization of resources and a system of remuneration that encouraged officials to fulfill both religious and administrative functions.

Pious Foundations constituted a fundamental pillar of ancient Egyptian society, playing a crucial role in the perpetuation of cults and in the consolidation of the power of both the Crown and the deities. Their function was not limited to ensuring the continuity of cultic activity; they also protected the wealth associated with such rituals by creating institutions

regarded as inviolable and capable of transcending the framework of terrestrial law.

4.6 Pious Foundations, Cults, and Institutional Resources

1. Perpetual maintenance of cults: Pious Foundations guaranteed the continuous cult of divine statues, deceased kings through their funerary cults, and private individuals who may have established cults of their own. This dimension of religious continuity was considered essential to the political and social stability of the country because the maintenance of cults was understood to secure the welfare of the pharaoh and the cosmic order of maat, justice and equilibrium.

2. Permanence and inviolability: Through Pious Foundations, sources of wealth associated with cults were protected from human law by their association with divinity. This system provided a form of legal security for religious resources, placing them beyond ordinary fluctuations in politics or administrative change and thereby ensuring their long-term continuity.

3. The role of Pyramid Temples: During the Old Kingdom and Middle Kingdom, Pyramid Temples functioned as cultic centers dedicated to royal statues. These temples possessed not only a religious but also a political character, since they represented the authority and legitimacy of the pharaoh. They operated as repositories that preserved statues and sacred objects while also serving as centers of power through the concentration of substantial resources and divine gifts.

4. Relationship with governmental stability: Pious Foundations played an essential role in political

stability because, through their connection with royal cult and the deities of the country, they contributed to the legitimation of government. Cults of royal and divine ancestors acted as a guarantee of continuity in pharaonic authority, reinforcing allegiance and social order.

5. Basis of provincial temples: In addition to pyramid temples, Pious Foundations constituted an important basis for provincial temples. These institutions were closely connected with local administrators responsible for managing and distributing foundation resources. Pious Foundations therefore affected not only the center of power but also provincial government, reinforcing local authority while contributing to the centralization of pharaonic power.

Pious Foundations were not merely a means of ensuring the continuity of cults but also a crucial instrument for maintaining pharaonic authority at both central and provincial levels. These foundations played a key role in religious and political organization by integrating state administration and divine cult within a deeply interconnected system intended to preserve social and cosmic order in ancient Egypt.

The system of "reversion of offerings" is particularly well attested during Dynasties 5 and 6. For example, the "false-door" stela of Tefnen states:

"I made this [tomb] as is fitting for one who is sustained by the Lord [the King]. I caused the workmen who made it to pray to the god of the necropolis for their recompense." "In the autobiography of Kaiemnefer, explicit reference is made to 'this offering that the King gave me for my sustenance... his pious foundations, which the King

gave me for my sustenance..."⁹³

The source provides a clear view of the system of "reversion of offerings" that developed during Dynasties 5 and 6 in ancient Egypt. This system involved the distribution of resources deriving from offerings and pious foundations to officials and workers engaged in the construction of tombs and temples, as well as other activities connected with royal and funerary cults. In this context, the reference to divine recompense associated with offerings highlights the interdependence between the pharaoh, his government, and the individuals who formed part of the administrative and religious apparatus. The stela of Tefnen provides an example of how the king's role as a source of sustenance was understood. It explicitly states that the tomb was built "as is fitting for one who is sustained by the Lord," implying that the worker or official who commissioned or constructed it possessed a claim to resources supplied by the pharaoh through pious foundations. The "reversion of offerings" was a process in which offerings dedicated to the gods, particularly within the funerary sphere, benefited not only religious cult but also served as a mechanism for securing the maintenance and subsistence of individuals engaged in administrative and religious duties. In the autobiography of Kaiemnefer, direct reference is made to the manner in which the king provided pious foundations for the support of his subjects, reflecting a system of royal patronage. This system was oriented not only toward the creation of funerary monuments but also toward ensuring that officials and workers, in life and after death, could depend upon the pharaoh for their material welfare. Pious foundations therefore functioned as a form of recompense for services rendered to the king and the gods,

⁹³ "*Autobiografía de Kaiemnefer*", in: WILSON, John A. p. 95.

creating a cycle of offerings and reciprocal benefits that helped consolidate pharaonic power and legitimacy while maintaining social order through a distributive system linking religion, politics, and economy.

The source analyzes a system of pious foundations deeply interconnected with the social, political, and religious structure of ancient Egypt and particularly with relations of dependence among monarchs, officials, and their subordinates. It notes how the names of pious foundations, personified as men and women, represent a direct connection between royal estates and the sustenance of officials responsible for religious and funerary activities. Examples such as Chebu-Snofru ("The Sandals of Sneferu") and Menat-Jufui ("The Nurse of Jufui/Khufu") indicate that in many cases these estates had originally belonged to monarchs, who guaranteed the resources required for the performance of funerary cults. This emphasizes the dependency of individuals upon the Crown, since officials ultimately relied upon royal foundations for their maintenance. The fact that royal estates provided sustenance and that subordinates were described as dependents of the "estate" of their superiors establishes a clear pattern of royal patronage. This framework not only supported the country's economic and religious stability but also consolidated pharaonic authority and control over resources, which were distributed through these pious mechanisms among those who served the kingdom. The case of Nikaiankh of Tehna extends this argument by showing how an official transferred benefits obtained through his religious offices, including service as a priest of the goddess Hathor and as a funerary priest, to his family, underscoring the hereditary dimension of such offices and the system of reversion of offerings. In this context, religious foundations not only supplied the cults of deities but also became economic resources for officials occupying key

positions within the religious and administrative apparatus. Nikaiankh's document reveals that the benefit obtained derived not only from a royal estate but also from a religious foundation established by Pharaoh Userkaf and enlarged by Menkaure/Mycerinus.

This practice of "reversion of offerings" helps explain how, through control of religious resources, monarchs could guarantee the support of their officials while simultaneously ensuring the perpetuation of funerary cults. The system also provided a form of social and political stability that sustained the continuity of administrative and religious order in pharaonic Egypt, reflecting the interweaving of political and religious functions within the framework of state administration.

The epithet *imakhu* or *imakhy*, so frequent in the funerary texts of the period, has conventionally been translated as "revered" or "possessing reverence"; its more literal sense, however, is "maintained" or "sustained," and it therefore denoted a person "under the care of" the Crown. At some point, however, this system became unsustainable for the royal treasury: the court could not directly maintain all of its officials. This is clearly visible in the reorganization of courtly and elite funerary cults. These appear to have been administered by major regional institutions, one for Upper Egypt and two for Lower Egypt, which guaranteed the maintenance and operation of the principal cemeteries, especially the Memphite necropolis (Giza and Saqqara as far as Dahshur), the Butic necropolis (ancient Buto in the Delta, capital of the "Predynastic kings" of that region), and the Abydene necropolis (Umm el-Qaab and its surroundings).

Donations and allocations recorded in the Royal Annals show that the monarchy connected resources with cults and foundations, but these operations should not automatically

be interpreted as an irreversible transfer of sovereignty to autonomous temples. Religious institutions could function simultaneously within royal and local networks, and their position changed across regions and dynasties.

A clear example of this process appears during the reign of Neferirkare, whose records mention the donation of 352 *arouras*, a unit of land measurement, to the "Gods of Jeraha" in the Nile Delta. These lands, however, were not given directly to local priests but were placed under the supervision of the High Priest of Heliopolis, who was also responsible for administering the dependents and officials charged with their exploitation. This allocation of land not only increased the wealth and power of local cults but also consolidated the position of the Heliopolitan priesthood by granting it substantial administrative autonomy over religious resources while simultaneously reinforcing the pharaoh's centralized oversight of those lands. The text specifies that "their entire production" was regarded as an "offering of the God," implying exemption from taxation and effectively treating the property as "land of the God." It is important to emphasize that fiscal exemptions do not appear to have been restricted to a particular cult; according to Neferirkare's Royal Decree at Abydos, they applied to specified "professional groups." Thus, the decree not only exempted temple lands from taxation but also released all priests of the Thinite district from fiscal obligations. Policies of this kind reveal a religious and administrative organization that extended beyond regulation of the cult of a single deity and possessed a broader regional dimension, in which pharaonic authority was expressed in a centralized and coordinated manner through the priest as an administrative official. A particularly important development in this context is the emergence of priests as a clearly defined social group by the middle of Dynasty 5. Like other sectors of

the bureaucracy, this group possessed an internal hierarchical structure. Unlike strictly political administrative structures, however, priests were not organized solely according to individual cults but were subject to an Overseer of Priests whose jurisdiction encompassed all priests within a given district regardless of the cults they served. This indicates that religious affairs were then administered regionally rather than being individualized by cult, as would occur in later periods. During Dynasty 6, by contrast, religious administration became more decentralized and specialized, with overseers assigned to particular cults. The Decree of Neferirkare may be regarded as a significant milestone in the development of religious institutionalization in Egypt because it facilitated greater independence of priests from centralized control. This "individualization" of the priestly profession gave priests a greater degree of autonomy in the performance of their functions and represented a fundamental change in the political and religious structure of ancient Egypt. The creation of an organized religious bureaucracy and the concentration of resources within pious foundations contributed to the consolidation of pharaonic authority while simultaneously strengthening religion as an essential pillar of the Egyptian system of governance.

The legal basis of their distinctive status in relation to other "social groups" appears not to have been the performance of "religious" ceremonies as such, but rather their responsibility for managing divine properties, which came to acquire an almost "extraterritorial" status with respect to fiscal obligations imposed upon immovable and movable goods. To illustrate this point, the following is the "Decree of Neferirkare in favor of the temple of Abydos":

CREATION OF AN EMPIRE

"The Horus User-Khau.

Decree of the King [for] the Superior of the Priests Hem-Ur.

I do not permit any person in authority to take any of the priests who are in the district in which you are stationed for the corvée of the land, nor for any [other] obligation of the district, except for the performance of the rites for his god in the temple in which he serves and the maintenance of the temples in which they are stationed. They are exempt forever by decree of the King of Upper and Lower Egypt Neferirkare. No legal requisition may be made against this in any service.

I do not permit any person in authority to impose any labor obligation upon any of the "fields of the god," through which the duties of the cult are maintained by each priest, for the corvée of the land or for any [other] labor obligation of the district. They are exempt forever by decree of the King of Upper and Lower Egypt Neferirkare. No legal requisition may be made against this in any service.

With respect to any person of the district who takes any priest from those who are in the "fields of the God," through which they perform the duties of the cult in this district, for the corvée of the land or any [other] labor obligation of the district, you shall send him before the court of justice, and he himself shall be sent to the granite quarries...

With respect to any person of the district who takes dependents who are [assigned] to the "fields of the God" for the corvée of the land or for any [other] labor obligation of the district, you shall send him before the court of justice, and he himself shall be sent to the granite quarries...

[Likewise] every magistrate, every King's Acquaintance, and every Keeper of Largesse who acts [in bad faith] with respect to that which [my Majesty] has ordered shall be sent before the court of justice. The cultivated lands, people, and all property belonging to him shall be confiscated...

Sealed in the presence of the sovereign himself, on day 18 of the second month of summer." ⁹⁴

⁹⁴ "Decreto de Neferirkare en beneficio del templo de Abidos", in: SERRANO DELGADO, José. op. cit., p. 165.

The Decree of Neferirkare and other exemption decrees are especially valuable because they demonstrate the king's capacity to define the obligations and privileges of specific institutions. They do not prove a simple separation between state and temple; rather, they reveal negotiation over jurisdictions, personnel, services, and resources within an order in which administrative and cultic spheres overlapped.

The administration of Egypt's Old Kingdom, whose degree of complexity has been extensively documented, displays a fundamental characteristic: the integration of civil and religious domains. Over the course of its development, this system, which initially drew no clear distinction between the two spheres, underwent a process of increasing "sacralization" of government. This phenomenon was expressed in a substantial expansion of the property and resources administered by temples and funerary foundations, which over time significantly affected the kingdom's political and economic structure. The transfer of land and resources to the control of religious institutions became a process that, although initially intended to strengthen the state apparatus, ultimately produced a "drain" on Crown resources in favor of the priestly nobility.

This phenomenon culminated toward the end of the Old Kingdom, when a significant portion of the Egyptian aristocracy, particularly the temple nobility, increasingly occupied offices in priestly, civil, and administrative spheres alike. This concentration of power within the religious and administrative elite not only increased the power of priests but also contributed to the weakening of the pharaoh's central authority. Although temples played a crucial role in the economy and in the control of resources, the situation also meant that the pharaoh had to surrender part of his administrative and fiscal authority to senior religious officials

whose influence within Egyptian society became progressively more firmly established.

The transfer of resources from the royal domain to religious institutions reflects a central paradox in the organization of power in Old Kingdom Egypt. On the one hand, temples appeared as fundamental actors in perpetuating social and religious order and, in many cases, as key economic institutions managing productive land and other assets. On the other hand, this tendency generated an expansion of priestly power that, although essential to the operation of the state, also compromised the pharaoh's capacity to control the kingdom's resources directly.

In this context, analysis of the administrative titles and roles described in the text, such as "King's Acquaintance" and "Keeper of Largesse," is particularly relevant. As Serrano notes, the title "King's Acquaintance" is common, and it remains unclear whether it was merely honorific or involved an actual administrative function. In either case, those who bore the title were evidently individuals with close connections to the monarchy, and their position probably combined elements of prestige and power, although its precise administrative role remains uncertain. The "Keeper of Largesse," by contrast, was associated with the administration of justice, suggesting that this official was responsible for supervising the execution of judicial decisions, particularly those concerning the property and resources of the state and temples.

This analysis allows us to understand how distinctions between religious and civil functions became increasingly blurred, producing a more complex administration in which hierarchies of power included not only the pharaoh and his court but also priests and officials who managed state and temple assets. The titles discussed reflect not only the

complexity of this system but also the growing participation of priests in administrative and political affairs.

Wilson complements this analysis by noting that, over the course of the Old Kingdom and particularly toward its end, numerous documents survive that attest to a system of fiscal and labor exemptions granted by the pharaoh to particular temples or religious entities. These immunity decrees, issued by royal authority, were primarily intended to exempt temples from taxation and labor services imposed upon other institutions. Temples therefore enjoyed not only fiscal immunity but also exceptional privileges that enabled them to operate with greater autonomy within the economic and political system.

This phenomenon has important implications for understanding the sociopolitical organization of Old Kingdom Egypt. The granting of fiscal and labor immunities not only favored temples but also reflected the growing influence of religion in the everyday life of Egyptian society. At the same time, the system of fiscal exemptions illustrates how pharaonic administration sought to balance the need to sustain religious institutions with the realities of an economic system based upon peasant labor and the exploitation of natural resources.

The strengthening of temples as relatively autonomous entities, in both economic and administrative terms, is a key factor in understanding the weakening of central authority toward the end of the Old Kingdom. The growing concentration of power in the hands of priests, reflected in their control over extensive areas of land and their management of religious resources, contributed to a fragmentation of authority that ultimately affected the stability of central government and facilitated the emergence of tensions among different sectors of the elite.

In conclusion, analysis of Old Kingdom documents and decrees, together with the study of administrative roles and titles, reveals a governmental system characterized by close interaction between religious and political spheres. Although this system initially contributed to cohesion, it also gave rise to a process of concentration of power that ultimately affected the balance between the central administration and religious groups, producing a landscape of increasing fragmentation of authority and growing autonomy among the priestly elite.

As an example of such charters of privilege, we shall provide several extracts from a decree of Pepi I of Dynasty 6, issued for the benefit of his distant ancestor Sneferu of Dynasty 4 and in favor of two pyramid towns, agricultural settlements that supplied personnel and revenues for the service of two of Sneferu's pyramids.

"My Majesty has decreed that these two pyramid towns shall be exempt for him and for all eternity from performing any work for the Palace, from undertaking any form of compulsory labor for any part of the Royal Residence for all eternity, or from providing any levy at the command of any person whatsoever, for all eternity."⁹⁵

Analysis of Pepi I's decree, issued for the benefit of his ancestor Sneferu, provides important insight into the complexity of administration in Dynasty 6 Egypt, particularly with respect to relations among royal authority, temples, and communities dependent upon major funerary projects. The decree, which grants immunity to the populations serving Sneferu's pyramids, reflects a recurrent practice of fiscal exemptions and privileges granted to particular entities or groups within the socioeconomic structure of the Egyptian state.

⁹⁵ "Decreto de Pepi I en beneficio de dos pirámides de dos pirámides de Snefru", in: WILSON, John A. op. cit., p. 154.

Exemptions granted to temples, pyramid towns, and institutional personnel formed part of specific royal strategies. Their accumulation may have altered the fiscal and labor base of certain institutions, but it cannot be assumed in advance that every exemption weakened the state. In some cases, exemption precisely formalized control, protection, and dependence upon the Crown.

Another example of this type of exemption may be found in the immunities granted to the temple of the god Min:

"The Chief Prophet and the Subordinate Prophet of Min, at Koptos..., all the servants engaged in the activity of the House of Min, the acolytes, the Retinue and the Watchmen of Min, the workshop personnel, and the architects of this temple who reside there: My Majesty does not permit that any royal service be required of them, nor herds of cattle, nor herds of donkeys, [nor herds of] small livestock..., no period of labor, nor any compulsory work to be credited to the House of Min, for all eternity. They are exempted anew today for Min of Koptos by decree of the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, [Pepi I], who lives forever and ever. Any governor of Upper Egypt who transfers them to an office of a House of Royal Documents, a House of the Chief of Inspection, an Archive, or [a House] bearing an [Official] Seal in order to make them work on any Palace undertaking shall be anathematized with the word 'treason.'"⁹⁶

The decree concerning the temple of Min at Koptos, issued by King Pepi I, provides important evidence for the operation of systems of fiscal exemption and privilege in Old Kingdom Egypt. Exemptions of this kind demonstrate how the pharaoh employed royal authority to consolidate control over the clergy and the resources associated with religious institutions, particularly temples that played crucial economic, political, and cultural roles within the kingdom. The text reveals a set of

⁹⁶ Source in: WILSON, John A. op. cit., pp. 154, 155.

exemptions affecting a wide range of persons involved in the religious activity of Min's temple at Koptos, including the "Chief Prophet," the "Subordinate Prophet," other members of the retinue, and temple workers such as "acolytes," "watchmen," "workshop personnel," and "architects." These exemptions not only protected clergy from obligations of royal service but also released them from compulsory labor, including tasks involving livestock and other agricultural duties ordinarily imposed upon Egyptian populations. The exemption of these groups indicates the political, economic, and religious importance of Min's temple. As an institution dedicated to one of the major deities of the Egyptian pantheon, its protection reflects the privileged position of temples as institutions enjoying particular rights granted directly by the pharaoh. The exemption may be interpreted in part as a means of ensuring that the temple's human and material resources were not diverted to other purposes, including demands imposed by the central government, thus securing the uninterrupted continuation of religious activity. The phrase "for all eternity" carries strong symbolic significance in the Egyptian religious context, where eternity implied not only perpetuity in a transcendent or spiritual sense but also continuity in administrative and material terms. Perpetual exemption reinforces the relationship between the pharaoh's immortality and the preservation of religious institutions, a fundamental principle in the organization of Egyptian society. This permanence further underscores the continuity of cults and temple functions as an integral part of the state structure, not to be interrupted by the demands of secular authority.

The decree also highlights an important aspect of the Egyptian political system: the pharaoh's jurisdiction over local governors. The text explicitly states that any attempt by a governor of Upper Egypt to transfer clergy or temple workers

for labor in the royal palace is to be regarded as treason. Such control illustrates how the pharaoh used exemptions and privileges to maintain a balance of power within the kingdom and prevent temple personnel from being exploited for purposes other than those for which they had been assigned. This mechanism also illustrates tensions between the interests of the state, represented by the pharaoh, and religious institutions possessing substantial autonomy. The emphasis on protecting persons associated with the temple of Min indicates the importance of these groups within Egyptian society. Exemption applied not only to priests but also to architects and laborers, underscoring the significance of architectural works and the administration of temples as centers of power. Egyptian temples were not merely places of worship but major administrative and economic institutions that often controlled land, resources, and personnel. The legal protection granted to these groups ensured that construction and maintenance activities could continue without interference from fiscal or labor demands imposed by the state. The decree also establishes a clear distinction between religious activities and civil and political obligations. The prohibition against using temple dependents for palace labor or other tasks of central government reflects a principle of differentiation between religious and political spheres which, although never absolute, allowed religious institutions to operate with relative autonomy from state administration. This distinction is important for understanding how the pharaoh could delegate aspects of authority to religious institutions without relinquishing ultimate control over them.

In conclusion, Pepi I's decree in favor of the temple of Min at Koptos not only underscores the importance of religious institutions within the political and social structure of the Old Kingdom but also shows how the pharaoh used fiscal

privileges and exemptions to ensure the stability and perpetuity of religious cults while regulating the human and material resources controlled by those institutions. Measures of this kind reflect the complexity of Egyptian administration, in which politics, religion, and economy were intrinsically interconnected, and demonstrate how royal decrees could consolidate pharaonic power without necessarily eliminating temple autonomy.

During Dynasty 6, a key process in the evolution of the political-administrative system of ancient Egypt became more firmly established: the increasing autonomy of temples of divine cult from direct supervision by the central Administration. This process, by which religious cults became less directly subject to royal control and which was facilitated by the sociopolitical tensions of the period, marked the beginning of a phase in which temples acquired unprecedented economic and political importance. The dynamic led to the consolidation of regional centers of power that, although formally subordinate to the pharaoh, operated with growing independence and accumulated extensive material and human resources.

The independence of local temples and the growing autonomy of regional religious centers, particularly in the southern provinces, resulted in the concentration of considerable wealth and power. These temples were not only centers of cult but also influential economic and administrative institutions. As religious cults became increasingly detached from direct royal supervision, substantial resources previously administered by the central government were transferred to these institutions. Although this dynamic may initially have favored religious stability, it ultimately proved detrimental to central authority. By allowing temples to operate with such autonomy, the Egyptian monarchy lost control over a

significant share of the resources required for the efficient functioning of the Administration and for the continuation of its centralizing policies. It is noteworthy that the pharaohs' decision to permit this degree of temple independence rather than strengthening control over religious institutions may appear puzzling from the perspective of fiscal and political administration. Despite the adverse effects that such policies may have had upon the royal treasury, kings did not reverse them, and the reasons for this continuity remain incompletely understood. Possible motives range from a desire to strengthen cults and ensure religious prosperity to an inability to overcome internal and external pressures that prevented the pharaohs from recovering control over temples. In a context of sociopolitical tension and internal rivalry, royal authority may have chosen to maintain an equilibrium with religious institutions, relying upon these centers to contribute to social and political order through their influence over local communities.

The traditional explanation according to which temples became independent, eroded pharaonic power, and caused the fragmentation of the Old Kingdom is overly linear. Cult institutions accumulated resources and some provincial elites expanded their autonomy, but the same actors could simultaneously remain integrated into networks of royal service. The transformation at the end of Dynasty 6 requires analysis of taxation, succession, provincial structures, economy, settlements, and environment without reducing temples to a single cause of political change.

Understanding the administrative structure of the "provincial regions," or *nomes*, of pharaonic Egypt, particularly during the period under analysis, presents significant challenges because of the limited archaeological evidence available. Urban archaeology in Egypt, despite

important advances, remains uneven, especially for the Old Kingdom. The number of excavated settlements is still limited and, in many cases, excavation has been partial, substantially constraining the scope of the evidence.

This shortage of satisfactory archaeological data is compounded by the difficulty of applying a modern contrast between urban and rural contexts to ancient Egypt. There is insufficient evidence to establish whether ancient Egyptians conceptualized a clear distinction between these two spheres, at least in terms comparable to those employed today. The lack of information concerning social structures and relations of production in different types of urban and rural settlements makes any attempt to contrast these forms of organization necessarily speculative. Written documents, although limited, have sometimes been interpreted as suggesting a form of "national urbanization policy," a concept that remains debated because neither the motivations nor the mechanisms by which such a policy might have been implemented are known. References to "new towns" in ancient texts appear to indicate, at least in part, deliberate efforts to promote settlement or establish new urban centers, although the details and scale of the process remain uncertain.

Old Kingdom settlement archaeology has advanced considerably and can no longer be reduced to four sites taken as representative of the nomes. Excavations and regional studies at Giza, Elephantine, Edfu, Ayn Asil, Kom el-Hisn, Hierakonpolis, and other locations have expanded knowledge of housing, production, administration, and urban organization. Preservation remains uneven, particularly in the Delta, but the available picture is substantially broader than that accessible to twentieth-century historiography.

Hierakonpolis (Nekhen): This site, regarded as one of the most important in the history of early Egypt, provides a key perspective on administrative and religious organization in the Predynastic and Early Dynastic periods. Hierakonpolis was a center of major political and religious significance, and although excavations have produced important discoveries, information concerning its administrative structure during the Old Kingdom remains incomplete.

Abydos (Abdju): Abydos, closely associated with the cult of Osiris, was a religious center of major importance. Although the site has been extensively excavated, evidence for provincial administration remains fragmentary and does not provide a complete picture of how the "nomes" were organized in terms of territorial control and resource management.

Edfu (Behedet Shema): Edfu, located in Upper Egypt, is known principally for its temple dedicated to Horus, but information concerning provincial administration at the site remains limited. The absence of comprehensive excavation in other parts of the settlement complicates reconstruction of its role within the administrative system of the Old Kingdom.

Elephantine (Abu): Elephantine, located on Egypt's southern frontier, played an important role in controlling trade and transportation routes. Although excavations have been conducted, its administrative role within the context of the "nomes" has not been completely reconstructed, and the archaeological evidence remains insufficient for definitive conclusions concerning its political and social structure.

The present archaeological record allows the diversity of Old Kingdom settlements to be studied with greater precision, although substantial regional gaps remain. Not every center can be straightforwardly identified with a nome, nor should all later administrative divisions be projected backward. The combination of urban archaeology, seals,

ceramics, titulary, and regional landscapes provides a more secure analytical framework.

Analysis of the available archaeological evidence for urbanization and administrative organization in Old Kingdom Egypt reveals significant limitations in both the quantity and quality of documentation. Information concerning regions of Upper Egypt is somewhat more accessible than that for the Delta or Lower Egypt, where excavations at sites such as Tell Basta and Mendes have demonstrated stable human occupation but where the evidence remains sparse and fragmentary. Thus, although progress has been made in understanding parts of Upper Egypt, the overall picture remains incomplete and partial.

With regard to the towns of Upper Egypt, comparison with cities of the Classical and modern worlds reveals their relatively small size. This observation has led some specialists to suggest that Egypt's total population during the Old Kingdom may have reached at most approximately one and a half million inhabitants, although any figure of this kind must remain hypothetical in the absence of robust demographic data. The limited scale of urban settlements and the possible structure of population distribution reflect a preindustrial society characterized by dispersed urbanization, in which numerous smaller rural villages were distributed around moderately sized urban nuclei. Settlement distribution across the territory, particularly along the Nile, nevertheless exhibits a degree of regularity. Memphis is particularly relevant in this context. Despite limited excavation, available evidence suggests that population distribution in the Memphite region was not simply discontinuous or dispersed. Archaeological studies have revealed continuing urban expansion, especially in Upper Egypt, suggesting a process of urban development associated

with the growth of regional autonomy. This phenomenon reflects, in part, the consolidation of urban centers as regions acquired greater authority and control over their own resources.

A significant aspect of urban and religious organization in ancient Egypt is the contrast between regional centers of divine cult and temples dedicated to the sovereign's funerary cult. Provincial temples of divine cult were considerably smaller than the pharaoh's pyramid complexes, which included funerary temples. This pattern emerged toward the end of Dynasty 1 and continued into the New Kingdom. Funerary temples associated with pyramids came to constitute particularly significant centers of religious power, while regional centers of divine cult occupied a different and often more limited institutional scale.

Archaeological identifications must remain open to revision when the evidence is incomplete. Cases in which cultic structures were initially attributed to particular kings illustrate the importance of combining architecture, stratigraphy, epigraphy, and material evidence. Revision of an attribution does not in itself demonstrate a general pattern of error but rather the normal operation of a discipline in which new excavations can modify earlier interpretations.

The Palermo Stone preserves records of important territorial donations beginning in Dynasty 5, for example under Neferirkare:

The reign of Neferirkare Kakai according to the Palermo Stone (Dynasty V).

"The Horus User-Khau, the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, the Two Ladies H-em-Sekhemu (?), [Horus] of Gold...
[Year 1]. [The first year in which the sovereign reigned for the final two months and seven days. [Festival of the] Birth of the Gods.

CREATION OF AN EMPIRE

[Ceremony of the] Union of the Two Lands. Circuit of the Wall. The King of Upper and Lower Egypt Neferirkare made [it] as his monument for:

-The Divine Ennead of the Double Divine Chapels in the city [called]

"Neferirkare-Beloved-of-the-Ennead"; cultivable land amounting to 30x100+10... arouras in the nome of Memphis, under the authority of the House of Neferirkare, beloved of his son.

-The Bas of Heliopolis, in the eastern nome, in the city [called] "Neferirkare-Beloved-of-the-Bas-of-Heliopolis"; arable land amounting to 110x100+10 arouras.

-The Bas of Heliopolis.

-The gods of Her-Aha, in the neighboring eastern nome; arable land in the following number of arouras: 352x100+20+1+1/2+1/4; one parcel under the authority of "The Two Great Seers" and another under the authority of the officials and priests of their temple; both parcels, as divine offerings, are exempt from taxes like the Estate of the God.

-Re-Senef and Hathor. An altar for each in the foundation [called] "Hutty," [provided] each day with 210 portions of divine offerings of bread and beer for one and 204 for the other, with appropriate storerooms and dependents assigned to each altar.

The Festival of the Opening of the Mouth of a statue of Ihi made of electrum, and the procession [to the temple] of Hathor, [Lady of the] Sycamore, at Meret-Snofru.

For Re, [in the chapel of] Tep-Hut; to make for him... the House of the Thirty...

[...]

[Year 10(?)]. [The year of the] ... Festival of the Opening of the Mouth in the Mansion of

Gold... the levy of taxes (?)... Neferirkare... for Re in the solar temple [called] "Favorite Place of Re" ... To make for him a Circuit of the Wall... To establish for him the estate... for King Huni; arable land amounting to ... arouras... Year of the fifth occasion of the census...

[Year 11 8?]. The year of the Appearance of the King of Upper Egypt and the appearance of the King of Lower Egypt... Erection of the Wall of the Solar Bark at the southern corner [of the solar

temple called "The Favorite Place of Re". The King of Upper and Lower Egypt Neferirkare made [them] as his monument for:

-Re in the solar temple [called] "The Favorite Place of Re": [images] of the Evening Solar Bark and the Morning Solar Bark, each of copper and eight cubits long.

-The Bas of Heliopolis... made of electrum...

-Wadjet in the Southern City... made of electrum..."⁹⁷

This fragment describes a crucial aspect of religious and territorial administration in Old Kingdom Egypt, particularly during the reign of Neferirkare. It addresses the manner in which territorial donations such as those mentioned above were directly connected with the establishment of monuments or temples dedicated to deities fundamental to official royal theology. This system of donations served not only to strengthen the Crown but also to guarantee the maintenance of priests and other state agents responsible for administering cults and religious services.

As Serrano notes, it is significant that territorial donations were made in favor of deities closely connected with sovereign theological doctrine, including Ra, Ptah, Hathor, Nekhbet, and Edjo (Wadjet). These deities represented not only religious principles but also key elements of royal power. The pharaoh, in addition to serving as political and military leader, presented himself as an intermediary between divine forces and the population, and his authority was deeply associated with divinity. The donation of land to temples dedicated to these deities therefore not only secured cultic activity but also functioned as an instrument of political control. Temples consequently became centers of local political influence that helped perpetuate the image of the pharaoh and consolidate royal authority throughout Egyptian territory.

⁹⁷ *Piedra de Palermo*, "El Reinado de Neferirkaré- Kakai", in: SERRANO, DELGADO, José. op. cit., pp. 71-72.

The administration of such temples, as illustrated by Hierakonpolis, Dendera, and Koptos, was not merely a religious matter. Temples in the Egyptian provinces functioned as structures of regional power through which the pharaoh maintained a presence even in areas distant from the governmental center. Royal statuary placed in these regional temples served as a means of transmitting pharaonic authority to local populations, creating a network of agents who sustained the king's presence throughout the territory.

Provincial temples and funerary cults participated in important economic and social networks, but the contracts from Asyut belong to the Middle Kingdom and should not be used without qualification as direct evidence for Old Kingdom administration. For Dynasties 5 and 6, provincial titulary, tombs, and decrees reveal the increasing visibility of regional authorities whose relationship with the Crown varied and cannot be reduced to an inevitable trajectory toward independence.

From the end of Dynasty 5 and throughout Dynasty 6, governors and senior provincial officials are more clearly documented. The term *nomarch* is a useful historiographical label, but it groups together different Egyptian titles and should not be transformed into a uniform office applicable to every district. The appearance of major district chiefs and regional priesthoods reveals changes in the articulation between the Residence and the provinces.

The accumulation of administrative and priestly titles in a single individual demonstrates the permeability between functions that modern historiography separates into civil and religious categories. It does not mean that governors were primarily priests or that provincial office necessarily originated in an autonomous clergy. Each biography and

cluster of titles must be situated within its specific region and historical moment.

The burial of officials connected with provincial regions in the Memphite necropolis may express proximity to the court, integration into royal networks, or family strategies and does not necessarily indicate increasing dependence of the Crown upon those districts. Burial location is a political and social indicator, but it is not a direct measure of provincial autonomy.

Funerary foundations and properties associated with elites could be distributed across regions different from the place of burial or the principal office of their owner. This demonstrates extensive economic networks and rights over revenues and personnel, but it does not allow the automatic conclusion that provincial governors exercised political control over those communities. Property, revenue, jurisdiction, and administrative office must be distinguished.

The growth of provincial elites in Dynasty 6 represents a transformation of the political structure, but the degree of their autonomy varied. The documentation reveals both regional interests and continued integration within the monarchy. There is no demonstrable continuity by which such autonomy remained unchanged throughout the remainder of the pharaonic period.

4.7 Funerary Democratization and Social Change

Cultural demotization is a complex process involving primarily the Egyptian ruling classes, although its effects may also be extended to broader dimensions of Egyptian culture, particularly writing and modes of symbolic representation. In

the periods preceding the Old Kingdom, writing was used principally as an administrative technique in the service of power, a role reflected in its restricted use for official and supervisory purposes. With the consolidation of the kingdom under Dynasty 1 and the subsequent unification of Egypt, however, material and symbolic culture expanded in parallel. This process gave rise to a palace culture characterized not only by monumental development and a distinctive artistic style, but also by the emergence of a coherent body of knowledge, a particular semantic system, an elevated language, and a normative moral code maintained under the exclusive control of the ruling elite, as John Baines has observed.

The centrality of the royal palace in structuring this palace culture entailed the suppression or marginalization of local, provincial, and rural cultures, which were relegated to a secondary position in terms of symbolic representation. Palace culture encompassed not only art but also writing, architecture, and a range of ritual practices that became defining features of the ruling elite. Writing, initially a functional instrument of administration, was transformed into a mechanism of exclusion that further consolidated the separation between the political elite and the rest of the population. In this context, only officials and priests of the court had access to the knowledge and means required to produce literary, artistic, and architectural works used to reinforce the centralized power of the pharaoh. This process of cultural appropriation was not sudden but developed gradually across several dynasties. In art, the transformation is visible in the appropriation by officials of symbols and representational styles that had initially been reserved exclusively for pharaohs or the royal family. This phenomenon should not be interpreted as a democratization of culture, but rather as an expansion of political values and symbols originally associated with kingship and now employed

by a bureaucratic class that progressively assumed the role of representing central authority in the regions. In other words, this process of appropriation does not constitute democratization in the modern sense, but rather a revaluation of symbols of power by an administrative elite that increasingly assumed political and religious competencies.

Artistic and architectural production, initially undertaken under state patronage and in relation to royal power, increasingly came to be used by officials to project their own authority. Within the context of the Old Kingdom, an individual could not independently finance the construction of a monumental sarcophagus, a royal-scale tomb, or a large statue. Such projects required resources and organization that only central authority could provide. Art and architecture consequently became extensions of the state apparatus, and their production was concentrated in state workshops, further reinforcing the connection between artistic production and the exercise of power. Through the court and high-ranking officials, the state became the principal producer of symbolic goods that reinforced the legitimacy and continuity of the political system.

During Naqada II, the use of writing intensified and became an instrument of domination and control accessible principally to circles close to clan or tribal leaders. Writing thus became a vehicle of power used to consolidate authority and social relations among groups closest to the ruling elite. During this period, Egypt increasingly diverged from an earlier pattern characterized by dispersed villages and moved toward the formation of urban centers that marked clearer social and economic distinctions. Urban centers and areas under royal influence became key locations for consolidating a structure of domination that increasingly separated the ruling elite from the rest of the population. This process, however, was not free of

crisis. As power became centralized around the pharaoh and his court, social tensions emerged from the limited participation of common people in political and cultural life. The exclusion of the broader population generated a crisis of participation that intensified over time and ultimately contributed to problems of distribution and provisioning. Famines and other social difficulties affecting the population are presented as manifestations of the structural inequalities generated by centralized power and by a culture benefiting only a restricted elite. The concentration of authority in the figure of the pharaoh and the absence of mechanisms of popular participation generated tensions affecting the political stability of the kingdom.

The transformation at the end of the Old Kingdom should not be described as a linear decentralization that necessarily culminated in anarchy. Changes in access to funerary texts, cemeteries, titles, and expressions of local identity were combined with political reconfigurations. The older thesis of an automatic democratization of the afterlife has been substantially qualified: the diffusion of practices formerly associated with kingship did not imply social equality or the disappearance of hierarchy. Likewise, revised chronology and recent paleoclimatic research advise against any monocausal explanation for the end of the Old Kingdom.⁹⁸

Alongside the reorganization of the state, culture played a crucial role in consolidating Egyptian power and identity. The clearest expression of the development of Egyptian culture can be observed through various artistic and monumental

⁹⁸McKay et al. (2024); Bussmann, *The Archaeology of Pharaonic Egypt* (2023); Erdil et al. (2025).

manifestations, which acquire still greater significance when analyzed comparatively with later periods. Egyptian culture not only preserved but also reinforced a canonical normativity that became a model throughout subsequent history. This stylistic pattern appears across a broad range of works, from monumental pyramids to small statuettes, temples, stelae, false doors, and offering tables. In all these cases, a remarkable continuity in representational elements can be observed, with forms remaining comparatively stable over centuries.

Beyond this stylistic persistence, which reflects the stability and continuity of Old Kingdom art and architecture, major monumental works such as the pyramids provide a clear indication of the material achievements reached during the period. The pyramids represented not only the pharaoh's divine power but also the technological and organizational capacities of Egyptian society. In this sense, the Old Kingdom, particularly under Dynasty 3, established several of the most fundamental pillars of Egyptian culture, including what has been termed the "ideology of stone." The concept is rooted in the development of large-scale stone construction under Djoser, whose Step Pyramid at Saqqara inaugurated a new paradigm in monumental architecture. This achievement secured Djoser a privileged position in Egyptian cultural memory, a legacy that endured for centuries. His monument not only established his reputation as a major ruler but transformed Saqqara into a center of cult associated with him, to the point that he was later venerated as a divine figure. His vizier Imhotep was likewise worshiped as a son of Ptah and became one of the most influential figures associated with this period.

The Step Pyramid of Saqqara, with its six levels and a total height of approximately 63 meters, constitutes the first large-scale construction executed entirely in stone. This monumental

project represented not only an architectural achievement but also a milestone in the history of engineering and labor organization in ancient Egypt. With its complex structure and symbolism, the pyramid exceeds the function of a simple royal tomb. Its architectural and spatial design reflects a worldview extending beyond the funerary sphere and symbolically projecting the pharaoh's domain over all Egypt and, in a broader sense, over the entire earth.

The Step Pyramid complex, with its carefully planned arrangement, offers a representation of the pharaoh's supreme power. The complex includes two tombs: one intended for the king of Upper Egypt and regarded as the actual receptacle of the sovereign's body, and another symbolizing his sovereignty over Lower Egypt and functioning as a ritual cenotaph. This arrangement reflects funerary practices associated with the Early Dynastic period while simultaneously emphasizing the symbolic and ritual character of pharaonic power, projected beyond the king's earthly role and connected with his divine nature.

The Step Pyramid of Saqqara expresses an exceptional capacity for mobilization and a new scale of royal monumentality, but the term absolutist should be employed cautiously. The monument materializes hierarchy, memory, and ritual, yet it does not by itself permit the inference that the king exercised unlimited control over every institution and community in the country.⁹⁹

The reign of Djoser inaugurated a megalithic era that reached its greatest expression under the pharaohs of Dynasty 4. The monumentality characteristic of this period was consolidated principally through the construction of the great

⁹⁹ SANMARTIN, Joaquín. SERRANO, José Miguel. *op. cit.*, pp. 259-269.

pyramids at Giza, tangible evidence of the concentration of power in the hands of the sovereign. During Dynasty 4, the royal family played a crucial role in state administration and occupied many of the highest governmental offices, reflecting the concentration of power and wealth at the royal court. The dynasty is inseparably associated with the archaeological landscape of Giza, where some of the most emblematic monuments of ancient Egypt were constructed.

One of the most prominent pharaohs of this period was Sneferu, who acquired a notable reputation as a generous king close to his people. This more humanized and accessible character distinguished him in Egyptian literature, as can be seen in the *Prophecy of Neferty*, where Sneferu is portrayed not only as a wise monarch but also as a ruler concerned with the education and welfare of his subjects. According to Nicolas Grimal, Sneferu endured in Egyptian cultural memory as a legendary figure and was venerated even during the Middle Kingdom, when later sovereigns such as Amenemhat I invoked him as a model of ideal kingship in support of their own legitimacy. The prominence of his cult was such that restorations were undertaken at his funerary temple at Dahshur, demonstrating the durability of his legacy. In terms of building activity, Sneferu was among the most prolific pharaohs and is associated with the construction of three pyramids, monuments that represent not only architectural ambition but also the consolidation of techniques and symbolism that would establish the pyramid as the central form of Egyptian monumentality.

The transformation of architecture under Dynasty 4, with the turn toward extensive use of stone, marked a major change in art and engineering. Pyramids, beyond their funerary function, became symbols of the pharaoh's supreme power, and their monumentality demonstrated the organizational and

coordinating capacities of the Egyptian state. Mobilizing resources and organizing a large labor force for projects of this scale required a strongly centralized state capable of concentrating authority and directing substantial human and material resources. The organization of labor, precision engineering, and architectural vision embodied in the pyramids became tangible expressions of royal will, capable, in literal and figurative terms, of "moving mountains." Egyptian architecture therefore symbolized not only political power but also the state's capacity to materialize a conception of divine and enduring order through monumentality.

The reign of Khufu, another of the most famous pharaohs of Dynasty 4, presents a more ambiguous image in terms of character and legacy. Construction of the Great Pyramid of Giza, the largest of the Egyptian pyramids, constitutes one of the most remarkable achievements of Egyptian history. In later Egyptian literary tradition, however, Khufu is sometimes presented as a harsh and cruel ruler obsessed with the construction of his mausoleum. According to later narratives and traditions, Khufu was a monarch prepared to resort to extreme measures to achieve his objectives, including criminal acts, as related in the *Westcar Papyrus*. The ambivalence of his image is notable: while his pyramid stands as one of the greatest achievements of ancient engineering, his reputation as a ruler is darkened by narratives portraying him as ruthless and self-centered. The precise duration of his reign remains uncertain and varies among sources: the *Turin Canon* assigns him twenty-three years, whereas Manetho records a reign of sixty-three years. This discrepancy further illustrates the complexity of Khufu's historical image, whose legacy in Egyptian history is as monumental as his pyramid but also marked by contradictions in later representations of his character and rule.

Herodotus states in his work:

"Indeed, until the reign of Rhampsinitus there was in Egypt, according to the priests, strict legality and the country enjoyed great prosperity (...) there was perfect order." (Herodotus 124)¹¹⁰

Despite the existence of less favorable periods, as Herodotus continues to relate, the image of power represented by the great pyramid constructions endured:

"Khufu (...) plunged all the inhabitants into complete misery. First, he closed all the sanctuaries (...) then he ordered all the Egyptians to work for him. Some he assigned the task of dragging blocks of stone from the quarries in the Arabian mountains to the Nile, while others were ordered to take charge of the blocks once they had been transported by boat to the opposite bank of the river and to drag them to the range called Libyan. They worked continuously in groups of one hundred thousand men, each shift lasting three months. (...) Khufu reached such a degree of wickedness that, finding himself short of money, he placed his own daughter in a brothel and ordered her to obtain a specified sum (...). She obtained the amount her father had demanded and, in addition, decided on her own initiative to leave a memorial of herself; thus, from every man who visited her she requested a block of stone as a gift. And the priests maintain that from those blocks of stone was built, in front of the great pyramid, the one that stands in the middle of the other three..." (Herodotus 125, 126.)¹⁰⁰

Herodotus offers a complex and, in some respects, controversial view of administration and kingship in ancient Egypt, particularly regarding Pharaoh Khufu and the construction of the great pyramids. Written in the fifth century BCE, the work of Herodotus is among the earliest extended historical sources on Egypt and, although crucial to the later transmission of knowledge about Egyptian civilization, its narratives must be contextualized in light of the nature of his sources and his literary approach. In the first passage cited above, Egypt is described as possessing "strict legality" and remarkable prosperity until the reign of Rhampsinitus. This

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 99.

reflects an idealized image of Egyptian government in which perfect order prevailed. Like many ancient historians, Herodotus tends to present periods preceding disruption as examples of harmony and order, a tendency that may be interpreted as nostalgia for an earlier past or admiration for Egyptian periods remembered for stability and organization. The "legality" he mentions may refer both to laws governing the country and to an administrative system capable of maintaining order and prosperity. This image, however, contrasts sharply with the portrait of Khufu that follows. Herodotus depicts Khufu as an extremely oppressive monarch whose determination to construct the Great Pyramid reduced his people to misery. This representation of Khufu as a tyrant obsessed with his mausoleum has traditionally been interpreted as a critique of excessive concentration of power and exploitation of labor for monumental purposes. Herodotus' story that Khufu ordered his daughter to prostitute herself in order to finance the pyramid adds a sensational and moralizing dimension intended to emphasize the king's cruelty and greed. Although such stories may contain substantial exaggeration or moralization, they also reflect a tradition that associated absolute power with the oppression of lower social groups.

Despite this internal criticism of Khufu's government, Herodotus also emphasizes the importance of commercial and military expeditions undertaken by Egypt to compensate for deficiencies in particular resources. This highlights Egypt's position as a civilization that, although based upon an agricultural economy, could not depend exclusively upon its own territory for every material required by its development. The need to import timber, minerals, and precious stones demonstrates Egypt's interconnection with the wider world and the state organization necessary to sustain commercial relations and expeditions. Herodotus' work therefore provides

not only a view of power within Egypt but also an image of the crucial role attributed to the pharaoh in managing resources, both internal and external.

Even during Dynasty 6, under the reign of Merenre, campaigns of expansion continued to be undertaken, particularly those led by Weni, whose successes earned him appointment as governor of Upper Egypt:

"His Majesty then had to act against the Asiatics, the 'Sand-Dwellers.'

His Majesty assembled an army of many tens of thousands of men [drawn] from all Upper Egypt..., from Lower Egypt and all its districts (...) His Majesty sent me at the head of this army, with princes, Chancellors of the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Companions, chiefs of interpreters, Superiors of the Priests of Upper and Lower Egypt (...) It was I who established the campaign plan for them (...) This army returned in peace after having ravaged the lands of the Sand-Dwellers (...) after having destroyed their fortresses, ... after having cut down their fig trees and vines, ... after having burned all their dwellings, ... after having slaughtered many tens of thousands of the troops who were there, ... after having brought back a very great number of people from there as captives. His Majesty sent me to command this army on five occasions, in order to subdue the land of the Sand-Dwellers each time they rebelled, with these same troops. (...) I arrived, captured all of them, and killed all the rebels among them."¹⁰¹

Analysis of the historical source represented by Weni's autobiography provides a valuable perspective on the political, social, and military dynamics of Egypt's Old Kingdom, particularly during Dynasty 6 under the reign of Merenre. The text belongs to a funerary literary tradition that, although commemorative in character, provides access to structures of power and to the internal and external tensions defining the period.

¹⁰¹ *"Autobiografía de Uni"*, in: GRIMAL, Nicolás. op. cit., pp. 90-92.

First, it is important to emphasize the scale of the military campaigns described by Weni. The account mentions the formation of an army drawn from different parts of Egypt, illustrating not only the pharaoh's territorial reach but also the operation of a centralized state apparatus capable of mobilizing human resources on a large scale. This capacity for mobilization, extending beyond local contexts to the entire country, reflects an administrative organization able to coordinate and execute major military decisions.

Particularly revealing in this passage is the ideological and symbolic dimension attributed to the expedition. The invasion of the "Sand-Dwellers" is presented not merely as a military conquest but as a manifestation of pharaonic power, with trusted figures such as Weni entrusted with executing the sovereign's will. In describing the campaign, Weni includes details emphasizing both the scale of the army and the ritualized, almost sacral character of the mission. The extensive destruction of land, slaughter of enemies, and seizure of resources from conquered territory are presented as necessary elements in securing victory and affirming the legitimacy of the pharaoh as sovereign. Such military campaigns were not oriented solely toward territorial expansion but also reflected the consolidation of a system of domination grounded in violence and subjugation. Explicit references to the killing of rebels and the taking of captives emphasize the harshness of warfare and the instrumental use of violence as a mechanism of control. Weni's presentation of himself as the military commander who led and directed the mission simultaneously projects pharaonic authority as an overwhelming force capable of subjugating hostile populations and controlling territory and resources. The account also reflects tensions inherent in Old Kingdom conceptions of power. On the one hand, the

pharaoh and his court are represented as divinely sanctioned figures responsible not only for maintaining order within Egypt but also for subduing external peoples. On the other hand, repeated references to the "Sand-Dwellers" as a recurring threat reveal that this order required continuing military intervention. The text also underscores the importance of funerary narrative within Egyptian culture. Like other autobiographies of the period, Weni's inscription does more than record an individual's achievements; it reinforces the protagonist's social and political status. Weni appears not only as a loyal official of the pharaoh but also as a renowned military commander whose heroic image is perpetuated through the inscription in his tomb. This reflects an increasingly visible tendency, particularly from Dynasty 5 onward, for Egyptian officials to secure an enduring legacy by celebrating personal achievements. At the same time, the representation of the pharaoh emphasizes his position as supreme and divinely sanctioned ruler. Merenre, although not the protagonist of the autobiography, remains the ultimate reference point of authority. The narrative does not discuss the pharaoh's motivations in detail, but Weni's repeated references to "His Majesty" and the presentation of his own successes as royal service underscore the centrality of kingship within Egyptian political life. Royal commands are presented as binding, and pharaonic will extends beyond Egypt's borders. The campaigns of Dynasty 6 also reveal the continuing importance of projecting power abroad. Although the Old Kingdom is often associated with internal order and monumentality, expeditions such as those described by Weni demonstrate that Egypt remained engaged in external conflict. In a context in which foreign relations and internal stability were deeply interconnected, military campaigns served not only to project Egyptian authority but also to secure resources and protect

strategic frontiers. Ultimately, Weni's account provides a rich and complex view of Old Kingdom power. It highlights military activity as an extension of pharaonic authority, the central position of the king and his administrative apparatus, and the mechanisms through which political and social memory was constructed for rulers and servants alike, each seeking to perpetuate achievement through the inscription of names and deeds in funerary texts.

During Dynasty 4, artisanal groups in ancient Egypt underwent significant diversification, reflected in the increasing specialization of functions and the establishment of hierarchical structures among craft workers. Prominent figures represented in the sources of this period not only occupied positions of responsibility within artisanal production but also performed crucial roles in organizing and supervising specialized work. Among titles found in inscriptions are "master sculptor of the Two Administrations" and "director of all works," as well as more specific positions such as "director of the armory." Such titles denote not only advanced technical skill but also the capacity to manage major projects and coordinate labor within the complex work structures of the period. The organization of labor and development of hierarchy among artisans, an important feature of the Egyptian economy, became particularly significant during Dynasty 4, when monumental construction such as the pyramids required precise coordination among multiple crafts and specializations. The role of the master or director therefore extended beyond technical supervision to the organization of human and material resources essential to project efficiency. This structure fostered a body of highly trained specialized workers whose expertise became indispensable to the development of Egyptian monumental architecture. During Dynasties 5 and 6, representations of craft labor and artisans became more

established and extended beyond courtly and central administrative contexts into the provinces. This tendency, visible in the tombs of prominent local officials and regional governors, emphasizes artisans not merely as executors of specific tasks but as important participants in the projection of regional authority. Increasingly prominent provincial elites displayed works produced under their supervision and represented the diversity of crafts and skills contributing to the prestige of their domains. The emphasis on artisanal production reflects not only workers' technical ability but also their place within the administrative and political apparatus of the Egyptian state. Images and texts in officials' tombs deliberately associate artisanal expertise with the power and authority of local rulers. This phenomenon is particularly visible in the tombs of Dynasty 5 officials, where craft production is celebrated not merely as a technical achievement but as an expression of prestige and the stability of regional authority.

From Dynasty 5 onward, representations of artisans and their work became more diverse. The "masters" or supervisors of architectural and building projects, including high-ranking officials responsible for the production of monuments and public buildings, increasingly represented a wider range of initiatives and projects in their tombs. These individuals presented themselves not simply as executors of royal orders but as active figures in decision-making and in the implementation of architectural and artistic innovations. This diversification in iconographic representation, encompassing a wide range of professions from sculptors to those responsible for temple and pyramid construction, reflects a change in the social perception of artisans and their importance within the hierarchy. Officials responsible for architectural programs, particularly the most prominent among them, did not merely

supervise projects from a distance but were represented as present at workplaces and closely engaged with laborers and specialists to ensure successful completion. Their activity extended beyond construction sites to quarries and other locations from which necessary materials were obtained. This suggests that, although building projects were strongly centralized, substantial cooperation among different levels of Egyptian administration was required to secure the availability and transport of materials essential to monumental construction. In social terms, this process reflects the increasing professionalization of crafts and the expansion of networks of communication and cooperation among groups of workers and officials. Division of labor and functional specialization allowed Egyptian artisans to develop technical mastery expressed in some of the most emblematic products of Egyptian civilization, including monumental statuary, temples, and richly decorated tombs. Dynasties 5 and 6 consolidated a model in which craftsmanship represented not only technical skill but also a vehicle for the assertion of political and social power. Visual representations of artisans and their work in the tombs of officials and rulers reveal an increasingly sophisticated appreciation of art and architecture not merely as aesthetic achievements but as symbols of social order, political stability, and the pharaoh's divine authority.

"His Majesty sent me to Ibbat to obtain the sarcophagus of the living, 'Lord of Life,' with its lid and the precious and august pyramidion intended for the pyramid 'Merenre Appears in [His] Perfection,' my sovereign. His Majesty sent me to Elephantine to obtain the granite false door with its threshold, lintels, and granite jambs, and to obtain the granite doors and slabs for the chamber of the pyramid 'Merenre Appears in [His] Perfection,' my sovereign. I brought them down the Nile to the pyramid 'Merenre Appears in [His] Perfection' in six barges, three boats, and three ships... (?), in

a single expedition (...) His Majesty sent me to Hatnub to obtain a
great offering table of Hatnub alabaster (...) "¹⁰²

The expedition reflects the monumental scale of the works undertaken under Merenre. References to objects such as the "sarcophagus of the living" and the pyramidion reveal the profound symbolism of these constructions, not merely as tombs but as structures representing the relationship between the pharaoh and the gods and symbolizing royal eternity and divine perfection. The perfection of the pyramid mentioned in the inscription refers not only to architectural quality but also to the religious conception underlying the monument. Such structures, more than simple tombs, reaffirmed the pharaoh's divine status in relation to the preservation of cosmic order and continuity of life. The logistics of transport are equally significant. The use of the Nile, vital to Egyptian infrastructure, as the principal means of transporting granite, alabaster, and other valuable materials highlights the sophistication of Old Kingdom transportation networks. The description of ships, barges, and boats carrying materials to the pyramid also underscores the central role of the river as the country's principal artery, capable of supporting large-scale resource mobilization. The expedition demonstrates not only administrative skill but also the centralization of pharaonic authority. As supreme ruler, the pharaoh ordered the acquisition of materials and controlled their allocation to projects associated with royal monumentality. The account therefore emphasizes the king's central role in state organization and in the exercise of power. The expedition also demonstrates Egypt's dependence upon geographically dispersed resources. The dispatch of officials to locations such as Ibbat, Elephantine, and Hatnub to obtain building materials

¹⁰² *Source*, in: DONADONI, Sergio (DIR). op. cit., p. 72.

reflects the uneven distribution of granite, alabaster, and other resources and the consequent need to organize expeditions to secure them. Finally, funerary texts of this kind played an important ideological role. Beyond recording the achievements of an official or prominent figure, such inscriptions validated pharaonic authority and reinforced perceptions of the king's divine connection. The perfection of the pyramid and its funerary objects served not only as symbols of wealth and power but also of the eternity expected for the pharaoh in the afterlife.

Egypt's Old Kingdom, renowned for its splendor and as one of the most emblematic civilizations of antiquity, is deeply associated with monumental funerary construction, particularly the pyramids. These great structures, which survive to the present day, represent not only exceptional architectural achievements but also direct manifestations of the relations of power, organization, and economy that defined the Egyptian state. The pyramids thus constitute a synthesis of pharaonic authority, both in the conditions of their construction and in the manner in which they reflect relationships among the pharaoh, the population, and the divine.

The Royal Cemeteries, located near the Western Desert and north of Memphis, are fundamental to understanding the hierarchy of the Old Kingdom. Differences in the size, complexity, and location of tombs reflect not only the status of the pharaoh but also a deeply hierarchical social structure. The gradation observable in funerary construction was not merely a reflection of a ruler's wealth but a visual and symbolic manifestation of power in which monumentality reinforced royal authority. In this context, pyramids were not only resting places for pharaohs but enduring symbols of royal divinity and the continuation of authority in the afterlife, expressing eternal victory over death.

The scale of pyramid construction cannot be separated from its economic dimension. Building the pyramids represented one of the major productive activities of the Old Kingdom and involved thousands of workers, artisans, technicians, and laborers organized through a logistical system of extraordinary complexity. These were not merely architectural works but integrated economic projects encompassing the extraction and transport of materials as well as construction itself. The concentration of human and material resources in support of pyramid projects reflects the substantial economic authority of the pharaoh and the state's capacity to mobilize and manage resources efficiently toward the completion of these monuments. One of the most remarkable features of pyramid construction was the organization and distribution of labor. Building structures of this scale required a sophisticated administrative system that not only supervised quarry work and transport logistics but also managed recruitment and the assignment of tasks among different groups of workers. This bureaucratic apparatus served the execution of royal projects. In this sense, the pyramid represents not only an engineering achievement but also the material expression of an administrative machine capable of coordinating large-scale effort, thereby revealing the extraordinary concentration of pharaonic power.

As the Old Kingdom developed, pyramid-building techniques and materials likewise evolved. Although earlier pyramids such as Khufu's exemplify the use of enormous stone blocks, Dynasties 5 and 6 show a tendency toward the rationalization of construction methods. Rather than emphasizing monumentality alone, pharaohs increasingly adopted more economical and efficient methods, adapting building techniques to changing conditions. This transition should not necessarily be interpreted as decline but may instead

reflect pragmatic adaptation to new challenges and greater flexibility in resource management. The evolution of construction thus reflects both technical and organizational adaptation to emerging needs within Egyptian civilization. The move toward more rationalized methods also demonstrates the state's growing capacity to maximize outcomes within the limits of available resources. It should not simply be interpreted as a loss of quality but as the refinement of different and more efficient modes of construction. The pyramids and Royal Cemeteries of the Old Kingdom were far more than tombs. They formed part of the foundations of a civilization that consolidated cultural, political, and religious identity through monumental structures. Pharaohs used these funerary monuments not only to perpetuate their own glory but also to reinforce their relationship with the divine and to secure the continuity of authority in the afterlife. The pyramids, like the administrative and logistical systems that made their construction possible, testify to the complexity of Egyptian civilization and to its capacity for large-scale organization, contributing to the durability of its culture and worldview.

4.8 Administrative Bureaucratization and Functional Specialization

The process of administrative bureaucratization in ancient Egypt represented a significant transformation in the organization of the state and public administration. In its early stages, administrative tasks were carried out by a hereditary ruling elite generally associated with local clans that exercised positions of authority in different regions of the country. With the growth and increasing complexity of the Old Kingdom, however, the need for a more efficient and specialized administrative structure became evident. This change was

reflected in the progressive supplementation of hereditary criteria by a system in which competence, capacity, and knowledge became increasingly important in the recruitment of officials. As the new organizational system became consolidated, state administration required a greater diversity of tasks and deeper specialization. This produced a more professionalized bureaucratic class whose functions extended from tax collection to the supervision of architectural projects and the management of resources. Literacy, previously a skill concentrated among upper and priestly groups, became essential for anyone aspiring to work within state administration. Mastery of writing thus became crucial not only for communication but also for the exercise of power and administrative organization.

The emergence of scribal schools is one of the clearest manifestations of this process. These institutions taught not only writing but also trained future officials in the principles of Egyptian administration. Scribes were therefore not merely responsible for drafting official documents and maintaining records but became key components of the state's bureaucratic apparatus. Writing was more than an art; it was a fundamental instrument for the control and administration of the country, linking knowledge and technical skill with the exercise of power. The Abusir papyri, dating to approximately 2470 BCE and deriving from the administration of the mortuary temple of King Neferirkare Kakai, provide a detailed view of the scale of this bureaucratic structure. These documents reveal not only administrative organization but also the increasing complexity of state management. They demonstrate how Egyptian administration, initially more strongly rooted in local structures, developed into an increasingly centralized and specialized system. This process of bureaucratization also contributed to the emergence of what may be termed a

literatocracy: a class composed of individuals who, through mastery of writing and administrative knowledge, advanced within the social hierarchy. This literate elite increasingly controlled mechanisms of centralized administration and expanded its influence as positions of power and responsibility in public administration were occupied by individuals trained in scribal institutions. Bureaucratization therefore represented not only a change in the political organization of ancient Egypt but also a profound social transformation. The new literate elite, with its knowledge of writing and administration, became crucial to the functioning of the state. Through this administrative class, Egypt was able to manage extensive resources and institutional structures, contributing to the stability of the Old Kingdom. Administrative bureaucratization was thus a key factor in the consolidation of pharaonic power, enabling the formation of a centralized and increasingly specialized administration. Through expertise in writing and administrative knowledge, Egypt organized and managed resources effectively, contributing to the long-term continuity of its civilization. The emerging literatocracy of scribes and administrators was therefore fundamental not only to state operation but also to the preservation and transmission of the knowledge underpinning Egyptian culture and organization.

Grimal's analysis of relations between the monarchy and the courtly and administrative aristocracy provides an important perspective for understanding the social and political evolution of the Old Kingdom. It reflects not only the dynamics of power but also the manner in which social structures changed in response to processes of state centralization and bureaucratization. Across the period, a gradual strengthening of elite groups can be observed in both the capital and the provinces, visibly reflected in the increasing wealth and prestige of private tombs. This transformation is also evident

in funerary autobiographies, whose content and style underwent significant development. Initially, biographical inscriptions consisted largely of brief references to important events such as gifts, favors, or appointments granted by the monarch. Over time, however, these inscriptions expanded and represented the individual's life and career in greater detail. The phenomenon reveals the emergence of a limited form of individual self-presentation within a structurally hierarchical system, a development that may appear contradictory in a society deeply anchored in collective institutions and centralized representations of pharaonic authority. Funerary autobiographies consequently became a space in which members of the elite could emphasize not only their relationship with the monarch but also their achievements, distinctive careers, and place within society.

Grimal's observation concerning Dynasty 3, when the need to recruit new personnel into an administrative system still in formation created some opportunities for social advancement based upon merit and efficiency, highlights how the early Old Kingdom permitted a degree of social mobility. Promotion based on performance and loyalty allowed new social actors to enter higher positions of power, although kinship ties with the monarchy continued to play a major role in governmental structures. The pharaoh's centrality remained unquestioned, but the development of the administrative system and the arrival of increasingly specialized officials altered the distribution of functions and authority. According to Grimal's analysis, Dynasty 4 marks the beginning of a clearer consolidation of the elite, a phenomenon also visible in funerary inscriptions. As the Egyptian state became more firmly established and its bureaucratic structure strengthened, elite prominence increased and the inscriptions of officials and notables expanded, reflecting their growing influence within

society. These biographies record not only personal merit but also individuals' capacity to administer power and accumulated wealth, reflecting a broader change in the nature of Egyptian politics and administration. In this context, the development of funerary inscriptions not only provides evidence for the rise of an elite with increasing visibility alongside royal authority but also reveals a redefinition of how power was represented in the Old Kingdom. Whereas earlier inscriptions primarily documented the relationship between monarch and servant, later texts became vehicles for elite self-assertion and for securing a distinguished place in collective memory. Their expanded narratives, rich in details concerning individual careers and accomplishments, underscore both the growing importance of officials in state administration and changing relations of power in which elite actors assumed increasingly prominent roles in political organization. This phenomenon is best understood within the broader evolution of Egyptian administration from a system centered upon direct royal supervision toward one in which elite officials possessed wider delegated competencies. As hierarchical structures diversified, competition among elites for royal favor became more visible through networks of patronage also reflected in tombs and funerary texts. Biographical inscriptions therefore became not only records of individual careers but also instruments of power and legitimation addressed to future generations.

From Dynasty 5 onward, Egyptian funerary architecture underwent a notable transformation, marked by increasing richness in the tombs of courtiers alongside a reduction in the monumentality of royal mausolea. This tendency reflects changes in the social and political structure of the Old Kingdom, in which elites and officials acquired greater prominence while pharaonic authority underwent certain adjustments. The phenomenon is particularly visible in the

biography from the tomb of Washptah, vizier under Neferirkare, who occupied a key position within pharaonic administration.

"Inscription of Washptah, from Abusir

His eldest son Mernetjernesut, Royal Chamberlain, Staff of the People, is the one who made [this] for him, when he was in his tomb in the necropolis... Neferirkare went and saw the beauty of this work... as he passed through them (?)... His Majesty caused him to be raised... when the Royal Sons saw... they marveled beyond measure. While His Majesty praised him because of this, His Majesty realized that he nevertheless did not hear... When the Royal Sons and Courtiers who were in the Residence learned of it, they became afraid beyond measure... His Majesty caused the Royal Sons, the Courtiers, the Lector Priests, and the Chiefs of Physicians to come... His Majesty caused the Chest of Writings to be brought to him... [but] they told him that he was going to die... [Then] the heart of His Majesty became sorrowful beyond measure. His Majesty said that he would do everything according to his wishes, and withdrew to the Residence... and worshiped Re...

... It was set down in writing in his tomb... His Majesty ordered that a sarcophagus of ebony, sealed, be made for him. Nothing like it had ever been made for a servant since the beginning of the earth... His Majesty caused him to be anointed [with precious oils?] in the presence of His Majesty.

His eldest son Mernetjernesut, Royal Chamberlain, Staff of the People, is the one who made [this] for him... a carrying chair was made for him... [so that] he might be buried in it (?)... His Majesty ordered that the decree be placed in his tomb... His Majesty praised him because of it and gave thanks to the god for him beyond measure...

...in his tomb in the necropolis which is at the [pyramid] "Kha-Ba-Sahure" [= "The Ba of Sahure Rises in Glory"]... "¹⁰³

¹⁰³ "*Inscripción de Washptah, de Abusir*", in: SERRANO DELGADO, José. op. cit., pp. 193, 194.

The Inscription of Washptah is an important source for court culture and the self-representation of high officials of Dynasty 5. Its rich titulary demonstrates specialization and hierarchy, but the number of titles should not automatically be converted into a modern bureaucratic organizational chart. Offices could be honorific, cumulative, temporary, or functional, and their meaning depended upon context.

In an inscription belonging to the legendary official Kagemni, whose career was said to have begun under the reign of Sneferu, one reads:

"Then the Majesty of the King of Upper and Lower Egypt Huni died, and the Majesty of the King of Upper and Lower Egypt Sneferu was elevated to the dignity of beneficent king throughout the country. Then Kagemni became mayor and vizier."¹⁰⁴

The brief statement preserved in the source - "Then the Majesty of the King of Upper and Lower Egypt Huni died, and the Majesty of the King of Upper and Lower Egypt Sneferu was elevated to the dignity of beneficent king throughout the country. Then Kagemni became mayor and vizier" - is particularly revealing of processes of bureaucratic consolidation during the transition between Dynasties 3 and 4. Despite its brevity, the passage provides insight into several key aspects of Old Kingdom administration and the transformation of political power through the increasing professionalization of government.

The first notable feature is the absence of any reference to earlier noble titles held by Kagemni, suggesting that his rise to the office of vizier, the highest position beneath the pharaoh, was not necessarily based upon dynastic membership or close

¹⁰⁴ "Autobiografía de Kagemni", in: GRIMAL, Nicolás. op. cit., p. 74.

familial proximity to the monarch but may have depended upon his ability and functional career. This evidence supports the argument that from Dynasty 4 onward an incipient meritocratic tendency developed within the state structure, in which technical competence and performance acquired greater significance alongside lineage. The progressive supplementation of hereditary criteria by standards of functional suitability constituted one element of bureaucratization, and Kagemni is presented as embodying this transition toward an increasingly rationalized and hierarchical administration.

The training of such elite officials took place within the Royal Residence, which performed not only palatial but also educational functions, since future scribes and high officials were instructed there in writing, accounting, liturgy, and territorial administration. Such training was not merely technical but also ideological, because scribes were educated within a worldview that positioned them as intermediaries between cosmic order, *maat*, and the practical functioning of the state. The scribe was therefore not simply a specialist in record keeping but a guarantor of universal order through the written word. During the Old Kingdom, scribal activity was characterized by a creative and performative dimension of writing. As Donadoni emphasizes, beyond accounting uses, which were frequent but often technically limited, scribes needed to master the production of complex compositions in both content and graphic expression. This ability made them not merely transmitters of texts but creators of discourses, documents, and symbols structuring state practice. The role of the scribe in religious texts, particularly the Pyramid Texts, reinforces this conception: the pharaoh is said to be "scribe of the divine roll: he says what is [reads] and causes to be what is not [writes]," a formulation that elevates writing to the level of

a creative, almost divine act. The figure of the lector priest, a specialist responsible for the ritual recitation of sacred texts, likewise reveals the high degree of specialization attained by the literate class. His function was not merely to recite but to operate through language endowed with symbolic and spiritual power, requiring complete command of both graphic and linguistic dimensions of the text. The concentration of knowledge and responsibility within a restricted body of specialists demonstrates the degree to which knowledge had become institutionalized in ancient Egypt. Examples such as the scribe Kaaper, active during Dynasty 5, clearly illustrate the diversification and professionalization of administration. Kaaper accumulated multiple specialized titles - "scribe of the administration, scribe of the pasture of cattle herds, scribe of the document division, inspector of the scribes of the State, scribe of the records of the State, scribe of royal expeditions" - indicating not only increasing organizational complexity but also clear functional segmentation within the state apparatus. Hieratic writing, employed for accounting and administrative purposes, further underscores the differentiation among written registers in pharaonic Egypt. The Abusir archive, dating to the reign of Isesi, constitutes one of the strongest forms of evidence for the degree of systematization achieved: it comprised a highly organized body of documentation allowing not only the daily administration of a temple or economic unit but also its supervision by central authority. Taken together, these elements reveal a context in which scribes and officials acquired growing importance, no longer merely as auxiliaries of the monarch but as indispensable agents of state administration. Kagemni's rise is therefore not simply anecdotal but is presented as evidence of an emerging paradigm: a model of the state sustained not only by the charismatic figure of the sovereign but by a complex

administrative structure grounded in specialized and centralized knowledge.

The Abusir archive, studied by Alessandro Roccati, constitutes one of the most compelling sources for the level of development attained by Egyptian administration during Dynasty 5. According to Roccati, the surviving documentation reveals an organized body of scribes structured according to internal hierarchies comparable to those of other sectors of the state apparatus, even comparatively minor ones, and based upon principles of high functional specialization. Beyond the ability simply to transcribe signs, scribal work also involved complex arithmetic skills essential to accounting, the recording of levies, management of storerooms, and redistribution of resources. This dual technical competence in writing and calculation made the scribe indispensable to the maintenance of the centralized economic system of the Old Kingdom.

The Abusir archives make it possible to observe an advanced stage of this formal logic. Administration did not need to reinvent in every record the relationship among work shift, product, office, institution, and responsible official. The repetition of categories, sequences, and procedures enabled different scribes to operate within a recognizable framework. Here the compiled rule appears less as an ideological formula than as documentary infrastructure: form preserves prior decisions concerning what must be recorded, who is authorized to act, and how an operation becomes recognizable as administratively valid.

It should not be overlooked that many of these scribes were responsible for the effective administration of state resources. They recorded revenues, classified products, particularly agricultural and pastoral goods, controlled storerooms, and supervised movements of commodities among different levels of the palace and temple economies. In other words, these

officials were among the actual managers of the pharaonic economy, and their activity was closely connected with the material stability of Egyptian social order. The Abusir archive therefore provides a window onto the everyday functioning of this complex and vertically organized administrative network.

At the same time, another type of scribe operated less in the economic sphere than in political and religious contexts. During this same period, certain scribes appear as personal assistants to high officials, priests, or members of the elite. These latter figures may not always have been required to possess direct mastery of writing, a circumstance that should not be surprising given the highly technical character of literacy at the time, and could delegate such tasks to specialized professionals. An evocative expression in the Coffin Texts suggests this symbolically: "Your officials [magistrates] rise for you and their scribes who are upon their mats before you tremble before you." The image not only underscores the scribe's hierarchical subordination to officials but also reveals tension between administrative authority and technical knowledge embodied by specialists in written language. Titles recorded in the Abusir papyri refer almost exclusively to documentary functions conducted through hieratic, the cursive form of the hieroglyphic system adapted to the speed and practicality demanded by administration. This linguistic specificity indicates not only the generalization of writing in bureaucratic contexts but also its progressive professionalization and functional delimitation. Far from constituting universal knowledge, writing had become a technology reserved for a specialized group possessing clearly differentiated competencies.

This phenomenon was not confined to written archives. Funerary archaeology confirms the same organizational structures. Tombs in the Memphite necropolis, where many

employees of the central administration were buried, contain inscriptions and reliefs describing with precision the administrative tasks performed by the deceased: inspection of granaries, calculation of taxes, supervision of subordinate scribes, and other duties. Functions formerly overshadowed by pharaonic monumentality begin to acquire visibility in their own right, reflecting the growing prominence of bureaucracy within the state. This increasing prestige also appears iconographically. As Nicolas Grimal notes, during the Old Kingdom the figure of the seated scribe, represented with papyrus on his lap and an attentive gaze, became one of the few professional identities given independent sculptural representation. The seated scribe is not merely a realistic image of an occupation but an emblem of status, knowledge, and technical authority. The representation was sufficiently powerful to remain an established artistic type well into the Middle Kingdom. Among the scribe's functions was also the interpretation of inscribed texts within a society in which most people were not literate. His role was therefore dual: producer of the written word and mediator between writing and the wider community. An inscription appearing at the entrances of certain tombs toward the end of the Old Kingdom illustrates this function: "O reader, read these words and say: 'an offering for the Ka...'" The ritual formula could be activated through the voice of the lector priest, but it also required an intelligible and accurately written text. In this context, the scribe guaranteed the symbolic and magical efficacy of language, reaffirming his centrality not only within administration but also within the religious and social imagination of pharaonic Egypt:

"He is one beloved of the king, [and] by Osiris Foremost of the Westerners and Osiris lord of Busiris: every scribe who reads

[aloud], every man who hears, every pure priest who observes [or considers mentally], [while] these words are spoken: 'praise Osiris and glorify Anubis who is upon his mountain, lord of the sacred land, and Senetites, justified' (Cairo CG 20017)."¹⁰⁵

This fragment, which embodies a liturgical command, demonstrates that the figure of the scribe was not confined to accounting or administrative tasks but possessed an active ritual and social dimension. He was required not only to write and read but also to recite aloud, transforming the written word into a performative act effective before the gods and the community. The explicit mention of scribes, listeners, and pure priests indicates a clear functional hierarchy in which each possessed a specific role within funerary and cultic practice. Reading the text aloud not only guaranteed the perpetuation of the deceased's memory, in this case Senetites, but reactivated sacred order each time the words were pronounced.

In this context, the scribe assumes a dual function: on the one hand, he is a technical agent of state administration; on the other, he is an officiant of a form of knowledge that guarantees the continuity of *maat*, the Egyptian cosmic and social order, through the power of writing. The inscription therefore underscores the centrality of literate knowledge within Old Kingdom ideological structures and its integration into the bureaucratic-religious apparatus of the state.

Funerary formulas reveal the most directly linguistic dimension of the concept. The inscription prescribes a sequence whose ritual efficacy, within Egyptian conceptions, depends upon its being read or pronounced in a recognizable form. The performer need not reconstruct on every occasion the entire funerary theology that justifies the offering, but instead activates an inherited form that already

¹⁰⁵ *Source*, in: DONADONI, Sergio (DIR). op. cit., p. 90.

organizes relations among name, recipient, offering, and legitimation. This does not demonstrate a mechanical semantics, nor does it permit a modern theory of language to be projected backward into the past. It does, however, reveal an institutional practice in which formal repetition was a condition of ritual validity.

From a sociopolitical perspective, the source shows that by the end of the Old Kingdom the professionalization of the scribal body was already well established. Although in the earliest centuries access to administrative positions could be conditioned by family connections or proximity to the sovereign, the system progressively moved toward a model in which merit and technical competence acquired greater importance. The evolution was neither abrupt nor complete, but it laid the foundations for a stable and functional bureaucracy whose personnel were recruited through formal instruction in scribal schools located in the Royal Residence or temple complexes.

The explicit mention of scribes as indispensable actors in the ritual reactivation of a text shows that they were no longer simply auxiliaries of royal power but recognized and legitimated figures within the system. They ensured that the written word did not remain silent and that decrees, offerings, and petitions to the gods could become effective. In this sense, the bureaucratization of Egyptian administration was not merely technical but also symbolic: the scribe did not only count but "caused to be what is not," as the *Pyramid Texts* state.

This process of professionalization also produced a change in social status. The scribe was no longer simply the educated servant of a noble or priest but himself became the bearer of a particular *auctoritas*, grounded in specialized knowledge. As this source demonstrates, the scribe's function was recognized and regulated within the religious and bureaucratic framework of

the pharaonic state, and his ritualized action, "every scribe who reads aloud," was considered essential to the efficacy of funerary cults and the continuity of social order. The text Cairo CG 20017 thus reflects an advanced moment in the process of bureaucratization during the Old Kingdom, when the scribe had become fully established as a literate professional indispensable to both administration and religion. Although the transition from a system of inherited privileges to one based upon competence was neither immediate nor complete, this structural change contributed to the consolidation of a durable and highly functional state apparatus that would influence the administrative models of subsequent periods of pharaonic Egypt.

Nevertheless, as will be examined in greater depth in the following section, devoted to the training and professionalization of the scribe, scribes together with senior officials of the Royal Administration formed the pillars of a new technocratic elite emerging from the process of bureaucratization characteristic of the Old Kingdom. This elite was defined not solely by lineage or kinship with the royal family, as in earlier periods, but increasingly by technical competence, specialized instruction, and the capacity to manage the administrative and ritual mechanisms of the state.

Through rigorous training that included mastery of hieroglyphic and hieratic writing, accounting knowledge, jurisprudence, and even religious liturgy, scribes became key agents of state centralization. Their expertise structured fiscal, judicial, and religious administration alike, and their command of written language conferred unprecedented practical and symbolic power.

This transformation produced a reconfiguration of social hierarchies in which merit, instruction, and experience began to occupy a more prominent place alongside aristocratic origin.

Scribes and officials thus formed an intermediate class between the courtly nobility and the broader population, consolidating a literate bureaucracy that functioned as the backbone of the pharaonic state apparatus. This new elite not only administered the state but, in doing so, actively contributed to the reproduction of the cosmic, social, and political order upon which pharaonic authority was founded.

4.9 The Courtly and Administrative Elite

During the period under consideration, Egypt was distinguished by an effective administration and a centralized government capable of coordinating the country's resources with considerable efficiency. The monumentality of royal funerary construction, including the pyramids of the Old Kingdom, attests not only to the availability of material and human surpluses but also to the existence of a highly functional state apparatus supported by generally favorable economic conditions. Taken together, these elements justify characterizing the period as an era of splendor and consolidation of the pharaonic state.

Within this context, administrative organization became progressively more complex, specialized, and hierarchical, forming an extensive bureaucratic apparatus composed of courtiers, high dignitaries, and a large body of scribes. One of the most characteristic social groups of pharaonic Egypt was precisely that of the courtiers, a category encompassing those who surrounded the sovereign and members of the royal family whose habitual residence was at the court or in the capital. This environment close to power constituted a principal pool from which the state recruited personnel for administrative, judicial, military, and religious offices.

For this reason, the figure of the courtier was closely connected with that of the official as an employee of the state's

bureaucratic apparatus. Although this was a minority sector, its privileged position enabled it to leave abundant evidence of its existence, particularly through funerary architecture, stelae, biographies, and decorated tombs, thereby facilitating its study and characterization by historians. This administrative elite was not homogeneous but was organized into clearly differentiated hierarchical levels, from prominent notables close to the pharaoh, frequently related to the royal house and possessing substantial authority, to scribes and lower employees responsible for more modest tasks such as supervising storerooms, workshops, and provincial offices. Even the latter, however, stood above the mass of the peasantry and possessed access to written knowledge and may therefore be regarded as part of an intermediate elite.

A defining characteristic of members of this class was their direct participation in the management of state power as auxiliaries of the sovereign. Within this framework, the Egyptian official was paradigmatically associated with the model of the scribe. From the beginnings of Egyptian history, mastery of writing was prestigious knowledge reserved largely for individuals of elevated social position. Literacy not only opened avenues of advancement within the bureaucracy but also symbolized a form of cultural and intellectual superiority. The figure was so important that even the monarch could represent himself as a scribe, thereby emphasizing the centrality of literate knowledge in the articulation of pharaonic power.

Training as a scribe constituted one of the comparatively few clearly structured avenues of upward social mobility in pharaonic Egypt. Access to knowledge of writing, encompassing techniques, signs, and intellectual competencies, enabled an individual not only to perform administrative functions of increasing responsibility but also to enter

privileged spheres of society. Unlike occupations governed primarily by hereditary or guild principles, scribal activity could therefore function as an instrument of meritocratic advancement in the service of the state.

Mastery of the written word, whether in hieroglyphic or hieratic form, was regarded as an elevated art restricted to a carefully instructed minority educated in schools connected with the palace, temples, or even the private residences of high officials. Through long and demanding training, apprentices, frequently the sons of scribes or individuals recommended by local elites, acquired the knowledge necessary to obtain positions within central or provincial administration, temple complexes, or the service of prominent dignitaries.

Particularly significant was the figure of the priest-scribe, who emerged prominently in the Old Kingdom as a high-status category within the clerical structure. Combining ritual functions with scribal responsibilities, this individual enjoyed considerable social respect and prestige. His role was essential both to the preservation of religious knowledge and to the performance of sacred ceremonies, especially those involving the reading of ritual texts in funerary or liturgical contexts. The combination of literate competence and priestly function placed the scribe-priest in an intermediary position between divine and human spheres and conferred upon him an almost sacred character. He was therefore not merely a technical agent of bureaucracy but a cultural mediator who guaranteed the continuity of cosmic and social order through the written and spoken word. For these reasons, being a scribe represented not simply a professional option but an ideal of life cultivated among the middle and upper sectors of Egyptian society, as demonstrated by numerous wisdom texts that praise scribal dignity and present the scribe as a model of the wise, prudent, and virtuous man.

In one of the earliest and most important examples of this particular genre, *The Satire of the Trades*, dated to the Middle Kingdom, one reads:

"As for a scribe in a position in the Residence, he will not suffer there. Since he satisfies the needs of another, how could he fail to end up satisfied? I have seen no occupation comparable to this, about which these maxims may be spoken. I shall make you love writings more than your mother; I shall present their virtues before you. It is greater than any other occupation; there is none on earth equal to it..."¹⁰⁶

The *Satire of the Trades* constitutes one of the most valuable literary testimonies for understanding not only the self-consciousness of the literate group in pharaonic Egypt but also the ideological dimension acquired by the scribal profession in the administrative culture of the Middle Kingdom. Belonging to the wisdom or didactic genre, the work takes the form of instruction addressed to young aspirants to the scribal profession, and its content reveals both the centrality and the social prestige attributed to writing. From philological and ideological perspectives, the passage admits several levels of analysis. First, it constructs a symbolic opposition between the scribe and the manual occupations portrayed elsewhere in the work as arduous, degrading, and painful, contrasting them with the figure of the scribe, whose work is characterized by comfort, recognition, and proximity to power. The expression "he will not suffer there," referring to scribal work within the Residence, points not only to more favorable working conditions but also suggests a certain immunity from the physical and social hardships affecting other workers.

Second, the text constructs an emotional and even affective appeal around writing when it declares, "I shall make you love

¹⁰⁶ "*Sátira de Los Oficios*", in: SERRANO, José Miguel. op. cit., p. 87.

writings more than your mother." The phrase, hyperbolic by nature, emphasizes an inversion of traditional values in favor of a new symbolic order in which literate culture occupies the highest position in a hierarchy of knowledge and prestige. Motherhood, a fundamental symbol of affection and protection in Egyptian thought, is here displaced by written knowledge, whose usefulness, beauty, and power are presented as superior to any other bond. The final exaltation, "It is greater than any other occupation; there is none on earth equal to it," closes the passage with a statement that can be read as reflecting an emerging professional ethic. The scribe does not merely practice an occupation but embodies a model of functional, cultural, and moral excellence promoted and reproduced by the state. Writing, in this context, ceases to be merely an auxiliary administrative instrument and becomes a symbolic foundation of Egyptian political and cosmic order. The text should therefore not be read only as a rhetorical exercise in school indoctrination but also as an eloquent manifestation of the state and bureaucratic ideology that, from the Middle Kingdom onward, elevated the scribe to the status of a structural pillar of state machinery. Although framed as satire directed against other occupations, the work reinforces the cultural hegemony of literate knowledge and justifies its supremacy within the value system of pharaonic Egypt.

The text then presents the son with a series of professions, emphasizing principally their hardships. As the passages below show, it subsequently stresses the virtues of becoming a scribe and the good fortune involved in being able to attend the Residence to learn the profession.

Look, there is no profession without a superior except that of the scribe. He is the chief. If you know writing, things will go better for you than in the occupations I have shown you. Look at them in their misery... Take care. See what I have done by traveling to

the Residence. I did it out of love for you. A [single] day in school will benefit you. It is [something] for eternity; its work is [like] stone. I shall also tell you other things, to teach you knowledge: if a dispute arises, do not approach the disputants...

If you walk behind the magistrates, keep the proper distance. If you enter and the master of the house is occupied with someone before you, sit with your hand over your mouth. Ask nothing of him, and do [only] as he says. Beware of rushing to the table. Be serious and possess dignity. Do not speak of secret matters. He who conceals his thoughts makes them his shield... Do not lie against your mother. It is an abomination to an official... Look, it is good that you be sent frequently to hear the words of the magistrates. You will acquire the manners of the well-born if you follow their steps. The scribe is seen as one who listens; he who listens becomes one who acts... Look, I have placed you upon the path of the god... Look, there is no scribe who lacks food and goods from the palace... Pray to the god for your father and your mother, who have placed you upon the path of life. Attend to these [counsels] that I have set before you...¹⁰⁷

Although this text dates to Dynasty 10 in the Middle Kingdom, it serves as a clear example of the exaltation of the scribal profession, since the prestige of scribal activity had already become established in the Old Kingdom and would persist until the decline of the New Kingdom.

Through a series of practical and behavioral precepts, the text outlines not only the ideal of the future literate official but also the ethical model that was expected to govern his conduct both within and beyond bureaucratic contexts. Rich in imperatives and warnings, the text reveals the close relationship between formal instruction and the internalization of fundamental social values: modesty, prudence, respect for hierarchy, and self-control. It emphasizes, for example, the importance of silence and patience in the presence of superiors, "sit with your hand over your mouth," as a form of

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 87.

self-regulation and compliance with social order. This attitude, invoking an ethic of submission and attentive listening, is presented as a prerequisite for advancement within the system: "he who listens becomes one who acts." Listening in this context is not passive but an active process of learning and of legitimating authority. The sacred dimension of the scribal function is also present in the expression "I have placed you upon the path of the god," suggesting a transcendent vocation extending beyond the merely professional. Writing and knowledge are therefore conceived not simply as technical instruments but as a path toward spiritual improvement intimately connected with the cosmic and divine order of *maat*. The reference to parents, "Pray to the god for your father and your mother," introduces an ethical and affective dimension into the formation of the individual. Scribal education is thus presented as an integrated project in which technical knowledge, writing, civic morality, respectful conduct, and religious piety toward parents and gods form a coherent whole. Finally, the statement that "there is no scribe who lacks food and goods from the palace" reinforces the aspirational character of the teaching. The scribe embodies not only a moral ideal but also a path toward economic stability and social prestige. The statement serves a motivational function by legitimating educational effort through the promise of material and symbolic rewards for those who persevere. In sum, the passage reflects the Egyptian conception of education as a process of shaping character as much as acquiring technical skills. Scribal instruction did not simply teach writing but sought to form an individual useful to the state, respectful of hierarchy, morally upright, and religiously pious: a true "good man" in the service of *maat*.

Still more emphatic is the tone of a text preserved in a Ramesside-period papyrus now held in the British Museum,

which even provides a list of those it regards as the greatest writers of the Egyptian tradition:

Be a scribe; put this in your heart / so that your name may become like theirs. / A book is better than a funerary stela, / than a solid funerary enclosure /.../ A man decays; his body is dust. / All his kin have perished. / But a book causes him to be remembered / through the mouth of the one who recites it. / A book is better than a well-built house, / than a funerary chapel in the West, / better than a solid mansion, / than a stela in the temple! / Is there anyone like Hardefef? / Is there anyone like Imhotep? / None among our kin is like Neferti / or Khety, first among them all. / I give you the name of Ptah-Emdjehuty / or Khakheperre-Sones. / Is there anyone like Ptahhotep? / Or anyone equal to Kaïres...? (Trans. M. Lichtheim, 1975-1980, Vol. II)108

This passage from a Ramesside-period papyrus, describing the virtues and value of the scribe in Egyptian society, reinforces the importance of this figure in the construction of social memory and individual status. The central claim that "a book causes him to be remembered through the mouth of the one who recites it" emphasizes the permanence and transcendence that writing can confer upon an individual. The text establishes a clear contrast between physical constructions, material and destructible, such as funerary stelae or mansions, and books, presented as vehicles of intellectual and spiritual immortality. The comparison reveals the enduring value attributed to writing and therefore to those who mastered it. References to historical and legendary figures such as Hardefef, Imhotep, Neferti, Khety, and Ptahhotep reinforce the idea that the scribe not only played a crucial role in administration and state organization but could attain glory and fame through literary accomplishment. These names belong to

¹⁰⁸ *"Papiro de Época Ramesida"*, in: SANMARTÍN, Joaquín. SERRANO, José Miguel. op. cit., p. 204.

prominent sages and authors within Egyptian tradition and functioned as models of virtue and knowledge who, like the texts associated with them, transcended time and retained relevance across generations. By invoking such figures, the passage connects the scribe directly with a tradition of wisdom and prestige. It also reflects a persistent theme in Egyptian culture: the conception of the scribe as an individual capable of shaping his own destiny through knowledge and literary skill. As the *Satire of the Trades* suggests, the scribe, represented as his own master, does not depend exclusively upon family inheritance or material fortune for success but upon mastery of writing and the ability to navigate the bureaucratic and social order. This form of "self-government" illustrates how education and knowledge could provide a route of advancement within Egyptian hierarchy beyond lineage alone.

The text presents writing as a form of permanence capable of exceeding the material duration of monuments and tombs. The contrast does not imply that funerary culture had lost importance but attributes to the scribe a specific avenue of continuity: preservation of the name, knowledge, and memory through texts capable of being copied and read. This valuation reinforces the social position of the scribe as both administrative and intellectual agent and demonstrates that writing could function simultaneously as an instrument of government, a mechanism of memory, and a resource of prestige.

To explain the structure of the courtly elite during the Old Kingdom in greater detail, we may cite Sanmartín and Serrano, who observe: "Around the pyramid of Khufu there extends a true city of the dead, with its streets and blocks, arranged in such a way that the location of the tombs reflects the social structure of a courtly elite subject to a complex hierarchy and,

above all, centered upon the sovereign's position." This statement illustrates how the physical arrangement of tombs reflects the hierarchical organization of Egyptian society, with the sovereign at the center, the crucial point around which the administrative and social structure of the Old Kingdom was articulated. The pyramid was not only a symbol of pharaonic power but also the epicenter of a funerary organization that materially reproduced the complex and stratified hierarchy of the court.

During this period, provincial and court officials gradually acquired greater power and autonomy, giving rise to a process that over time contributed to erosion of central authority. Such a phenomenon was not unique to ancient Egypt but may be compared with processes occurring in other highly bureaucratized civilizations, where the concentration of authority in local administration can reduce a sovereign's direct control over distant territories.

The role of Egyptian officials in structuring the economy and society demonstrates a considerable capacity for influence capable of transforming the country's socioeconomic regime, which encompassed thousands of people. This power, however, should not be understood solely as a product of bureaucracy but as the expression of an administrative tradition operating strategically to maintain social and economic equilibrium. The Egyptian official was not merely a servant of the state but bore crucial responsibility for managing resources essential to the population's survival, as illustrated by systems for measuring Nile floods. The relationship between flood levels and harvests, in which abundance or scarcity depended closely upon the behavior of the river, became an important indicator of administrative capacity, particularly with respect to preventing famine. Unlike societies in which scarcity could remain beyond the reach of organized intervention, Egyptian

administration possessed mechanisms for mitigating the effects of poor harvests through the management of surpluses and redistribution of resources.

Although periods of poor harvest certainly occurred, historical records suggest that the Egyptian administrative system was often capable of limiting provisioning crises. This depended in part upon officials trained to anticipate and manage complex situations. Autobiographical texts of officials provide valuable information concerning the means and methods associated with good administration. Beyond documenting aspects of lived experience, such writings reveal the range of skills required for advancement within the administrative hierarchy. Training was therefore a determining factor in the development of Egyptian state administration. Knowledge and mastery of writing, mathematics, engineering, and other disciplines were essential. Officials needed to perform complex calculations, measure areas and volumes, and manage resources accurately. Technical knowledge, increasingly formalized during the Old Kingdom, was crucial to major construction projects such as the pyramids, which constitute the principal monumental legacy of the period. Without appropriate training, the planning and execution of projects of such scale would not have been possible, making this era a period of exceptional achievement in the history of architecture and engineering.

Egyptian administration, with its structured educational system, played a fundamental role in training such officials. From Dynasty 4 onward, there was the possibility of receiving education in the "House of the Royal Children," a court institution in which the sons of high-ranking officials could study alongside descendants of the royal family. This school provided not only formal instruction in writing but also practical skills such as swimming, significant in a country where

the Nile was fundamental to daily life. Training within this elite environment guaranteed not only an advanced education but also access to the court, providing students with opportunities for advancement and visibility before the pharaoh. Study within the court school could therefore influence an individual's future by opening pathways into state administration and the higher circles of power. Kings are said to have visited such institutions and taken notice of particularly promising pupils, providing them with an important advantage at the beginning of their administrative careers. The court educational system thus not only trained competent future officials but also ensured that pharaonic authority was supported by an efficient and well-trained administration playing a crucial role in the stability and prosperity of the Old Kingdom.

Education alongside the heir, intended to prepare the future king for the throne, represented one of the most privileged opportunities available to fellow students, who could gain exceptional prospects through such proximity. This educational relationship placed the future sovereign at the center of the formative process and benefited not only the heir but also those who shared the experience of royal instruction. In this context, the case of the young Pepi II is especially significant. Although he ascended the throne at approximately six years of age, he is represented as having been notably accomplished in several areas of knowledge. By the age of eight or nine, the young pharaoh already possessed skills such as the ability to write, or at least to dictate, a highly formal and important letter to the nomarch Harkhuf, a senior official of Upper Egypt known for his journeys to the land of Yam, as noted above.

This case underscores the high quality and depth attributed to the Egyptian educational system, which was intended not

only to train future monarchs but also to form a competent administrative elite capable of participating actively in state affairs from an early age. The education of the heir and those close to him, including future high-ranking officials, involved rigorous instruction encompassing writing as well as the practical and political knowledge necessary for governing and administration. Court education therefore served not only dynastic continuity but also the consolidation of an administrative system based upon competence and effective performance, reflecting the state's commitment to good government.

In the case of Pepi II, his capacity to compose or dictate a formal letter at such a young age highlights not only his education but also the degree of responsibility expected of a young prince. The ability to communicate appropriately with state officials such as the nomarch Harkhuf also demonstrates the level of administrative sophistication achieved in the Old Kingdom. Early education in direct contact with the highest levels of power provided future rulers and administrators with tools required to maintain order and prosperity across Egyptian territory and contributed to the formation of a highly trained courtly elite capable of managing complex affairs of state.

"[The pharaoh's letter] 'Seal of the king himself: Year II, day 15 of the third month of the inundation. Royal decree for the Sole Companion, Lector Priest, Chief of Interpreters Harkhuf. Notice has been taken of this letter of yours which you sent to the king, to the Palace, to make known that you have returned safely from Yam together with the troop that was with you. You say in this letter of yours that you have brought every kind of great and good product which Hathor, lady of Imaau, has given for the Ka of King Neferkare, who lives forever. You have [also] said in this letter of yours that you have brought a pygmy for the "dances of the god" from the land of the Horizon-Dwellers, like the pygmy whom the Chancellor of the God Baurdjed brought from [the land

of] Punt in the time of King Isesi. You have said to My Majesty that nothing equal to him had been brought by anyone else who had previously gone to Yam. You certainly know how to do what your lord desires and appreciates. Truly you spend day and night thinking about doing what your lord loves, praises, and commands. His Majesty will provide your many honors for the benefit of your son's son forever, so that all people will say, when they hear what My Majesty did for you: "Is there anything comparable to what was done for the Sole Companion Harkhuf when he returned from Yam, because of the vigilance he showed in doing what his lord loved, praised, and commanded?"

This historical source, a letter from the pharaoh addressed to Harkhuf, provides valuable insight into Egyptian administration and the operation of power in the Old Kingdom, particularly with respect to relations between the pharaoh and senior officials. The letter is formal and celebratory in character, displaying both Harkhuf's effectiveness as an official and the reciprocal system of rewards granted by the pharaoh in recognition of service.

First, the temporal and administrative context of the letter is significant. The indication of the precise year and day on which the decree was issued reveals the level of detail and organization present in Egyptian administration. Such precision demonstrates an advanced bureaucratic structure in which control of activities and the traceability of governmental actions were important to state operation. The letter emphasizes Harkhuf as an exceptional official. In his roles as Lector Priest and Chief of Interpreters, he was a prominent member of the Egyptian administration entrusted with important diplomatic or commercial missions, including his return from Yam with exotic products. The fact that he brought back a pygmy, who in this context possessed strong symbolic value as a rare and highly prized person at court, is significant because such acquisitions functioned not only as tribute but also as symbols of the pharaoh's magnificence and

reach over distant lands. The letter further emphasizes diligence and fulfillment of the pharaoh's wishes, reflecting expectations placed upon officials: complete loyalty and devotion to the monarch and precise execution of his commands. The phrase "Truly you spend day and night thinking about doing what your lord loves, appreciates, and commands" underscores the importance of absolute dedication to royal service, suggesting that Egyptian administration demanded not only technical competence but also profound personal loyalty to the monarch.

The heading of the letter to Harkhuf allows this mechanism to be observed in a concrete source. The dating, identification of the royal seal, titles of the recipient, and imperative form transform a will situated in the Residence into a recognizable order beyond the king's physical presence. Authority travels not only as semantic content but as a formally identifiable document. The supply chain mentioned subsequently extends the same operation to other officials, storerooms, and temples. The compiled rule provides a means of describing how a royal decision could be executed at a distance through forms preserving its origin and hierarchical position.

The reward promised by the pharaoh is also significant. The reference to "many honors" and to enduring benefit for Harkhuf's descendants reflects the manner in which an official's achievements could be rewarded not only individually but also by securing a family legacy. Measures of this kind helped consolidate a system in which ties of loyalty and continuity of family influence within administration were important to maintaining control over the territory.

The comparison of Harkhuf with important officials of the past, such as the Chancellor of the God Baurdjed, indicates a

desire to connect contemporary officials with the tradition and grandeur of Egyptian administration over time, suggesting that success reflected not only personal ability but also a continuing tradition of service to the pharaoh. The letter is therefore not merely testimony to royal recognition of an outstanding official's efforts but also a source for understanding the symbiotic relationship between pharaoh and officials, characterized by devotion, fulfillment of orders, and the promise of material and status rewards. It also illustrates how Egyptian administration rested upon networks of mutual loyalty and a clearly defined hierarchy in which rewards could extend beyond the immediate recipient to future generations, thereby helping preserve continuity within the state apparatus.

Come north to the Residence immediately. Hurry and bring with you this pygmy whom you have brought from the land of the Horizon-Dwellers alive, healthy, and safe, for the "dances of the god," to gladden the heart of King Neferkare, who lives forever. When he goes aboard the ship with you, have capable men stand around him on deck so that he does not fall into the water. When he sleeps at night, have capable men sleep around him in his tent. Go and inspect [him] ten times during the night. My Majesty desires to see this pygmy more than the products of the land of the mines and of Punt. When you reach the Residence, if this pygmy is alive, healthy, and safe with you, My Majesty will do great things for you, greater than those done for the Chancellor of the God Baurdjed in the time of King Isesi, according to My Majesty's desire to see this pygmy. Orders have been sent to the "chief of the new towns," Companion and Superior of the Priests, commanding that supplies be provided from that which is under the authority of each one, from every storeroom, every depot, and every temple that does not enjoy exemptions."¹⁰⁹

This detailed instruction issued by the pharaoh highlights several crucial aspects of administrative organization, relations

¹⁰⁹ "Pepi II; *La Carta del Faraón*", in: SERRANO, DELGADO, José. op. cit., pp. 77-78.

between the pharaoh and his officials, and the importance of exotic and ritual acquisitions at the Egyptian court. In its urgent and precise tone, the letter not only emphasizes the pharaoh's desire to receive a pygmy for the "dances of the god" but also reveals the expectations placed upon subordinate officials in terms of responsibility and loyalty.

The order that the pygmy be transported safely and kept under constant supervision reflects the importance attached to valuable acquisitions brought from distant lands. The pharaoh seeks not only the acquisition of rare and exotic persons or objects but also assurance that they will be delivered without harm, since their value extends beyond the material and is connected with divine or ritual symbolism at court. The phrase "My Majesty desires to see this pygmy" emphasizes the personal interest of the pharaoh and his direct connection with the tribute brought to the Residence, underscoring the concentration of authority around the royal person.

The minute supervision of the pygmy's safety, including extraordinary measures such as having capable men sleep around him and checking on him ten times each night, reflects the importance attached to detail in royal service and the weight of responsibility imposed upon officials. The dependence upon subordinates to carry out these instructions demonstrates a hierarchy in which specific functions were delegated while exact results were demanded. The letter also refers to rewards for successful performance, promising "great things" to the official if the pygmy is delivered in perfect condition. Such promises of honors or material benefits reveal how loyal and effective royal service could provide a route to advancement within the Egyptian administrative hierarchy. The comparison with the Chancellor of the God Baurdjed, a distinguished figure from the past, establishes a model of prestige and recompense associated over time with excellence

in royal service. The pharaoh's specific instructions to other officials, including the "chief of the new towns" and the "Companion and Superior of the Priests," to provide supplies from different storerooms and temples illustrate the complexity of Egyptian administration and coordination among distinct spheres of authority. References to "storerooms," "depots," and "temples" likewise point to the organization of resources and to state mechanisms facilitating the efficient management of goods and products. Finally, the letter emphasizes the symbolic status of the pygmy. In many ancient cultures, exotic persons and objects were treated as prestigious acquisitions for gods or monarchs, and their value was measured not only by rarity but also by the prestige they conferred upon ruler and court. In this context, the pygmy probably possessed ritual as well as symbolic value, associated with pharaonic magnificence and the ruler's reach over distant and exotic regions. The source therefore offers a rich view of Old Kingdom administrative organization, emphasizing service to the pharaoh, official loyalty, and the central role of exotic acquisitions within the political framework of the Egyptian state. It also reveals the complexity of relations between pharaoh and officials, in which practical administration, ritual symbolism, and social recognition were closely intertwined.

Pepi II's letter to Harkhuf is an exceptional source, but it cannot be demonstrated that every formulation preserves the literal personal intervention of the child king. The funerary text was selected and monumentalized by Harkhuf to represent his privileged relationship with the Crown. Its historical value lies both in the expedition and logistics it

records and in the official's strategy of self-representation. Court rewards and scribal education reveal opportunities for mobility within the elite, although family origin remained an important factor and cannot be said to have ceased to constitute a social constraint.

High officials could receive rations, goods, revenues, and rights associated with estates or foundations. Representations of properties in tombs express wealth and funerary provision but do not always correspond to territorial exploitation owned in a modern legal sense. The accumulation of priestly and administrative offices reveals a multifunctional elite. The Abusir papyri provide evidence for service rotations, distribution of goods, and cult organization and offer a more secure basis for reconstructing practices than inferences based exclusively upon titles.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis developed in this study supports the conclusion that the consolidation of the Egyptian Old Kingdom was not the result of a single cause, nor the automatic consequence of the geography of the Nile Valley, religion, or an assumed absolute concentration of power in the person of the pharaoh. It was a long-term historical process in which territorial integration, administrative specialization, the capacity to mobilize resources, the symbolic production of legitimacy, and articulation among the court, estates, cult institutions, and regional authorities converged. The strength of the pharaonic state therefore lay less in uniform centralization than in its capacity to coordinate spaces, people, and resources through institutions capable of reproducing themselves and adapting over time.

The geography of the Nile Valley provided particularly favorable conditions for demographic concentration, riverine circulation, and agricultural production, but it did not by itself determine state formation. The floods required collective responses and forms of organization, yet the evidence does not permit the emergence of monarchy to be reduced to a hydraulic model. Power was also constructed through competition among regional centers, exchange networks, social differentiation, ritual, and early forms of record keeping. The physical environment created possibilities and constraints; it was the political and institutional responses to those conditions that acquired historical significance.

The unification of Upper and Lower Egypt should be understood as a process rather than an isolated event. Narmer occupies a central position within that process, but the evidence does not authorize the later tradition concerning

Menes to be converted into a definitive identification. For institutional history, the decisive question is not merely which sovereign completed unification but how the ideology of the Two Lands transformed a diverse territorial reality into a permanent political unity. This formulation made it possible to represent regional multiplicity as a governable whole and transformed territorial integration into a constitutive property of kingship.

Pharaonic monarchy articulated political authority and cosmic order without either dimension being reducible to the other. The pharaoh was represented as guarantor of maat, privileged intermediary between the gods and the community, and ritual center of the state. Yet this position did not amount to personal and direct control over every dimension of government. The effectiveness of kingship depended upon a complex network of officials, scribes, supervisors of granaries and treasuries, estate administrators, priests, provincial authorities, and expedition leaders. Ideology conferred legitimacy upon the system, but administrative practices transformed that legitimacy into effective governing capacity.

At this point, the notion of the compiled rule permits a specific conclusion to be formulated. Certain forms of authority acquired effectiveness precisely because they could be repeated without reconstructing on each occasion all the foundations that legitimized them. Titularies, seals, ritual formulas, documentary protocols, and administrative classifications made a relationship of authority recognizable before each actor had to negotiate it anew. Institutional stability did not depend solely upon singular orders issued by the sovereign but also upon previously stabilized forms capable of circulating through documents, objects, offices, and ceremonies. This mechanism does not eliminate conflict,

negotiation, or noncompliance, but it explains part of the state's capacity to reproduce authority across distance and through time.

Writing played a decisive role within this transformation. Its importance was not limited to recording events or producing religious texts but extended to accounting, taxation, logistics, archives, inventories, expeditions, and the administration of property and personnel. Surviving documentation, including administrative papyri and evidence from funerary complexes, demonstrates that the consolidation of the Old Kingdom was accompanied by an increasing capacity to convert resources and obligations into recordable categories. Written administration stabilized relationships that no longer depended exclusively upon memory, physical presence, or oral transmission.

The economy of the Old Kingdom likewise cannot be described through an image of total pharaonic ownership of land, people, and products. The evidence allows distinctions among royal estates, funerary foundations, cult institutions, private rights, local communities, and diverse mechanisms of transfer and usufruct. The state possessed considerable capacity for mobilization and redistribution, but this coexisted with forms of tenure and administration that cannot be reduced to a single property regime. Similarly, labor obligations included compulsory work, institutional service, specialized activities, and other forms of dependency that should not automatically be identified with slavery or servitude.

Monumentality constitutes one of the most visible expressions of this capacity for coordination. Pyramids and major funerary complexes were not merely religious manifestations or simple demonstrations of personal power.

Their construction required systems of provisioning, transportation, accommodation, artisanal specialization, material control, technical direction, and labor administration. Monumental architecture may therefore be read as material evidence of an institutional capacity articulating ideology, economy, and logistics. Monumentality did not create the state by itself, but it rendered a particular conception of political order visible and reproducible.

The relationship between center and provinces was equally dynamic. From Dynasties 3 to 6 there was progressive differentiation of offices, titles, and regional responsibilities, together with greater visibility of provincial elites. This development should not automatically be interpreted as a linear decline of central authority. Delegation could expand state capacity by incorporating local actors into administrative and ritual circuits. Only when political, fiscal, and succession conditions changed could some of these same structures favor configurations of power less dependent upon the Residence. Decentralization should therefore be analyzed as a transformation of institutional relationships rather than as the simple collapse of a previously perfect centralization.

The transition to the First Intermediate Period confirms the need to abandon monocausal explanations. Environmental variation and difficulties associated with the Nile regime are relevant, but they are insufficient by themselves to explain the end of the Old Kingdom. Royal succession, the duration of particular reigns, fiscal demands, the expansion of provincial networks, the weight of foundations and estates, and uneven central capacity for coordination all formed part of a complex process. The end of the Old Kingdom represented a reconfiguration of scales and centers of power, not the

immediate disappearance of pharaonic political culture or of the institutions that sustained it.

From a historiographical perspective, this study also demonstrates the limitations of several traditional categories. Expressions such as Oriental despotism, hydraulic society, feudalism, independent priestly power, or pharaonic absolutism may obscure more than they explain when used as closed models. Old Kingdom sources are fragmentary, socially biased, and derive largely from funerary, administrative, or monumental contexts. Any reconstruction must therefore distinguish ideological representation from social practice, title from effective function, contemporary sources from much later testimony, and documentary absence from historical absence.

The principal result of this study is therefore to interpret the institutional consolidation of the Old Kingdom as the production of a sustained capacity for coordination. This capacity linked territory, administration, writing, religion, economy, labor, and monumentality within a system capable of reproducing relations of authority beyond immediate interaction between ruler and ruled. The continuity of the Egyptian state is not explained by institutional immobility, but by institutions sufficiently stable to remain recognizable and sufficiently flexible to transform. Permanence was a property of institutional adaptation, not the absence of change.

This conclusion finally requires the history of the Old Kingdom to be distinguished from retrospective images that for centuries have transformed Egypt into a paradigm of immobility, mystery, or absolute power. The pharaonic state was a concrete historical construction subject to tensions, material limits, negotiation, and transformation. Precisely for

this reason, its durability is more significant: its capacity to produce continuity over long periods did not arise from a perfect structure but from the interaction of forms of legitimacy, administrative mechanisms, and social practices capable of reorganization. Understanding that interaction allows a more precise explanation of how a monarchy of the third millennium BCE transformed territorial diversity and limited resources into one of the most enduring state experiences of the ancient world.

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