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CHAPTER

29 The Old Kingdom and First Intermediate Period

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Abstract

The Old Kingdom is usually characterized as the first great epoch of Egyptian history, when the phenomenal cultural, iconographical and political developments of the late Predynastic Period and the Early Dynastic Period coalesced to give an eminently visible culture that says ‘ancient Egypt’ to the modern audience. This development may best be symbolized by the pyramid, the most persistent image of the era. For its part, the First Intermediate Period is the first clear manifestation in Egyptian history of the periods of disunity and systemic weakness that have affected every long-lasting ancient and modern culture in one form or the other. The time-period covered in this section illustrates for the first time both the highs and lows of ancient Egypt. The Old Kingdom is usually defined as consisting of the Third to Eighth Dynasties of Manetho (c.2686–2125 BC), and the First Intermediate Period of the Ninth and Tenth and roughly two-thirds of the Eleventh Dynasty (c.2160–2016 BC).

Keywords: Old Kingdom, First Intermediate Period, Egypt, history, Djoser, Khufu

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An historical outline

IT is conventional to begin the Old Kingdom with the Third Dynasty (c.2686–2613 BC), since the reign of Netjerikhet Djoser, the first or second king, saw the beginning of large-scale building in stone, a technical achievement that characterizes the Old Kingdom.¹ The principal references for the major issues in this historical outline will be found in the ‘Suggested reading’ section at the end of the article, and many of the references in the text below are to surveys in which fuller bibliography can be found. Some individual issues are discussed further below.

Relatively little is known about the history of the Third Dynasty, in complete opposition to what is known about its architectural achievements. After the Step Pyramid of Djoser at Saqqara, most of the monuments appear never to have been completed. The successors of Djoser were Sekhemkhet and Khaba, and the last king of the dynasty was probably Qaihedjet Huni, who may or may not have been involved in the building of the pyramid at Meidum, just north of the Faiyum. The successor of Huni was Sneferu, first king of the Fourth Dynasty (c.2613–2494 BC), although there is no clear family break in contemporary records.²

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Sneferu (c.2613–2589 BC) is recorded in the Palermo Stone as raiding Nubia, and it is quite likely that incursions started by Egyptian kings in the First Dynasty (c.3000–2890 BC) meant that this area was depopulated from then until later in the Old Kingdom; a graffito of Sneferu from Khor el-Aquiba can be interpreted as referring to an expedition contributing to this process of depopulation, perhaps for labour needed in Egypt.³ He certainly built two pyramids at Dahshur, and had a significant involvement in that at Meidum. Sneferu survived in Egyptian mythical memory as a beneficent king, whereas his son and successor, Khufu (Greek Kheops) was recalled as a tyrant; these aspects are best illustrated in the late Middle Kingdom Papyrus Westcar.⁴ Khufu as a tyrant is perhaps most widely known from Herodotus History (Book II: 124–7). It is possible that the sheer size of Khufu's funerary monument, the Great Pyramid at Giza, suggested to later Egyptians that he must have been a despotic ruler. Little is known about Khufu himself, but it is quite clear that the vast amount of pyramid building going on at this time required the development of a strong central administration to enable such work to proceed. Khufu's son Djedefra built his pyramid at Abu Roash to the north of Giza, but his successor, another of Khufu's sons, called Khafra (Greek Chephren) returned to Giza to construct his funerary monument; construction of the Great Sphinx at that site is usually attributed to him.⁵

Although the last two known royal tombs of the Fourth Dynasty did not rival those of the earlier rulers, the Fifth Dynasty (c.2494–2345 BC) adopted more modest designs for its pyramids. The reason for this may not have been so much economic overreaching as a result of the immense projects of the preceding dynasty as a change in emphasis to the building of more temples, including the 'sun temples', dedicated to the king and the sun-god, just to the north of the predominant royal burial site of Saqqara/Abusir.⁶ The cult of the sun had been growing in influence since the middle of the Fourth Dynasty when, for example, Ra, the name of one of the principal forms of the sun god, became a standard part of the royal names.

Changes in the way in which the administration was structured are evident at this time. While previously the royal family had filled many of the offices of state, private individuals were increasingly promoted to high levels.⁷ Although the tombs of many Fourth Dynasty officials are relatively close to their kings at Giza, more of a separation was observed in the Fifth Dynasty, with the majority being buried at Saqqara, while most of their rulers' pyramids were at Abusir. Private tombs became more elaborate, and there was an increase in the number of texts. Increasing levels of decoration are attested in royal temples, and in those of Neferefra and Neferirkara at Abusir substantial remains of administrative archives were uncovered.⁸ The number of rock inscriptions in the Sinai and elsewhere suggests a growth in expeditions abroad.⁹

The construction of sun temples seems to have ceased in the reign of Djedkara Isesi, the penultimate king of the dynasty, who also built his pyramid at the relatively little-used site of South Saqqara—although how much should be read into either development is debatable. Also at about this time a somewhat changed attitude to provincial officials is seen; whereas the provinces had before been mostly administered from the capital, more tombs of important persons are now found outside Memphis.¹⁰ This may indicate not so much a shift to decentralization as an attempt to govern and exploit these regions more effectively, since some of these officials came originally from the Memphite region. The last king of the dynasty, Unas, was the first king to inscribe the Pyramid Texts on the walls of the burial chambers of his pyramid at Saqqara; tombs of some of his high officials were built adjacent to his pyramid complex. After Unas, the rise of the Sixth Dynasty (c.2345–2181 BC) coincides with the first clear break in the so-called 'Turin Canon', a fragmentary

p. 621 papyrus bearing a list ↳ of royal names, probably a king-list of the Ramesside Period, much used to reconstruct the sequences of kings and chronology before the New Kingdom.¹¹

Even if there was a family change, the Old Kingdom continued apparently much as before. Teti, the first king, built a pyramid at Saqqara, around which clustered the tombs of his high officials. A possible ephemeral king called Userkara might have reigned for a short while after Teti, and an argument has been advanced for some instability in the early years of the Sixth Dynasty, involving assassinations and palace intrigues.¹² However, the longish reign of Pepy I (c.2321–2287 BC) ensured a measure of stability,¹³ and this king seems to have carefully modified the balance of power of provincial officials to prevent anyone becoming too powerful.¹⁴ He also built a series of temples throughout Egypt at major cult centres, which might have included some of the first stone examples of such structures, which had previously mainly been made of mud brick.¹⁵ He may also have conducted military campaigns on the borders of Egypt. His son Merenra had a short seven-year reign, after which he was succeeded by the child-king Pepy II, who may have been a son of either of his predecessors. Tradition holds that this Pepy was aged six at accession and lived to be 100 years old (Manetho from Africanus Fr. 20).¹⁶

The first signs of internal weakness that may eventually have put paid to the strong centralized Old Kingdom possibly appear at this time (c.2250 BC). The successors of Pepy II seem to have been relatively short-lived, although royal decrees from Koptos¹⁷ suggest that Memphis at least held nominal control over the country until the end of the Eighth Dynasty, but at some point around 2170 BC central control disintegrated. The kingship seems to have passed to the governors of Herakleopolis, a town just to the south of the Faiyum. The period of around 160 years (there is no overall consensus on the length of the period, however; see below) that followed is usually termed the First Intermediate Period. It is not really known why the kingship moved to Herakleopolis, as this city is almost unknown during the later Old Kingdom; presumably the local nomarchs saw the chance to seize power in a vacuum. Manetho assigned the Ninth and Tenth Dynasties to these rulers, although so little is known about them that making a clear division between these dynasties seems over-optimistic.¹⁸

Much better attested is the situation in the southern part of Egypt. The Eighth Dynasty rulers were recognized in Upper Egypt—some of their principal attestations are in the aforementioned decrees from Koptos but at some point following the demise of the Eighth Dynasty, the local chiefs of each ran their provinces as local fiefdoms with little or no reference to whatever central government there was. There are many monuments of these men, and they attest to fighting and disputes between the southernmost provinces. The most famed document is the biography in the remarkable tomb of Ankhtifi at Moalla¹⁹ in the Upper Egyptian third nome (province). The best-known disputes are those between the third and fourth nomes of Upper Egypt (Moalla and Thebes), but there is some evidence of earlier clashes between Thebes and Koptos.²⁰ The result was that the Theban rulers of the ↳ Eleventh Dynasty, whose names were Inyotef and Mentuhotep, and who before long began writing their names in cartouches and calling themselves kings, gradually extended their control south to Aswan and north to beyond Abydos. There they came into conflict with the nomarchs of Asyut, who seem to have been loyal to the Herakleopolitan rulers. So much is attested in inscriptions, and although it cannot be precisely dated, the expansion north to Abydos seems to have been completed before the end of the reign of Inyotef II Wahankh (c.2112–2063 BC). Progress towards the eventual reunification of Egypt under his successor Mentuhotep II (c.2055–2004 BC) has to be pieced together from more convoluted sources, above all a series of royal name changes which are presumed to reflect a combination of aspirations and achievements, culminating in the name ‘Uniter of the Two Lands’ in about his year 39 (c.2016 BC). At that point in the Eleventh Dynasty it is normal to end the First Intermediate Period.

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Available data on monuments

An almost complete series of pyramids for kings from the beginning of the Third to the end of the Sixth Dynasty exists in the Memphite region, from Abu Roash to Meidum, as do tombs for the major rulers of the Eleventh Dynasty at Thebes. For extensive bibliographic coverage of the Memphite cemeteries, see Porter and Moss volume III, 2nd edition, and for basic coverage of the southern sites see Porter and Moss volume I 2nd edition and volume IV. Several publications on the early Theban royal tombs have appeared since volume I of Porter and Moss was published²¹, and new private tomb reports appear all the time. Also, fieldwork is finding the formerly lost locations of a number of well-known tombs, such as those of Weni and Iuu at Abydos²², and tombs have been located in the Delta, which does not have the luxury of the excellent preservation usually afforded in the Nile Valley, such as Bubastis.²³

There is, however, a major gap in material relating to the Herakleopolitan kings and officials²⁴, and there is the inevitable gap in the Delta record. The Old Kingdom and First Intermediate Period probably has the widest geographical range of non-royal elite tombs of the Pharaonic Period, and is perhaps also the least incomplete of all the great Egyptian epochs. The tomb locations include the large court cemeteries of Saqqara and Giza and the lesser ones of Abusir, Dahshur and Meidum. South of the Memphite region, tombs, or elements of them, primarily of the Fifth to Eleventh Dynasties, are known in almost all of the 22 Upper Egyptian nomes. The state of publication of this material is mostly quite good, in particular for the site of Giza. One notable gap in this type of evidence concerns temples, other than those in the service of royal cults; it is assumed that many were of brick and were lost in later re-buildings.²⁵

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Available textual data

The majority of texts come from tombs, and are thus of a funerary nature. Many documentary texts are collected in hieroglyphs in Sethe²⁶ (abbreviated in Egyptological publications as Urk. I) and also in Clère and Vandier.²⁷ A set of translations of most Old Kingdom sources has been published by Strudwick²⁸, including an introduction to the period and the texts and language; many of these texts are translated into French in Roccati.²⁹ Collections of specific texts dealing with the First Intermediate Period, mostly with translations, are Vandier, Schenkel, Edel, and Daoud.³⁰

Many tomb owners had inscribed for themselves a 'biographical' text, quite a number of which are of an idealizing nature, but there are others that seem to refer to real events. As their context is the tomb, they tend to stress the strengths of the owners and are short on what we might consider historical detail.³¹ Temple texts are few in number, but they include many royal decrees, usually giving exemptions from state requirements, which can shed light on administrative practices. Administrative texts were limited until 2013 to two major archives from Abusir and Gebelein, one of a royal cult and the other of a funerary estate. These provide a wealth of detail, but, as administrative documents, they make no allowances for the lack of background of the reader in the twenty-first century AD. The Abusir and Gebelein papyri are edited in Posener-Kriéger and de Cenival and Posener-Kriéger respectively.³² A fascinating commentary on the Abusir Papyri is provided in Posener-Krieger.³³ Further papyri were discovered at Abusir in the 1970s and 1980s.³⁴ A remarkable addition to Old Kingdom papyri came in 2013, when excavations at the Old Kingdom port at Wadi el-Jarf revealed many fragments from the reign of Khufu.³⁵ The published part of these papyri concerns the day-book of an official named Merer, whose duties were to command crews carrying limestone from Tura to the building site of the Great Pyramid at Giza, a type of text hitherto unknown from this date. These are now the oldest written papyri from Egypt and their importance cannot be underestimated. There are in addition a number of letters and the like, including unusual mud tablets from the site of Balat in Dakhla oasis³⁶, as well as sealings from various sites.

The principal religious texts of the Old Kingdom are the Pyramid Texts, which also formed the basis of the Coffin Texts of private individuals in the First Intermediate Period. The Pyramid Texts were first collected by Sethe³⁷, and translated into English most recently in Allen.³⁸ The classic editions of the Coffin Texts have been published by de Buck and Allen, and the standard English translation was published by Faulkner.³⁹

p. 624 The position of the use of Egyptian literary texts as sources for the Old Kingdom and First Intermediate Period is problematic. Many earlier publications assign three so-called 'Wisdom Texts' (associated with the Old Kingdom 'sages' Ptahhotep, Djedefhor, and Kaigemni) to the Old Kingdom, but the most recent studies date them to the Middle Kingdom.⁴⁰ Likewise, it used to be fashionable to use the 'doom and gloom' of certain texts, particularly the *Lamentations of Ipuwer*, as depicting the chaos of the First Intermediate Period, but such texts are now treated as creations of the Middle Kingdom and reflect a popular literary topos of the time.⁴¹ More complex is the status of the *Instruction for Merikara*.⁴² An argument was made in 2011 for dating it to the First Intermediate Period.⁴³

Data deriving from settlements

The Egyptological study of preserved material remains suffers from a rather extreme skewing in favour of objects from tombs and temples. This is partly due to the ancient Egyptians' deliberate attempts to preserve those aspects for eternity, as their beliefs required. The dearth of material from settlements also derives both from the fact that many were located in the cultivated areas (where the environment is not conducive to the preservation of remains, particularly organic ones) and from the unfortunate but understandable attraction of fieldworkers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries AD to the easier and perhaps choicer pickings from funerary contexts. In addition, town sites have been frequently rebuilt over the past 5,000 years, and often modern investigators have been technically ill-equipped to deal with the more complex archaeology encountered in these locations (for further discussion of these issues see Chapter 18).

This situation only really began to change in the decades since Bietak published his overview of this subject.⁴⁴ The first Old Kingdom settlements to be studied and published were mostly connected with funerary establishments, in particular that of Khentkawes at Giza⁴⁵; fieldwork presently being undertaken by Mark Lehner and Zahi Hawass at Heit el-Ghurab in Giza, the 'town of the pyramid builders', will reveal much interesting information about this neglected group of people.⁴⁶ However, a number of town sites are now being investigated in the Nile Valley, the Delta and the oases. Most of these excavations are still in progress and incompletely published; some sites suffer from the regrettable preference given by their excavators to continuing fieldwork to the detriment of the writing up of the results.⁴⁷

p. 625 The settlement at Elephantine dates back to the Predynastic Period, and in the Old Kingdom there was a sizeable town and, most important of all, a fortress. Elephantine has long been under investigation by the German Archaeological Institute. Much of the information is in their preliminary reports, but there is a partial overview of some of the Old Kingdom information in Seidlmayer, while Ziermann includes discussion of the fortifications of the Old Kingdom; see also the overview of the entire site in Raue.⁴⁸ Further sites in Upper Egypt that have seen investigation and study for the Old Kingdom and First Intermediate Period are Kom Ombo⁴⁹, Edfu⁵⁰, Dendera⁵¹ and Abydos.⁵²

No doubt many of the main Delta sites have occupation levels that cover the Third to Eleventh Dynasties, but this region has been largely ignored until relatively recently. Some examples of Delta sites where Old Kingdom and First Intermediate settlement phases have been revealed are Tell Basta, Tell el-Dab'a, Mendes and Kom el-Hisn.⁵³ Particularly intriguing is the late Old Kingdom and First Intermediate Period site of Ayn Asil in the Dakhla Oasis. While the site was used in later periods, the earlier occupation phases, which include settlements, including pottery workshops⁵⁴, the governors' palace⁵⁵, and of course the associated

cemeteries, are by far the most important. This material sheds light on an area much different from the Nile Valley.⁵⁶

Specific historical issues

Periods and dating

Egyptology tends to be shackled by various structures imposed in the past, and broad dating is no exception. In many Egyptological publications, the Seventh and Eighth Dynasties are not included in the Old Kingdom, although it seems clear from cautious use of the king lists that they should be so included. Likewise, some authors include the whole Eleventh Dynasty in the First Intermediate Period, although I prefer to terminate it with the reunification in the latter part of the reign of Mentuhotep II.

The dynastic structure in use is still basically that of Manetho, but research has shown that this is not something that Egyptians of the time would have recognized. Thus, while Manetho conceived of each dynasty along the lines of a 'ruling house' there are clear family links between the Second and Third Dynasties, perhaps between the Third and Fourth, and almost certainly between the Fourth and Fifth. The Turin Canon may be instructive in this regard, as it places its first sub-total of kings at the end of the Fifth Dynasty; Jaromir Malek has suggested that the manner in which this document was copied might even have given rise to some of the historical divisions which led to Manetho's structures.⁵⁷

p. 626 The early periods in Egypt have an additional dating complexity, that of the manner in which the years of individual reigns are expressed. Dating may have started out at the beginning of Egyptian history by recording the years based on events, and this is probably reflected in the compartments of the Palermo Stone.⁵⁸ The key event seems to have been a recurring census of the cattle of Egypt within the reign of a king, the first of which would have taken place not long after his accession to the throne, presumably as a way of establishing and announcing the authority of the new ruler, and the recurrence of this event seems to have given rise to the principal dating system employed in the Early Dynastic Period and Old Kingdom. Thus an Old Kingdom document might be dated the year of the n-th occasion of the count of the cattle, sometimes, but not always, accompanied by the name of a king; this is frequently abbreviated to 'year of the n-th occasion'. The problem with understanding this system is our uncertainty concerning the frequency of these counts, as there are many cases where the count is indeed biennial (shown by the use of 'year after the n-th occasion'), but others where the textual and other data cannot be reconciled. The solution is not to impose our modern rigorous concepts of dating but to understand that the Egyptians knew what they meant, and that was what mattered.⁵⁹

Most historical issues are still at the rather basic level of the succession of kings and reign lengths. There are a number of reigns where the evidence of the king lists is contradicted by dated contemporary monuments.⁶⁰ The whole Third Dynasty is quite suspect, even allowing for the fact that several royal pyramids are known; the problem is making the links between the rulers, and obtaining some idea of the reign lengths. And these almost pale into insignificance with the uncertainties of the First Intermediate Period!

The Fourth Dynasty

Bicheris and Thamphthis, two of the names given by Manetho in his history of Egypt (Manetho from Africanus Fr. 14), cannot easily be equated with known kings, although it has been suggested that the latter name might come from the Egyptian Djedefptah.⁶¹ Whether such a king actually existed is somewhat dubious, but it is speculated that it might have derived from Hordjedef, a son of Khufu.⁶² This is supported to some extent by the Turin Canon, which seems to have spaces for two otherwise unknown kings in the dynasty. One of these kings could be the owner of the 'great excavation' at Zawiyet el-Aryan, which is thought to be the substructure of an unfinished pyramid of Fourth-Dynasty date, presumably of a ruler who died after a short reign. Builders' marks of uncertain reading have been found at this site, and the name of the king has been suggested as Nebka or Bikka, which it may be possible to reconcile with Bicheris.⁶³ No other monuments can be associated with these kings, and (almost) contemporary lists of kings include no others than the well-known ones.

p. 627 It has been speculated that there was a split in the family over the succession of Khufu, based largely on some damage in the Eastern Cemetery at Giza, where members of the royal family are buried, and on the variable location of Fourth-Dynasty pyramids. Specifically, the decision of Djedkara, the son and successor of Khufu, to build his funerary monument at Abu Roash, several kilometres to the north of Giza, has been viewed as evidence of a split. The latter is rather misleading however, as both his predecessors had chosen new sites for their burial complexes (Dahshur and Giza), and thus it would be continuing a practice for their successor to seek a new site. It could actually be argued that the other two kings who built at Giza, Khafra and Menkaura, were acting out of sequence, perhaps due to nothing more than a lack of good alternative sites.

The Fifth Dynasty

The question of the transition between the later Fourth and earlier Fifth Dynasty, and the succession and origin of the kings is still an issue. The Turin Canon makes no break anywhere in this period, and the archaeological evidence tends to support that. A crucial figure in the transition seems to be Khentkawes, a queen buried in a tomb which has been termed the 'fourth pyramid of Giza', the excavation of which caused a sensation in the 1930s when inscriptions were found that called her 'mother of two kings of Upper and Lower Egypt'.⁶⁴ From her burial location she would seem to be a queen of the later Fourth Dynasty, although to whom she was married is unclear. An interesting attempt was made by Hartwig Altenmüller to argue that she and the two kings were the prototype for the story of Radjedet in the Westcar Papyrus, although this theory now seems to find little favour.⁶⁵ The identity of her sons is not certain, although the preferred candidates are Userkaf and Sahura. The picture is somewhat complicated by the existence of a second Khentkawes with the same title, this time a wife of Neferirkara and known from Abusir.⁶⁶ Who were her sons? Neferirkara was succeeded by Neferefra and Niuserra for certain, both of whom have pyramids at Abusir, but there is also a rather shadowy king called Shepseskara, known only from sealings from Abusir and from his possible association with the cartouche of the equally unknown king Isi.⁶⁷ Miroslav Verner argues that a second unfinished pyramid at Abusir (in addition to that of Neferefra), excavated in the 1980s, might have been built for Shepseskara.⁶⁸

While the succession of the remaining kings of the dynasty is not questioned, we know little about their relationships to each other. Niuserra was succeeded by Menkauhor, possibly his son⁶⁹, but that king's pyramid is the only funerary monument of a major Old Kingdom ruler never to have been located. The monument is named in various titles, but it is also mentioned in the decree of Pepy I that relates to the pyramids of Sneferu at Dahshur, in which it is forbidden to take labour from these pyramids to that of Menkauhor⁷⁰, and there is a certain logic to the argument that this ought to mean that the missing pyramid was therefore in the vicinity of Dahshur. However, another location has also been proposed at north

Saqqara, not far from the pyramid of Teti.⁷¹ The pyramid of Djedkara at south Saqqara has never been fully studied⁷², and it is possible that further information about family relationships might be revealed there. Unas, whose pyramid complex is well-known, is also a king whose origins are somewhat mysterious.

p. 628 The locations of the so-called 'sun-temples' remain a problem. The titles of officials of the Fifth Dynasty make it clear that a new category of royal temple came into being, which we term 'sun-temples', characterized by prominent obelisks and courts open to the sky.⁷³ Perhaps some of the reduction in size of Fifth-Dynasty pyramids, when compared with those of the Fourth, can be attributed to a shift in emphasis to other temple construction; certainly we can see from the Abusir papyri how the sun-temple worked in tandem with the royal mortuary temple in the provision and distribution of the income from the royal estates, which was used for maintaining the royal cult. Six temples are known from titles (attributed to Userkaf, Sahura, Neferirkara, Neferefra, Nyuserra and Menkauhor) but the remains of only two have been found (those of Userkaf and Nyuserra). Where were the others? The answer is unknown, although suggestions have been made over the years that the temples were re-used, or dismantled.⁷⁴ This is an archaeological problem with important historical and religious dimensions. It is particularly a mystery in relation to the sun-temple of Neferirkara, which is so frequently attested in the Abusir papyri from the mortuary complex of the same king.

The Sixth Dynasty

There seems to be a further little-known king early in the Sixth Dynasty, named Userkara, who is attested from a small number of sources. An apparent gap in the listing of the Turin Canon between Teti and Pepy I suggests his presence, and the Sixth-Dynasty annals on the lid of the sarcophagus of Ankhesenpepy suggest that he reigned for a short period at that time.⁷⁵ Relatively recent excavations in the Teti pyramid cemetery at Saqqara have suggested that a number of tombs of the early Sixth Dynasty there show signs of deliberate damage as if there were some dispute over the succession.⁷⁶

Other historical problems in the Sixth Dynasty revolve mainly around the reign lengths of Pepy I and II. The former is given 20 years in the Turin Canon list, which is flatly contradicted by contemporary dates, and it is not impossible that whatever happened surrounding Userkara may have skewed the historical record to some degree.⁷⁷ The reverse is true for Pepy II, who is said by Manetho to have come to the throne at the age of six and to have reigned until he was 100; the Turin list gives 90 years for him (Manetho from Africanus Fr. 20).⁷⁸ However, contemporary sources seem to provide few dates that might encompass the last three decades of the reign, and this has given rise to suggestions that he may have reigned for 60–70 years. This of course assumes a certain regularity in the year recording systems about which caution has been expressed above.⁷⁹

The end of the Old Kingdom

p. 629 Probably the most debated and vexatious issue is the end of the Old Kingdom: who ruled, for how long, where, and why did control disintegrate? The long reign of the Sixth-Dynasty ruler Pepy II was followed by two short reigns, one of which has for many years been considered to be that of a woman known by the Greek name Nitocris. It seems that this idea has now become less plausible if a misreading of the Turin Canon is accepted.⁸⁰ A further group of names is found in the Turin Canon, plus a mysterious reference to 'missing six years'. A total of 855 years is then given, and next the Ninth and Tenth Dynasties are reached. Many scholars have equated the aforementioned 'further group of names' with the Eighth Dynasty while the 'missing six years' may perhaps be the Seventh Dynasty. The Seventh and Eighth Dynasties have also been linked with a list of otherwise little-known kings in the Abydos king list.⁸¹

Few significant monuments have survived from this period at the end of the Old Kingdom. All the evidence points to a number of short reigns following that of Pepy II, and this implies a level of instability, to which I will return shortly. It seems that Manetho's Seventh and Eighth Dynasties were very short-lived, and the only substantial evidence of them comes from a series of decrees set up by one of the last rulers, Neferkahun, at Koptos.⁸² As at least one pyramid of this dynasty, that of Ibi, is located at Saqqara, it is reasonable to assume that they ruled from Memphis, and that southern Upper Egypt was still under their control.⁸³

However, it is evident that it was not long before the authority of the central government declined. Upper Egypt had for a very long time been composed of a series of 22 nomes, and it appears that each of these became its own little kingdom for a time. What caused this collapse of the central government?⁸⁴ Various theories have been suggested over the years⁸⁵ ranging from instability outside Memphis caused by the increasing power of provincial officials during the Sixth Dynasty, to economic problems caused by low Nile and subsequent famines; recently the theory of "punctuated equilibrium" has been advanced.⁸⁶

It used to be fashionable for scholars to favour one theory or the other. Economic problems were once favourite, as there are a number of references in tomb texts of the late Old Kingdom and First Intermediate Period to possible famines⁸⁷, and studies suggest that Egypt did indeed become drier in the later Old Kingdom.⁸⁸ But it is not right to assume the total historicity of tomb texts, given that they are a form of religious document intended to promote the personality of the tomb owner and not to convey objective history, and it is plausible that possible difficulties were exaggerated as the mention of famine became a fashionable subject in these texts.⁸⁹ Likewise, the growth in provincial cemeteries as the Old Kingdom progressed has been taken as an indication of growing independence of these local magnates, and yet studies have shown that by and large, power over these rulers was maintained by the central government.⁹⁰ However, some instability after the reign of Pepy II is undeniable, as shown by the paucity of royal monuments and the rapid turnover of kings. It is in fact most likely that the causes were a multiplicity of factors, including those mentioned, and that the structures that underpinned the Old Kingdom could not take the new strains placed on them. The result was the eventual disintegration of the centralized state⁹¹; however, Nadine Moeller queries the effects of climate change, and Moreno Garcia poses the question as to whether there even was a collapse.⁹² More contemporary material is needed to help with these problems.

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The length of the First Intermediate Period

There seems to be no scholarly consensus on which dynasties to include in this complicated period. Nowadays, most scholars tend to include the Seventh and Eighth Dynasties within the Old Kingdom, indicating that the Memphite kingship was continuing in some form⁹³, although sometimes the obscurity of these two dynasties encourages some to add them into the First Intermediate Period. But the real debate has been on the length of the period, with a shorter versus a longer duration, best considered in Seidlmayer.⁹⁴ The longer model presently seems to be most in favour.

The Ninth and Tenth Dynasties

While the Eleventh Dynasty is quite well documented for the First Intermediate Period, the largest gaps in our present knowledge are, firstly, the nature of the Ninth and Tenth Dynasties⁹⁵, secondly the identities and burial places of their kings⁹⁶, even whether there are one or two dynasties, and thirdly the progress towards their defeat by the Theban rulers of the Eleventh Dynasty (see below). Despite evidence pointing to these rulers as having come from Herakleopolis, excavations at the site have revealed a singular lack of material of that date, and nothing approaching tombs of significant officials or rulers of the town has ever been found.⁹⁷ The main tombs of officials that can clearly be dated to the kings of these dynasties are those at Asyut, which contain some texts relevant to the conflict.⁹⁸

The ‘reunification’

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The so-called ‘reunification’ of Egypt roughly halfway through the Eleventh Dynasty, marks the end of the First Intermediate Period, and is also subject to some debate. Most of the evidence for the beginning of the conflict between the rulers of Thebes and Herakleopolis comes from the earlier parts of the Eleventh Dynasty and is largely from Thebes (particularly datable to the reigns of Inyotef II and the first years of Mentuhotep II⁹⁹). The *Instruction for Merykara* may also refer to these events (but see the caution urged above in the discussion of available textual data), as do the tombs of the nobles at Asyut.¹⁰⁰ However, given that the Theban campaigns must have proceeded north along the Nile Valley, where there are impressive tombs of governors of the more northerly provinces, for example at Beni Hasan ١ and el-Bersha¹⁰¹, and graffiti associated with the latter officials in the quarries at Hatnub, but none of these make explicit reference to the difficulties of the time. The one possible exception to the latter is Graffito 16 at Hatnub (attributed to Kay son of Nehery), discussed by Giuliani, which has been thought to make an oblique reference to the armies of the south passing through the nome.¹⁰² Thus there is a historical void roughly between years 14 and 39 of Mentuhotep II, in which momentous events must have occurred, but of which we are almost entirely ignorant.

Suggested Reading

For more detailed overviews of the Old Kingdom and First Intermediate Period respectively, see the chapters by Malek and Seidlmayer in *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt* (Shaw 2000), and for chronology, see the relevant sections of *Ancient Egyptian Chronology* (Hornung et al. 2006). *Ancient Egypt: Anatomy of a Civilization* (Kemp 2006) should be read by anyone seeking insights into the development and functioning of ancient Egyptian society. A ‘cultural’ perspective on the Old Kingdom can be found in *The Mind of Egypt* (Assmann 2003: 46–77). Parts of the Old Kingdom and its end are reviewed in Bussmann 2015, Bárta 2017 and Müller-Wollermann 2014. The First Intermediate Period does not attract a great deal of ‘accessible’ studies, although it has been a very fertile ground for archaeological, textual and artistic study.

The Old Kingdom figures prominently in all books on Egyptian art and architecture, but perhaps the best introduction to this is the catalogue of an important exhibition in 1999–2000 (Metropolitan Museum 1999). Stylistic and artistic criteria formed the basis for the important studies by Cherpion 1989 and Harpur 1987. For administration and the dating of monuments, the abundance of decorated tombs, particularly for the Old Kingdom, has made it a fruitful dataset for administrative studies, and also studies of other areas that need to establish good dating criteria before moving to the area of interest. Beginning with Helck 1954, such work has moved through that of Baer 1960, Kanawati 1977 and 1980, Martin-Pardey 1976, Strudwick 1985, Cherpion 1989, Harpur 1987, Baud 1999, Papazian 2013, all of which have contributed to our detailed knowledge of the officials of the period. The original manuscript of this contribution, written in 2005, was not emended from 2007 until 2017, and again in 2020, during which time an explosion of relevant publications occurred. I have done my best to incorporate as many as possible, but the article is still very much a 2007 one with some additions and much important additional bibliography.

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Notes

- 1 See Verner 2001 for a survey of all pyramids covered in this article.
- 2 See von Beckerath 1997 and Hornung et al. 2006 for comprehensive surveys of Egyptian chronology, dates and rulers; for detailed individual names of rulers see von Beckerath 1999.
- 3 López 1967, Helck 1974.

- 4 Translated Lichtheim 1973: 215–22.
5 Lehner 1992.
6 Kaiser 1956; Verner 2016.
7 Strudwick 1985; Bárta 2013.
8 See survey in Strudwick 2005: 39–40.
9 See Eichler 1993.
10 Martin-Pardey 1976; Kanawati 1980.
11 Gardiner 1959.
12 Kanawati 2003.
13 Gourdon 2016.
14 Kanawati 1980.
15 The use of stone had previously been concentrated on funerary temples and tombs designed for eternity; survey in Bussmann 2010.
16 Gardiner 1959: pl. II, v.5.
17 See, for example, Strudwick 2005: 116–24.
18 Brovarski 2018: 7–49.
19 Vandier 1950.
20 For example, the texts in Darnell and Darnell 1997.
21 See Arnold 1976, 1979, 1974–81.
22 Richards 2002; Herbich and Richards 2006.
23 See Bakr and Lange 2017.
24 See Pérez-Die 1995 for discussion of the Spanish Archaeological Mission’s work at Herakleopolis since 1966, including the excavation of a First Intermediate Period cemetery.
25 O’Connor 1992; cf. Bussmann 2010. For the early Amun temple at Karnak, see Gabolde 2018.
26 Sethe 1932–33.
27 Clère and Vandier 1948.
28 Strudwick 2005.
29 Roccati 1982.
30 Vandier 1950, Schenkel 1965, Edel 1984, and Daoud 2006.
31 Kloth 2002; Stauder-Porchet 2017.
32 Posener-Kriéger and de Cenival 1968; Posener-Kriéger 2004.
33 Posener-Krieger 1976.
34 See Posener-Kriéger et al. 2006.
35 Tallet 2017.
36 Pantalacci 2013.
37 Sethe 1908–22.
38 Allen 2005.
39 de Buck 1935–61; Allen 2006; Faulkner 1973–8.
40 Summaries and survey in Parkinson 2002: 313–15; many references in Moers et al. 2013.
41 Summary and survey in Parkinson 2002: 204–16, 308–9; many references in Moers et al. 2013.
42 Summary and survey in Parkinson 2002: 248–57, 315–16; many references in Moers et al. 2013. See also Brovarski 2018: 42–9.
43 Demidchik 2011.
44 Bietak 1979.
45 Hassan 1943.
46 See Lehner and Wetterstrom 2006; Lehner et al. 2011; Lehner 2015.
47 But see the overview in Moeller 2016.
48 Seidlmayer 1996; Ziermann 1993; Raue 2007.
49 Kemp 1985, who indicates that Old Kingdom and First Intermediate Period remains appear to be the most extensive.
50 Moeller 2003.
51 Marchand and Laisney 2000; Marchand 2004.
52 Adams 1998.
53 el-Sawi 1979 (Tell Basta); Bietak 1996 (Mendes); Redford 2010 (Tell el-Dab’a); Wenke and Brewer 1996 (Kom el-Hisn).
54 Soukiassian et al. 1990.
55 Soukiassian et al. 2002.
56 See Pantalacci 1998 for an overview of the social composition of the Dakhla Oasis in the Sixth Dynasty.

- 57 Malek 1982: 106.
- 58 See Wilkinson 2000 for an overview of the Palermo Stone and other annals.
- 59 See Strudwick 2005: 10–14, for an overview and bibliographical references, and see also Verner 2006, Verner 2008, and the more calendrically based studies in Nolan 2003 and Nolan 2015.
- 60 See Spalinger 1994 for a survey of the dating information available from contemporary monuments.
- 61 Summary Gundacker 2015: 122–3.
- 62 Gundacker 2015: 138–41.
- 63 Barsanti 1906: 257–65, Dodson 1985, but see also Theis 2014.
- 64 Hassan 1943: 16.
- 65 Altenmüller 1970; Hays 2002.
- 66 Verner 2015.
- 67 Verner 2000.
- 68 Verner 2001: 310–11.
- 69 Verner 2015: 91.
- 70 Translated Strudwick 2005: 103–5.
- 71 Berlandini 1978 and Verner 2001: 322–4.
- 72 See now Megahed et al. 2019, with further references.
- 73 See further Nuzzolo 2015; Nuzzolo 2016; Verner 2016; Nuzzolo 2019.
- 74 See Kaiser 1956, and see also Stadelmann 2000: 540–2 for the argument that the Userkaf sun temple might have been modified for use by Sahura and Neferirkara.
- 75 See Baud and Dobrev 1995.
- 76 Kanawati 2003.
- 77 Baud 2006: 146; Kanawati 2003: 4.
- 78 Gardiner 1959: pl. II, v.5.
- 79 See most recently Gourdon 2016: 15–41.
- 80 Ryholt 2000.
- 81 Baud 2006: 156–8; Papazian 2015: 411–17.
- 82 For translation see Strudwick 2005: 117–23.
- 83 Overview in Papazian 2015.
- 84 General overviews will be found in Müller-Wollermann 2014 and Bárta 2011: 220–8.
- 85 See, for instance, Bell 1971, Kanawati 1977, 1980, Müller-Wollermann 1986, Vercoutter 1993.
- 86 Bárta 2015b.
- 87 Vandier 1936.
- 88 Bell 1971; Bárta 2015a.
- 89 See Seidlmayer 2000: 129–33 for a discussion of the interpretation of First Intermediate Period ‘biographical’ texts.
- 90 Kanawati 1980.
- 91 See particularly Müller-Wollermann 1986.
- 92 Moeller 2005; Moreno Garcia 2015.
- 93 Strudwick 2005: 10; Seidlmayer 2000: 118.
- 94 Seidlmayer 2006.
- 95 E.g. Demidchik 2013.
- 96 E.g. Demidchik 2016.
- 97 See for example, Pérez-Die 2010.
- 98 Kahl 2007: 74–82; el-Khadragy 2012.
- 99 For example, the two stelae in Russmann 2001: 81–3.
- 100 Kahl 2007: 74–82; el-Khadragy 2012.
- 101 For Beni Hasan see Newberry et al. 1893–1900; Shedid 1994, and for Deir el-Bersha see Griffith and Newberry 1895; Brovarski 1981.
- 102 Giuliani 1997; see also Brovarski 1981: 22.