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Müller-Wollermann, Renate

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Renate Müller-Wollermann

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END OF THE OLD KINGDOM

نهاية الدولة القديمة

Renate Müller-Wollermann

Ende des Alten Reichs
Fin de l'Ancien Empire

Egypt's Old Kingdom ended, according to widespread scholarly opinion, with the last king of the 8th Dynasty—that is, around the middle of the twenty-second century BCE, or a few decades later. The reasons for the fall are to be seen in internal and/or climatic factors that arose much earlier, or possibly in an invasion from the northeast—explanations that do not preclude each other. As a result of these factors, the territorial entity of the Egyptian state was dissolved and a period of economic and cultural decline followed. The end of the Old Kingdom is one of the most controversial topics in Egyptian historiography. Moreover, the end recorded by the ancient Egyptians does not necessarily coincide with what modern scholars have considered the end. Until now the exact causes for the decline remain uncertain.

انتهت الدولة القديمة بنهاية آخر ملوك الاسرة الثامنة، وذلك في منتصف القرن الثاني والعشرين قبل الميلاد أو ربما بعد ذلك بعدة عقود وفقاً للرأي الشائع بين الباحثين. وتتمحور أسباب الانهيار حول عوامل داخلية و/أو عوامل مناخية والتي ظهرت قبل هذه المرحلة بكثير، أو ربما يكون الانهيار نتيجة لغزو من الجهة الشمالية الشرقية لمصر، وهي أسباب متعددة لا تتعارض مع بعضها. تم تفكيك الوحدة الإقليمية للدولة المصرية نتيجة هذه العوامل وتلاها فترة من التدهور الاقتصادي والثقافي. وتعد نهاية الدولة القديمة من أكثر الموضوعات المثيرة للجدل بمجال دراسة تاريخ مصر القديمة، بالإضافة إلى أن النهاية التي وثقها قدماء المصريون لا تتوافق بالضرورة مع ما يعتبره العلماء الحاليين نهاية الدولة القديمة. ولا تزال حتى الآن أسباب هذا التدهور غير معروفة.



The term “Old Kingdom” (in German: *Altes Reich*; in French: *ancien empire*) was minted in the mid-nineteenth century and at that time meant the period of the 1st through the 16th dynasties; later the term referred to the period of the 1st through the 10th dynasties, and today it refers to the 1st through the 8th dynasties (Müller-Wollermann 1986: 4-7). Some scholars, however, put the end of the Old

Kingdom at the end of the 6th Dynasty, or after the reign of Pepy II (Baud 2010: 63). Most Egyptologists now designate the first two dynasties as the Early Dynastic Period, the Old Kingdom beginning with the 3rd Dynasty.

Dynasties 6 and 8 are combined in the Canon of Turin (Málek 1982); the 7th Dynasty is fictive. Thus, anciently the Old Kingdom was considered to have ended after the 8th

Dynasty. It seems to have been marked by the transfer of the royal residence from Memphis to Herakleopolis.

History of Research

Scholarly research on the Old Kingdom has traditionally relied on textual evidence. Texts have been considered to be more expressive than archaeological finds, because they “speak.” A compilation of ancient Egyptian records was already published by 1933 (Sethe 1933: *Urk I*), preceded and followed by several anthologies of translations (Breasted 1906; Roccati 1982; Strudwick 2005). Moreover, Egyptian literary texts—especially the “Admonitions,” which describe the world as being turned upside down (i.e., in a chaotic state)—have influenced historians (Bell 1971; Hassan 2007).

Only recently a change in methodologies has taken place and archaeological evidence has been given more weight (Sowada 2009; Richards 2010). This is due partly to the fact that archaeology has become increasingly scientific and is no longer confined to “digging for treasures.” Furthermore, new sites continue to be opened up (for example, el-Hawawish and Balat in the Kharga Oasis), adding to our information. Because the preponderance of philological and archaeological evidence derives from Middle and Upper Egypt, research has tended to focus on those regions, such evidence from the Delta having so far been lacking; some exceptions are Mendes (Redford 2010: 42-57), Kom el-Hisn (Cagle 2003), Buto, and the northeastern Delta.

In previous decades, Egyptologists explained the decline of the Old Kingdom by a growing decentralization of the administration and economy that led to the weakness, and eventually collapse, of the central state (Müller-Wollermann 1986). More recently, climatic causes—specifically increasing desiccation—have been both proposed and denounced (Moeller 2005). An entirely new proposal was brought forward by Jansen-Winkeln, who claimed that an attack by foreigners from the northeast was feasible (Jansen-Winkeln 2010: 302-303).

Still lacking are safe criteria for dating texts and archaeological material, especially in order to distinguish between material from the end of the Old Kingdom and that of the First Intermediate Period. The dating of tombs and their owners is still much debated (see, e.g., Brovarski 2013); progress has been made in establishing temporal sequences of pottery types, but only rarely can equations be made with absolutely dated finds (Seidlmayer 1990: 105-123; Marchand 2004).

Relative and Absolute Chronology

The succession of kings in the 6th Dynasty is fairly certain: Tety, Userkara, Pepy I, Merenra I, Pepy II, Merenra II, and Nitocris (who was in fact a king, not a ruling queen, as has long been believed: Ryholt 2000), plus two additional kings. The 8th Dynasty comprises 18 kings, most of them wearing the name Neferkara or variants thereof.

The end of the 6th Dynasty has been handed down to us by Manetho. In the Turin Canon we find that the 6th and 8th dynasties are combined. According to this list both dynasties lasted 187 years, six months, and three days. The succession of kings reconstructed by the Turin Canon and the Abydos King List is certain, although the last kings of the 6th Dynasty and most of the kings of the 8th Dynasty are not known by contemporary evidence. The succession and reign length of the kings of the 6th Dynasty reconstructed by the Turin Canon are as follows: Tety: X years; Userkara: X years; Pepy I: 20 years; Nemtiemsaef/Merenra I: 44 years; Pepy II: 90+ years; Nemtiemsaef/Merenra II: one year; Netjerkara: X years. Tety may have reigned about 15 years, Userkara a very short time, perhaps two to four years (Baud 2006: 146), and Nemtiemsaef/Merenra I less than ten years. The kings of the 8th Dynasty were ephemeral: all their reigns combined probably lasted about one generation, or 50 years at the most (ibid.: 157).

The absolute chronology is more difficult to determine due to the paucity of radiocarbon data and the lack of Sothic data. According to recent radiocarbon data, Tety acceded to the

throne around 2340 BCE and the reign of Pepy II ended around 2170 BCE (Bárta 2013: 220-221). This corresponds more or less with the high chronology proposed by Shaw (Shaw 2000: 480).

Political History

The decline of the Old Kingdom begins with the reign of Pepy II. Although the Turin Canon ascribes to him more than 90 years, there are no inscriptions later than the year after the 31st (cattle) count, which would be the 63rd year of his reign or even earlier, depending on the intervals of the count. A graffito in his pyramid at South Saqqara (fig. 1) mentions a burial and probably the 32nd count; this may place his death in the 64th year of his reign (Goedicke 1988), or earlier.

It is confirmed that in Pepy II's reign expeditions were made to Hatnub to quarry alabaster, the Sinai to extract turquoise and copper, Byblos to obtain timber, and Nubia to

acquire gold and exotics. Furthermore, nine royal decrees from his reign are known: one at Abydos for the benefit of royal statues, four at Coptos for the benefit of the temple of Min, one at Giza for the benefit of the pyramid of Menkaura, two at Saqqara in favor of a royal person and of a non-royal individual, respectively (Goedicke 1967: 81-157), and one at Dakhla for the benefit of the governors of that oasis (Pantalacci 1985).

Pepy II's son and successor, Nemtiemsaef/Merenra II, may have left a decree at Saqqara in order to protect the cult of two king's mothers (Goedicke 1967: 158-162). In the 8th Dynasty Neferkauhor left eleven decrees, all in Coptos (Goedicke 1967: 165-213). His successor, Demedjibtau, also left a decree in Coptos (*ibid.*: 214-225). From these 8th-Dynasty decrees we learn that Neferkauhor protected an official and the official's son, but subsequently withdrew his favor from them, and that later his successor attempted to protect the official and his son again.



Figure 1. Pyramid of Pepy II at South Saqqara.

Social, Economic, and Cultural History

The administration of the latter half of the 6th Dynasty is characterized by increasing decentralization. More and more posts were taken over by officials in the provinces and made *de facto* inheritable. Especially noteworthy is the number of provincial viziers (Strudwick 1985: 323), although some of these viziers may be titular. Many, but not all, nomes were governed by a nome administrator, who was often also the overseer of the priests of the main temple of the nome. These officials were responsible for recruiting manpower—especially soldiers, as a standing army did not exist. The training and recruiting of troops, Nubian mercenaries included, was increased, and forts were erected, in Balat, for example, or on the Sinai coast (Moreno García 2010).

Prior to the reign of Pepy II most of the holders of the office of Overseer of Upper Egypt—responsible for the collection of taxes—were buried at the royal residence, only a few being buried in the provinces. Upon Pepy II's reign, however, the situation was reversed. The nomes in the Delta, however, seem to have been administered from the royal residence.

The number of royal domains increased in the 6th Dynasty, but not in those regions with major temples, such as el-Hawawish, Elkab, or Coptos. This indicates that royal domains and temples took over the same task—that is, to supply the royal residence with provisions.

The location of the pyramids of the 6th-Dynasty kings who reigned after Pepy II remains unknown. Of the pyramids of the 8th Dynasty, only that of Ibi has been located, in the vicinity of Pepy II's pyramid in South Saqqara.

The increasing number of decorated tombs in the provinces produced a variety of texts and figures. Provincial tomb biographies show greater innovation and more frequent use of unconventional motifs than those in the royal residence (Kloth 2002: 286). The quality of decoration in provincial tombs, however, declined and the scenes became increasingly less elaborate, due to, among other possible

factors, the smaller size of many of the tombs (Harpur 1987: 221). The decoration of tombs in the southern provinces in particular, where contact with skilled craftsmen from the royal residence was limited, shows a return to simplicity (*ibid.*: 230). In general, tomb decoration, including statues, exhibits a new, “second style” that became manifest in the representation of exceptionally long bodies, narrow waists, and wide eyes (fig. 2; Russmann 1995). Some scholars, however, have claimed that the canon of proportions did not change (Harvey 2006; Roeten 2007a, b, c).

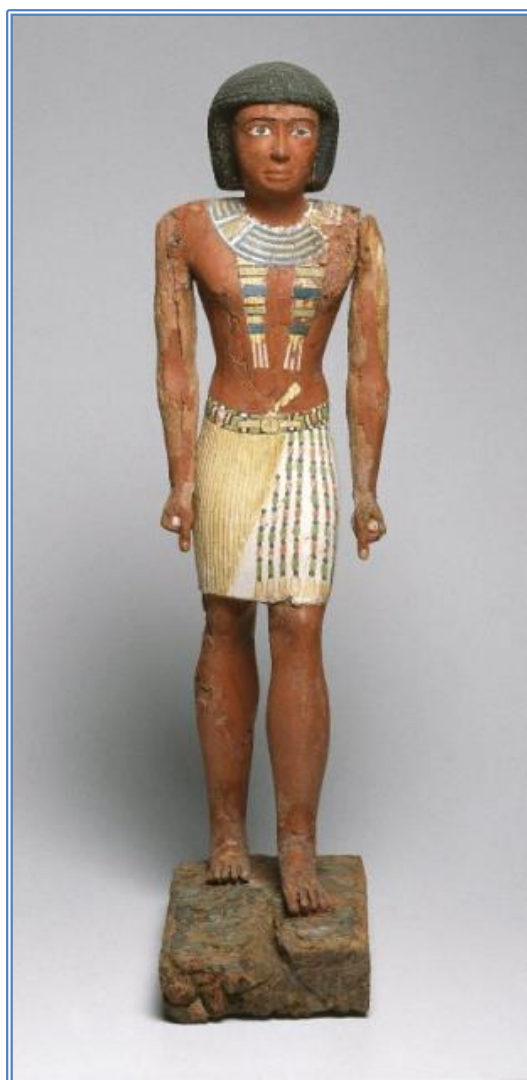


Figure 2. Statue of Metjetji, late 5th Dynasty-early 6th Dynasty.

Causes of the Decline of the Old Kingdom

There is no single cause that can be pinpointed to account for the decline of the Old Kingdom. Rather, the reasons are manifold, and it is difficult to determine their weight.

Proposed internal causes include an economic weakening of the central government due to the exemption of the temples from duties; an administrative weakening due to the growing bureaucracy and inheritability of offices; and a political weakening caused by the increasing autonomy of the provinces and their governors. It is possible that the weakness of the central government was more significant than the strength of the provinces (Martin-Pardey 1976: 150). Indeed the long reign of Pepy II produced a great number of potential successors and therefore possible rivalries following his death.

Economic reasons for the decline have very recently been rejected, since the income of the royal residence was based on the residence's own domains situated throughout the country (Römer 2011: 99-101), and no overall tax system existed (Warden 2014).

Less recently, administrative causes were excluded, as the balance of power between the royal residence and the provinces does not seem to have been disturbed (Strudwick 1985: 346).

Possible external political causes have recently been brought forward by Jansen-Winkel (2010), who maintains that the proposed internal reasons are not sound and that all the Egyptian empires were brought down by foreign invasions. In his view the rapid changeover from the Old Kingdom to the First Intermediate Period, the lack of documents of the elite in the Delta in the First Intermediate Period, the shift of the residence from Memphis to Herakleopolis, and the *Teaching of Merikara* all speak in favor of a foreign invasion. Excavations at Mendes, however, perhaps not yet noticed by Jansen-Winkel, reveal the destruction of the town and the murder of its inhabitants at the end of

the 6th Dynasty (Redford 2010: 46-50)—that is, before the end of the Old Kingdom.

Climatic changes have also been suggested to account for the Old Kingdom's decline. Hassan was one of the first and most decisive supporters of the hypothesis that reduced Nile floods in conjunction with the invasion of desert sand in the Nile Valley led to desiccation of the land, and consequently to famines (Hassan 1997). Sand dunes in the area of Abusir were noticed since the reign of Tety (Bárta and Bezděk 2008: 221-222). The exact dates of the occurrence of droughts, however, are difficult to determine and therefore it cannot be stated with certainty whether droughts occurred before or after the end of the Old Kingdom. According to Bárta (2009: 52) they indeed accelerated the decline of the Old Kingdom.

Buto appears to have been abandoned at the end of the Old Kingdom, probably due to a shift in the course of a nearby waterway, rather than to external or internal political reasons. A similar situation occurred in Memphis, which no longer offered ideal conditions for a royal residence subsequent to an eastward shift of the Nile (Giddy 1994: 197-199).

Results of the End of the Old Kingdom

Upon the end of the Old Kingdom, the territorial entity of the Egyptian state disintegrated; the position of the king, however, was not put into question. In Upper Egypt the end of the kingdom led to civil strife wherein coalitions of (some) nomes fought against other coalitions, famines plaguing a number of nomes, while others had ample resources. The situation in Lower Egypt is unclear. In general, the importance of nomes decreased in comparison to that of towns (Jansen-Winkel 2010: 287-290). The most obvious result of the end of the Old Kingdom was the cessation of Egypt's relations with foreign countries and expeditions into mining regions, with a resultant lack of exotic goods and loss of prestige.

The End of the Old Kingdom in Tradition

Several literary texts have traditionally been considered to describe the situation in Egypt following the end of the Old Kingdom, such as the *Teaching for Merikara*, the *Admonitions of Ipuwer*, and the *Prophecies of Neferti*. It is, however, unclear exactly when these texts were composed and which time period(s) they describe—and whether they describe an actual situation at all. In recent years the *Admonitions*

of Ipuwer were dated to the end of the 12th, or to the 13th, Dynasty (Enmarch 2008: 24) and the *Teaching for Merikara* and *Prophecies of Neferti*, as late as the 18th Dynasty (Gnirs 2006). A king Neferkara (probably Pepy II) is held in bad repute in the *Tale of Neferkara and the General Saset*, a text transmitted from the New Kingdom onwards, which recounts the king's homosexual relationship with his army general Saset (Parkinson 1995: 71-74).

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Figure 1. Pyramid of Pepy II at South Saqqara. Photograph by Jon Bodsworth.

Figure 2. Statue of Metjetji, late 5th Dynasty-early 6th Dynasty. Courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum, Charles Edwin Wilbour Fund, 53.222.