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MICROHISTORY

"MICROHISTORY" (تاريخ عامة الناس)

*Juan Carlos Moreno García*

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## MICROHISTORY

## "MICROHISTORY" (تاريخ عامة الناس)

Juan Carlos Moreno García

Mikrogeschichte  
Microhistoire

*Microhistory is a rather ambiguous term, usually referring to the lives, activities, and cultural values of common people, rarely evoked in official sources. In the case of ancient Egypt, both the urban and village spheres provide some clues about the existence, social relations, spiritual expectations, and life conditions of farmers, craftspersons, and "marginal" populations (such as herders), and also about "invisible" elites that played so important a role in the stability of the kingdom. In some instances, exceptional archives (the Ramesside tomb-robbery papyri, Papyrus Turin 1887, recording the "Elephantine scandal," and the thousands of ostraca recovered at Deir el-Medina) cast light on the realities of social life, in which crimes and reprehensible practices appear quite common. In other cases, structural archaeological evidence reveals the harsh conditions under which many Egyptians lived and died. Finally, small private archives, often associated with temple activities, reveal how some individuals managed to thrive and to follow personal strategies that enabled them to accumulate moderate wealth. Microhistory clearly has a role to play in Egyptology in balancing the information provided by official texts, with their biased perspectives of the social order and cultural values prevailing in the Nile Valley.*

"Microhistory" (تاريخ عامة الناس) هو مصطلح مبهم ، عادة ما يشير إلى حياة العامة من الناس ، ونادرا ما يتم استخدامه في المصادر الرسمية. في حالة مصر القديمة، توفر كل من المناطق الحضرية والبيئة القروية بعض الدلائل على وجود العلاقات الاجتماعية، والتوقعات الروحية، وظروف الحياة الخاصة بالفلاحين والحرفيين والسكان "الثانويين" (مثل الرعاة). وفي بعض الحالات، الوثائق النادرة (مثل: بردية سرقات المقابر من عصر الرعامسة ، وبردي تورين 1887 والتي تسجل "فضيحة الفنيتين"؛ والآلاف من الأوستراكا المكتشفة في دير المدينة) تسلط الضوء على واقع الحياة الاجتماعية، حيث كانت الجرائم والممارسات الشنيعة شائعة بنسبة كبيرة. وفي حالات أخرى، تكشف الأدلة الأثرية عن الظروف القاسية التي عاش ومات فيها كثيرا من المصريين. وأخيرا، تكشف بعض الوثائق الخاصة، والتي غالبا ما ترتبط بأنشطة المعبد، عن كيفية تمكن بعض الأفراد من تنجح وتجمع الثروات المعتدلة. ومن الواضح أن التاريخ الجزئي يلعب دورا في علم المصريات ، وذلك في موازنة المعلومات التي توفرها النصوص الرسمية، مع منظوراتها المتحيزة للقيم الاجتماعية والثقافية السائدة في وادي النيل.

**I**n spite of its popularity in recent historical research, the notion of microhistory still remains ambiguous (Ginzburg and Poni 1981; Levi 1991; Muir and Ruggiero, eds. 1991; Revel, ed. 1996; Brooks, DeCorse, and Walton, eds. 2008; Magnússon and Szijártó, eds. 2013). It may simply refer to occurrences that took place in the private sphere or in a domestic environment, events or activities unofficial in nature and not intended to be displayed in public (to be distinguished from secret dealings of the government and military). It may also refer to the lives, beliefs, and cultural practices of common people (farmers, workers, craftsmen, etc.), rarely recorded in official sources and that, quite often, differed significantly from the activities, lifestyles, and culture of the elite (Overholtzer and Bolnick 2017). Finally, microhistory can refer to anecdotal information that might cast, however, unexpected light on ordinary events and everyday activities, as well as on places frequented by both common people and the elite, revealing factors that tie together a community, or exposing informal mechanisms of authority, resistance, socio-cultural identity, and political participation (illustrative subject matter includes taverns, dances, rites, feasts, and even particular goods endowed with a particular symbolic significance, such as salt). Such paths have been explored by influential authors such as Mikhail Bakhtin (1968) and Edward Thompson (1963, 1991), but the borders between microhistory, popular culture, social history, biography, and anthropology (or just historical gossip) are far from being clearly delimited and, in fact, they quite frequently overlap.

Given the nature of the evidence recovered from ancient Egypt, and the research preferences of Egyptologists, the study of microhistory in ancient Egypt still remains underdeveloped (notable exceptions include Vernus 1993, Meskell 1999, and Donker van Heel 2012 and 2014). The bulk of research has traditionally been focused on (prestigious) buildings usually linked to the monarchy (palaces, fortresses, specialized “towns”) or on structures of a religious and/or funerary nature (temples, tombs), and much more rarely on

settlements (organic towns and villages). Indeed even the modest items that have benefited from in-depth analysis have derived from high or “middle class” funerary contexts, or places associated with the monarchy (see for example Pinch 1993; Wada 2007; Whelan 2007; Goulding 2013). This means that, in historical discussions, due to the lack of sufficient evidence entire sectors of pharaonic society are underrepresented—not only farmers and “marginal” populations living on the borders of the Nile Valley (herders, foreigners), but also people dwelling in urban centers, especially popular districts, not to speak of the underworld (gang members, prostitutes, peddlars, etc.). Texts from papyri offer little insight, as they usually comprise administrative records (the accounting of goods and the workforce, the recording of transfers of commodities and people, etc.) and official correspondence (Eyre 2013). Only rarely is it possible to get from them a glimpse of personal opinions, emotions, and anxieties not directly related to official duties (as in the “Letters to the Dead”: Donnat-Beauquier 2014). In contrast, it is risky to generalize when our information comes from exceptional discoveries centered on a small, specialized community or on a single individual (the correspondence of Heqanakht and the papyri from Lahun and Deir el-Medina are good examples: Allen 2002; Collier and Quirke, eds., 2002, 2004, 2006; McDowell 2009).

A particularly fertile area still to be explored is religion. Discussions about “popular religion” (especially in light of the so-called “personal piety” of the New Kingdom and the “Letters to the Dead” of the late third/early second millennium BCE), and the role of ancestor cults, etc., have contributed to a renewal of perspectives. The religious practices of common people may differ significantly from those of people of status and may in fact show little trace of official beliefs and formal religion, as can be seen in burials close to the Workers Village at Amarna (Kemp, Stevens, Dabbs, and Zabecki 2013). Artifacts recovered from domestic urban areas also reveal a world dominated by magic and concerns about illness, childbirth, dangerous animals, and the “evil eye”—a world in which ancestors were

venerated and their aid requested, and in which the values of official religion and cultural values had little effect (Giddy 1999). Importantly, scarab seals carried by women suggest that their owners used them not only as amulets but also to seal documents, and consequently, the legal capacity and entrepreneurship of women were probably more significant than previously assumed (Dubiel 2012 a and b).

Finally, literary texts provide colorful tales about the misfortunes of particular individuals, describing the problems they encountered and the ingenuity and determination they showed in coping with them. *The Story of Sinube*, *The Eloquent Peasant*, *The Report of Wenamun*, *The Tale of Woe* (papyrus Pushkin 127), and *The Teaching of Ankhsheshonq* could easily be interpreted as invaluable sources for microhistorical research. However, it is difficult to decide to what extent they, being products of a learned, scribal culture, correspond to actual experiences and not to stereotypical fictional depictions (like farmers and other categories of workers described in *miscellanies* and satires of trades). In all, an intelligent use of ethnoarchaeology (Wendrich and van der Kooij, eds. 2002; a recent example: Hinson 2013), in combination with information gleaned from texts and archaeology (Smith 2010; Moreno García 2017a), may provide a better understanding of ancient Egyptian social practices rarely evoked at all in official sources or difficult to detect from only a particular set of evidence.

Under these conditions, microhistory should provide important clues about class, gender, age, origins (rural, urban, foreign), personal aspirations, life expectations and constraints, and social interaction. That officials enjoying a certain degree of status and wealth presented themselves as poor/modest (*nds*) in the late third millennium BCE suggests that a new set of social values, based on personal initiative, autonomy, and independent accumulation of wealth, had become significant in the absence of a central monarchy and that this mutation corresponded to deeper socio-political changes also discernible in the archaeological record (Seidlmayer 1990; Moreno García 2015a, 2016). The sudden prevalence of warnings against cupidity and

against an overly money-oriented mentality in first-millennium sapiential literature might, too, suggest that trade, “money,” and contracts were becoming broadly diffused in Egyptian society (Agut-Labordère 2013). Moreover, the robbery of tombs in the late second millennium BCE—crimes that benefited from the complicity of priests, traders, and authorities—casts invaluable light on actual attitudes towards official religion and authority, attitudes in stark contrast to the pious and submissive stances we traditionally assume were characteristic of the ancient Egyptians (Vernus 1993). Finally, the remains of poor and illiterate people, who lacked written testimony of their own, speak about their hardships, poor health, and social identities and thus help balance the colorful images provided by literature and iconography (Zakrzewski, Shortland, and Rowland 2016: 125-223).

### *Villages and Small Communities*

Rural life and the living conditions of farmers and other inhabitants of the Egyptian countryside still remain little known despite the plethora of pharaonic iconography and literary compositions, whose contents are, moreover, heavily biased (Eyre 1999 and 2004; Seidlmayer 2007; Moreno García 2011a; Kóthay 2013). The papyri of Gebelein, one of the earliest archives from pharaonic Egypt, record lists of people and their occupations in several villages around Gebelein. According to the papyrus, many of the village dwellers exploited the natural resources of the region, from hunting to fowling and collecting honey, revealing that the villages were more than strictly agricultural communities. Even some “nomads” were settled there too, thus pointing to the fluidity of relations between the Nile Valley and the neighboring areas (Posener-Kriéger and Demichelis 2004). A small fragment of papyrus also records several *mjtrw*, a controversial term that in early times probably designated a category of (male and female) traders, as if part of the population of the villages were also involved in trading activities (Fiore Marochetti et al. 2003: 246-248, 256 fig. 11). Later sources reveal that contacts with desert and foreign populations still played an important role at Gebelein. A cemetery of Nubian soldiers,

dating from the First Intermediate Period, shows that the graves' occupants had been settled in Gebelein and had acquired property, a lifestyle, and values that probably did not differ greatly from those of their Egyptian neighbors (Fischer 1961). Nubian people from the Pan-Grave Culture also crossed the Nile Valley. Their cemeteries, dating to the early centuries of the second millennium BCE and scattered along the Valley, reveal that they were part of the local landscape, probably as peddlers (Näser 2012). In some cases, small sanctuaries close to the Valley show that they worshipped Hathor (Friedman 1992 and 2000).

The importance of the cult of Hathor was, in fact, crucial to promoting trust and facilitating the coexistence of people from diverse origins working together at special sites, such as mines and harbors (Moreno García 2017a). The mining site of Serabit el-Khadim in Sinai reveals, for instance, that Egyptians, Canaanites, peoples from the eastern margins of the Delta (*Shjw*, *Jmnww*), and Bedouin participated together in the exploitation and transport of the mineral ores. Hathor's sanctuary there has preserved abundant epigraphic, iconographic, and cult evidence of the interaction of these populations and thus helps balance the typical image of foreigners as a menace to Egypt or as poor, wandering nomads seeking to enter the Nile Valley. To the contrary, this small cosmopolitan micro-cosmos reveals that Canaanite warriors helped maintain the security of the site and that "marginal" populations were crucial in the organization of logistics (including caravans of donkeys); indeed a foreign leader is depicted with the paraphernalia proper to his rank, sitting on a donkey (Arnold 2010). Not surprisingly, it was at this cultural crossroad that a new form of writing, Proto-Sinaitic, flourished (Goldwasser 2013). Ultimately, the site of Serabit el-Khadim helps us understand how other specialized communities operated within Egypt, examples of which include Elephantine, Tell el-Dabaa, the Nubian fortresses of the Middle Kingdom, and other trading communities where peoples from diverse origins (Nubians, Asiatics, Libyans, Egyptians, desert dwellers) coexisted and worked together. Their cultural practices

(burials) and markers (pottery, body ornaments, even cloth) attest their presence there and defy stereotypical interpretations of their roles (Moreno García 2017b). Not every Nubian living in Egypt was necessarily a mercenary, nor an Asiatic, slave, or trader (Matić 2014).

Other sorts of specialized communities provide evidence of their role and social composition with more administrative accuracy. The verso of papyrus British Museum 10068 lists people living in a "village" (*whyt*) in the area of the Qurna temple of Sety I, the Ramesseum, and the mortuary temple of Ramesses III. Given the location of this settlement, it is likely that many (if not all) of the personnel recorded were at the service of these cult centers. Thus the document includes 25 *nab*-priests and seven god's fathers, as well as several high officials (like Pwer'o, the mayor of Western Thebes who played an important role in the tomb robbery affairs), craftsmen and laborers, herdsmen, cultivators, and "middle rank" citizens. In other words, officials with important duties at Thebes, members of the clergy, and craftsmen and workers involved in the activities and supply of the temples occupied this area (Janssen 1992). The tomb-robbery papyri of the late Ramesside Period show in detail the complex network of complicity that linked the robbers with these people (one of the robbers melted stolen gold in the house of an accomplice, a priest of Ptah: Demarée 2010: 57) and also with traders and guards. Thanks to these documents it is also possible to understand the complex links of patronage revolving around political factions and the ways in which leaders used their personal power and the institutions of the monarchy in order to discredit their rivals and consolidate their own position (Vernus 1993: 11-74; Moreno García 2013a: 1061-1062).

Also significant is of course the specialized settlement of Deir el-Medina, the community of artists and workers employed in the construction and decoration of the New Kingdom royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings. The considerable mass of documents preserved there, describing the day-to-day lives of its inhabitants, makes it the best-



documented community of ancient Egypt. At the same time the highly specialized nature of this small, isolated micro-cosmos precludes the drawing of generalizations. In any case, the documents cast light on the community's conflicts and social practices, from gifts among ladies to the promotion of royal cults by local scribes, from theft to pious donations, from literacy and the possession of private libraries to strikes and small economic operations involving donkeys, credit, or transfers of slave-days (Vernus 2002: 57-69; McDowell 2009).

Mention should additionally be made of the Middle Kingdom Egyptian fortresses in Nubia and of the Old Kingdom settlement at Balat, in the Dakhla Oasis. We observe that administrative practices and formal hierarchies were quite visible in these specialized communities when the central government was strong, and that, moreover, when the central government collapsed, these communities continued to thrive, revealing that, beyond their official function, their inhabitants enjoyed a high degree of autonomy, irrespective of any central instruction or support (Smith 1995; Moeller 2016: 175-186, 241-244).

More elusive communities comprised Egyptians who settled and lived in the Levant following the imperial expansion of the New Kingdom. A number of these individuals may have constituted an Egyptian "trading diaspora" involved in commerce and other activities (Holladay 2001: 143, 166-174). In other cases they were soldiers, administrators, or simply settlers whose culinary tastes (such as the consumption of Nile perch: Linseele, Van Neer, and Bretschneider 2013) and toilette customs make them visible in the archaeological record and distinguishable from the local, Levantine populations (Sparks 2002). *The Story of Sinuhe* and *The Tale of Woe*, whether fictional in nature, reveal nevertheless the anxieties and expectations of exiles living outside the Nile Valley and the importance they attached to the precise adherence to Egyptian customs regarding food and the care of the body. The adaptability exhibited by the inhabitants of the Nubian fortresses, surely related to the non-institutional nature of their activities (mainly trade), explains why the

fortress dwellers thrived both when the Egyptian monarchy was strong and centralized and when it collapsed. This could also explain why the fortresses were often surrounded by non-walled settlements in which a mixed population of Nubians and Egyptians lived and traded: Egyptian "colonists" apparently had little to fear from their Nubian neighbors (Smith 1995; Knoblauch, Bestock, and Makovics 2013). The Semna dispatches as well as royal inscriptions record the arrival at the fortresses of small Nubian trading caravans (Kraemer and Lizska 2016), while the discovery of execration texts, accompanied by human sacrifices, close to the "open city" northeast of the fortress of Mirgissa provides some clues about a gloomier aspect of the trading activities, wherein bloody rituals were conducted to ensure protection from danger (Jambon 2010: 5).

Depending on their contexts, official sources for the authorities of Egyptian villages and small communities often remain ambiguous. Old Kingdom funerary iconography usually depicts the chiefs of villages bowing to, or being beaten by, higher authorities to whom they are mere bearers of tribute and taxes. In some instances, as in a famous scene in the 18<sup>th</sup>-dynasty tomb of Rekhmira, the quantities of cloth, precious metals, and other goods the chiefs carried were carefully recorded (de Garis Davies 1943: pls. 29-35). When the authority of the monarchy collapsed, however, village chiefs appear in a more positive light, as repositories of authority and resources, and as links to social networks that provided protection for their communities. In a total reversion of roles, it was then that scribes and administrators proudly proclaimed that they served under these chiefs.

Leaving aside these rather biased claims, administrative texts mention village chiefs as indispensable mediators for implementing orders of the king. Apparently this role was sometimes materially rewarded, as some of these local leaders managed to afford for themselves prestigious items (such as statues and inscribed objects, usually reserved for officials and the elite) that marked their local

preeminence. To their subordinates and the people living under their jurisdiction they acted as patronage leaders and sources of authority, probably based on a mix of prestige, family origins, wealth, and traditional authority (Moreno García 2013a: 1053-1056). In late third and early second millennium BCE Elephantine, for instance, the local elite appear as a reduced but closely knit social group, in which rituals and ceremonies, veneration of a(n ideally) common ancestor (Heqaib), and the mutual exchange of goods in funerary rituals helped maintain their cohesion as a social group as well as their position and prestige as rulers of their community. In fact, it was from this group that governors and other local leaders were issued (Moreno García 2014).

Having left practically no written trace about themselves, it appears that village chiefs were basically local potentates and wealthy farmers, closely connected to local temples. Texts from the first millennium BCE refer to them as “big men,” in control of their communities. A Demotic literary text gives some clues about their power, when one such “big man” kept close ties to the local temple that further strengthened his authority. He was also a priest in the local temple—a function that provided him with a profitable source of income. He received part of the agricultural income of the sanctuary because of his service as a priest and, in addition, he exploited some temple fields as a cultivator in exchange for a portion of the harvest; the considerable wealth thus amassed allowed him to pay wages to the personnel of the temple, who were thus considered his clients (the text states that he had “acquired” them) and he could even marry his daughters to priests and potentates (lit. “great men”) of another town (Moreno García 2013a: 1053).

### *Urban Environment*

A passage from *The Teaching for Merikara* warns against demagogues who agitate the spirits of citizens (Quirke 2004: 113). While the setting of the narrative corresponds to the First Intermediate Period, the actual date of the text’s composition is still debated (Stauder 2013: 175-199). However, many First

Intermediate Period inscriptions reveal that cities and their “public opinion” had become important enough to have their role recognized and respected by local authorities (Moreno García 2011b). Later, during the early centuries of the first millennium BCE, Demotic sapiential texts evoke a world of villages and towns dominated by “big men.” In both cases, both cities and small settlements provided personal and social identities hardly evoked at all in official texts (Agut-Labordère 2011)—identities in which men were advised against marrying women from other villages and towns, and in which service in the temples and service to the king provided prestigious, or at least complementary, alternatives of self-presentation. It was not by chance that the concept of city-god had been a source of collective identity since the third millennium BCE. Despite the scarce evidence preserved, literary texts evoke the role of taverns as foci of sociability, frequented not only by ordinary people (and diverting students from their studies) but by an underworld of prostitutes. Thus, the idle scribe described in Papyrus Anastasi IV wanders in the streets, drunk and in the company of harlots (Caminos 1954: 182). It is also possible that independent artists were part of this world, as the greedy and out-of-tune harpist satirized in a Demotic composition (Collombert 2003). Unfortunately, little is known about petty crime, gangs, rogues, and the dubious characters that might have proliferated in big cities, especially in harbors.

Traders and merchants were certainly part of the urban population, perhaps a significant one, judging from Mesopotamian parallels and from the neighborhoods and harbor facilities in which they lived and worked. Although the opulence and splendor of cities were celebrated in many New Kingdom compositions, in some instances urban markets, “money,” business, and traders were also the objects of praise. Of the Ramesside capital Pi-Ramesse, for example, it was written: “Pleasant is the market-place with/because of (?) its money there, namely the vine tendrils (?) and business. The chiefs of every foreign country come in order to descend with their products” (ostrakon Ashmolean Museum HO 1187;



Fischer-Elfert 2016). There the quays were bursting with the business of foreign and Egyptian traders, and with women selling their products (Eyre 1998), while officials oversaw the arrival of cargo-laden ships and the activities that took place in the harbor areas (as we learn from Sarenput I, governor of Aswan in the early Middle Kingdom and superior of the harbor areas of Elephantine: Obsomer 1995: 479). Urban and rural markets were places where people exchanged products and news, frequented by peddlers from remote areas (such as the famous *Eloquent Peasant*, who came with his small caravan of donkeys from Wadi Natrun to Heracleopolis to trade), while small exchanges of gifts between neighbors cemented social relations within communities (Janssen 1982; 1997: 55-86). Specialized workers and artisans, usually working for the king, also put their skills at the service of customers eager to afford high quality equipment for themselves—the sort of private, non-institutional demand so badly documented in administrative papyri (Cooney 2007; Dorn 2011: 422-426). Specialized, large-scale workshops aiming to supply the army, temples, and the palace coexisted with a more modest but widespread artisan production, in the hands of craftsmen (potters, leather workers, weavers, brick makers, etc.) who were often the object of mockery in the satire-of-trades texts. Finally, the supplying of cities with charcoal, fresh vegetables, meat, and fish is occasionally referred to in administrative documents and private letters (Wente 1990: 118-119), thus giving an idea of the impact of urban markets on the economic activities, trades, and lifestyles of people living far away from cities. That fishermen, for instance, were paid in silver and, in turn, paid their taxes in silver during the reign of Ramesses II (Wente 1990: 119, 120-121), suggests that markets (and traders) played an important role in the commercialization of fish, harvests, and goods, in the use of precious metals as a means of exchange, and in the circulation of commodities. Credit is also evoked in the textual record and it can be posited that, at least in some cases, it stimulated the output of various crafts, particularly in domains such as textile production in the domestic sphere.

While in some instances women delivered pieces of cloth on a compulsory basis, it is possible that, in other instances, they produced textiles for markets through the mediation of traders (Eyre 1998: 180-183). Individuals also provided loans and credit to their neighbors (Allen 2002; Markiewicz 2006), thus creating a network of personal bonds and dependence that reinforced their local preeminence as well as the accumulation of wealth in their hands (an example: Moreno García 2000).

Little is known about the payment of urban workers, employed in either private or public constructions, in the form of wages rather than in the context of compulsory work (*corvée* labor). However, many inscriptions from the Old Kingdom do refer to officials who built their tombs with their own means and who remunerated the craftsmen and builders involved with copper and cloth, as well as grain and beer (Strudwick 2005: 251-260). Thus, apparently, craftsmen could be paid on a private basis and their skills put occasionally at the service of customers rather than institutional workshops. The huge New Kingdom construction projects at Pi-Ramesse, Karnak, and elsewhere, or the temples built in the first millennium BCE, likely mobilized a considerable combined mass of skilled workers, farmers engaged in unskilled work on a seasonal basis, craftspeople, and workers in charge of transport activities, etc., engaged on a “contractual” basis (not as *corvée*) and paid with wages (in some cases by private patrons) (Andrássy 2007; Eyre 2010; Thiers 2009; Spencer 2010). Indeed, demand for the latter individuals might have stimulated urban markets—for instance, the production of fresh vegetables in artificially irrigated gardens. In sharp contrast, the bulk of information at our disposal about people living in cities refers to scribes, administrators, priests, members of the court, military personnel, and agents of the crown. Whether their monuments present them according to the ideal of the pious and righteous official, the vivid descriptions of their corrupt practices (robbery of temple and crown property, conspiracies against the king, illicit appropriation of goods, etc.), even at the small-community level, has provided fertile ground for research on microhistory in ancient

Egypt (Lichtheim 1980: 161-163; Vernus 1993 and 2002; Redford 2002).

Of further microhistorical significance is the integration of different communities in cosmopolitan settings, such as capital cities and probably also in lesser cities. One is reminded of the famous stela depicting an Asiatic soldier drinking beer in the company of his (apparently) Egyptian wife and young son (Priese, Arnst, et al. 1991: 129). Some documents refer to Asiatics as prisoners of war or slaves in the hands of institutions. But in other instances they appear to have been well integrated in pharaonic society, married Egyptians, performed various trades, bore Egyptian titles occasionally and displayed their foreign origin in their otherwise fully Egyptian monuments (Schneider 1998 – 2003; Mourad 2015). Thus, for instance, Perseneb, an attendant of the palace, bore an Egyptian name, but his grandmother, his two sisters, and other members of his household were presented in his monuments as Asiatics (*šmw*), while his niece bore a non-Egyptian name (Satzinger and Stefanović 2011). The Wilbour Papyrus provides evidence of foreigners who had become soldiers and officials in the Egyptian army and who enjoyed considerable wealth as holders of substantial plots of land. There is, furthermore, evidence of military colonies where Asiatic soldiers were settled in Ramesside times, especially in Middle Egypt (Grandet 1993: 173-174). We are, however, unaware of whether Asiatics living in Egyptian cities settled in separate neighborhoods or, on the contrary, whether they mingled with their Egyptian neighbors in the same urban sectors. Bietak has recently shown that Egyptians living in Avaris during the Hyksos Period occupied a particular area of the city, judging from the material evidence: neither toggle-pins nor intramural burials have been found there (two typical Canaanite ethnic markers), while these items were present in neighboring quarters. It might then be inferred that this part of the city was inhabited by an Egyptian community (Bietak 2016). Other foreign settlers entering the Nile Valley seem to have preferred (or been forced into) a segregated life according to the funerary evidence. Such is the case regarding the Pan-Grave Nubian cemeteries, dating to

the first centuries of the second millennium BCE, recovered in many localities of Upper Egypt (Näser 2012). It does appear that people from different origins coexisted at specific sites such as at harbors (Mersa/Wadi Gawasis) and mining centers (Serabit el-Khadim, Gebel el-Zeit). Slaves and serfs arrived in Egypt in substantial numbers during some periods (Bakir 1952; Moreno García 2008). Usually employed in domestic activities in private households or as specialized workers (weavers, cultivators, gardeners) in institutions, they may have constituted another social sector in cities and in the rural domains of the nobility. It is unknown to what extent the mix of slaves, soldiers, and traders from different countries may have contributed to create some sort of “creole” culture in those places (Bader 2013). Their presence may have introduced foreign rituals and fashions that exerted some influence on their humbler Egyptian neighbors (Moreno García 2017a), or conversely may have strengthened a sense of Egyptian-ness among the Egyptian population.

Finally, archaeology provides evidence of wealthy, and moderately wealthy, rural and urban dwellers, whose villas and mansions, both at Amarna and elsewhere, had storage capacities that exceeded the needs of single nuclear families (Adams 2007; Wilson 2011: 191-199; Rzepka et al. 2012 – 2013: 253-271). These individuals (in some cases they seem to have been wealthy farmers) probably provided grain to extended networks of relations, including kin, clients, etc. Especially from the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE on, a new kind of prestigious habitat, the so-called tower-house, spread in Lower Egypt and the Fayum area and constituted in some cities distinctive neighborhoods (Marouard 2014; Marchi 2014). In all, further crucial archaeological evidence is needed of urban settings and of the activities and social structure (perhaps quite different from that of planned royal settlements such as Lahun) of their inhabitants to help balance the vivid, but nevertheless highly biased, depictions present in the satires of trades and in the sapiential literature.

*Temples as Valuable Foci for Microhistorical Research*

Temples probably represent the best-documented social environment from ancient Egypt. Abundant sources inform us of temple-related activities and of the personnel (including their internal conflicts and relations with the king and the court) involved in the day-to-day operation of these establishments, thus providing invaluable material for microhistorical research. During the Old and Middle Kingdoms several archives and royal decrees deal with the organization of cult, priestly organization, and revenue derived from royal funerary temples. These particular sanctuaries appear as centers where the central and provincial elites met together, participated in ritual services, and probably thereby strengthened their consciousness of being part of the ruling elite. As sources of income, authority, and social influence, priestly positions could be bought and sold; moreover, many such positions were restricted by royal order for members of the elite. Provincial temples too, though less satisfactorily documented, played a crucial role as bases of authority, prestige, and income for local potentates and their families. Significantly, they also were key centers that put into contact the local elites, the court, and the king through land donations, the foundation of royal chapels, and the erection of royal statues (Bussmann 2010). Local elites could thus enlarge their political horizons and become more integrated into the government apparatus controlled by the monarchy and preserve their own interests, while at the same time be officially recognized by the king as key local agents, to the detriment of other, rival families. The strategies developed by some of the best-documented families (at El-Hawawish, Elkab, Coptos), including the choice of prestigious zones wherein to build their necropoleis, reveal the complex interplay of these factors and their political and economic impact (Moreno García 2006 and 2013b).

New Kingdom sources provide more clues about the internal functioning of temples, including information on the social background of priests and on the conflicts of

interest that took place among them. The organization of the nascent New Kingdom monarchy relied heavily on the integration of local elites through the mediation of temples, especially during its earliest steps, following the expulsion of the Hyksos (Shirley 2010). Sataimau of Edfu, for instance, was a scribe and priest who served at the temple of Edfu in the reign of Ahmose, the first king of Dynasty 18. He was, in fact, from an elite family closely connected to the monarchy and achieved career advancement with successive appointments to two significant posts in the temple. These were remunerated with part of the offerings presented to the sanctuary and with the income derived from the cult of a royal statue, including about 40 hectares of land (one hectare being roughly equivalent to 2.5 acres) (Davies 2013). His case is quite similar to that of Iuf, another official from Edfu, who lived between the reigns of Ahmose and Thutmose I. Iuf also performed cult activities for royal statues and was recompensed with offerings and land (Barbotin 2008: 230-231). Further to the north, at Gebelein, things were rather the same, as king Ahmose had endowed the temple of Hathor with revenue (*b3kw*) later disputed, in the time of Thutmose III, by a soldier (Spiegelberg 1928). Hence the income, prestige, and influential social relations associated with temple prebends explain why priesthood—especially middle and high ranking functions—was reserved for members of the elite, to the point that it was often stated that noblemen and their offspring, as well as military personnel, were to be recruited as personnel of the temples, with severe measures taken to restrict access to such coveted positions (Moreno García 2013a: 1057). In some cases, priests expressed their contempt towards potential candidates from a “lesser” social background, as in the case of a merchant’s son who wished to enter the priesthood (Porten, ed. 1996: 47-48). Alternatively, bribes were used as a means of joining the temple staff, to the point that royal decrees were periodically enacted in order to prevent this fraudulent practice (Kruchten 1981: 151 and 159; Porten, ed. 1996: 47-48). And it was not uncommon for former

beneficiaries of prebends and temple fields to be dispossessed by force or see their rights usurped by others; there were cases in which officials occupying high positions in a temple were removed from office by royal decree as a result of their involvement in conspiracies, while their supporters were threatened with retaliation. Thus the Coptos decree of king Antef V mentions that a certain Teti, involved in conflicts with the king, was (along with his family) deprived of the priestly positions and income he had enjoyed in the temple of Min (Moreno García 2013a: 1057).

According to the extant sources, in troubled times disruptions in the normal life of sanctuaries, and internal conflicts among their personnel, became common currency. In one case, simple cultivators had become *nab*-priests in the temple of Khnum at Elephantine, and the authorities felt it necessary to send their representatives in order to restore the temple and to relegate those priests to their former occupation. In another case, the installation of the high priest Menkheperra followed the displacement of an unnamed rival and the exile to the Kharga Oasis of the defeated faction, who were later formally forgiven and recalled by Amun with the full agreement of Menkheperra. An oracular procedure from Karnak in the 22<sup>nd</sup> Dynasty records the fiscal abuses inflicted against the Theban lesser clergy by higher clergy and bureaucrats, perhaps in the framework of competing factions surrounding the rival high priests Osorkon (B) and Harsiese (B), the former apparently supported by the lower clergy and the latter backed by the local elite (Moreno García 2013a: 1058). Finally, the extensive Papyrus Rylands 9 describes the long-standing conflicts between a family of dignitaries and the priests of a small provincial temple, involving crimes, bribery, usurpation of property, the destruction of evidence, and the search for support from powerful patrons (Vittmann 1998).

From another perspective, a number of small archives provide a glimpse into the strategies exercised by priests and those who performed rituals to obtain income and strengthen their positions as members of a

modest local elite. Several papyri mention, for instance, the affairs of Tsenhor, a female *choachyte* who performed funerary rituals on mummies, an activity that enabled her to accumulate wealth and to invest it in the acquisition of real property, slaves, and cattle (Donker van Heel 2014). Other *choachytes* were involved in leasing and cultivating land from temples, thus obtaining agricultural rents (Donker van Heel 2012). Such modest local sub-elites are also visible in Ramesside papyri (the Wilbour Papyrus is the most famous example), when temple land and fields ascribed to the cult of royal statues made it possible for hundreds of officials, priests, women, and wealthy farmers to enhance their position and strengthen the influence of the king in the provincial sphere. To conclude, given the nature of much of the documentary evidence preserved from ancient Egypt, activities related to temples provide a unique opportunity for us to analyze the strategies followed by actors from different social origins (provincial potentates, members of the court and royal family, local sub-elites, even farmers) in order to improve their condition, to increase their income, and to join useful networks of power and wealth for their own interests.

### *Women and Gender*

Women occupy a prominent position in ancient Egyptian iconography and mythology, and the study of their condition has certainly improved in recent times. However, the study of “women” has tended to refer in fact to the study of upper-class ladies, rendering it illusory to generalize that privileged conditions (for instance, their alleged juridical autonomy) applied to all of female society. Another limitation is that the study of Egyptian women in many cases implicitly assumes a restriction to what usually has been considered specific to the “feminine sphere” (that is, marriage, childbirth, body ornament), while aspects such as business, authority, personal initiative, and political participation are much less known (Wilfong 2010). Some documents provide information about physical abuse and social misconduct (rape, adultery), while others show women involved in activities in which they exerted economic and juridical initiative,



independently of their male relatives, as displayed in the will of Naunakhte (Donker van Heel 2016) and the archive of Tsenhor (ibid. 2014). Many sources attest women's role as political actors, whether in palace conspiracies or the arrival of a new king on the throne of Egypt (Moreno García 2015b).

Nonetheless, fundamental questions remain under-addressed and little documented. The fact that young women of modest background were subject to serfdom during the late third millennium BCE, especially when their families were unable to pay back the debts they had contracted, points to social traditions that were apparently common in the domestic and peasant sphere (Moreno García 2000). Young women were also forced to work for institutions and the state, as weavers or merely as replacements for their male kin and, again, it is quite probable that these measures had a different impact on women depending on their social status.

However, the use of seals and contracts, as they appear in the archaeological and documentary record of the very late third and early second millennium BCE, together with the widespread diffusion of the title "Lady of the House" (*nbt pr*), suggests that, at least, women from the "middle class" managed their own affairs and enjoyed legal initiative during this period (Moreno García 2015a). As sellers in markets, they probably contributed to the domestic economy thanks not only to the sale of agricultural and craft goods, but also to the sale of cloth. An interesting question is whether these activities were financed in some cases by traders. The fact that small domestic fleets collected agricultural goods and cloth from "ladies," or that "ladies" occupied a prominent role as holders of temple land in the Wilbour Papyrus, could point to some kind of production—not necessarily ordered by institutions but aiming to supply specialized goods—in which women played an important role (Eyre 1998). In any case, late third and early second millennium funerary iconography and wooden models often represent all-female workshops in which women work as cooks and weavers. As owners of institutional land-holdings, especially in the first millennium

BCE, women were able to transfer their property to others (Moreno García 2015b). Small parties organized by women, banquets, and similar activities helped cement social relations in small communities, as was true at Deir el-Medina, and they were quite probably occasions for planning marriages and for strategizing alliances (social alliances and those offering protection and promotion) (Janssen 1997: 55-86; Kóthay 2006). Late third millennium "letters to the dead" mention conflicts related to the inheritance and division of the property of opposing wives married to the same man (Donnat-Beauquier 2014). Marriage agreements include clauses intended to protect the interests of brides, but the impression that women enjoyed equal rights, derived therein, might be deceptive. It could be possible that marriages were the fruit of negotiations between families and that young brides and widows had little say in these dealings, especially if they came from a modest background—possibly explaining why, in some transactions, male relatives appear as their representatives or mediators (Parker 1962: 50). Finally, mistreatment and violence against women are well attested according to archaeological and papyrological evidence (McDowell 2009: 34; Graves-Brown 2010: 39-40; Hue-Arcé 2017).

In the domain of religion, women of status had access to involvement in prestigious roles in temples, especially as singers and priestesses of specific cults (most noteworthy that of Hathor). It is quite possible that the spiritual concerns of common women were rather more practical and that they were vastly different from the beliefs, hopes, and concerns expressed in official religion. Amulets suggest that the dangers associated with childbirth and children's health/mortality were all too present in women's lives, perhaps together with more prosaic concerns such as the evil eye. Still awaiting in-depth analysis is the sudden importance of flat female figurines associated with magical protection not only in the domestic sphere but also at a cosmopolitan level, where they were associated with negotiations within communities, a phenomenon attested across vast distances

during the late third and early second millennium BCE (Moreno García 2017a).

### *Conclusion*

Given its imprecise limits, microhistory has the potential of considering virtually anything as a potentially productive subject of research. Thus microhistory could easily comprise a banal succession of anecdotal historical narratives, justified by its personalizing or “fleshing out” otherwise too-formal reconstructions of the pharaonic past (for example, political history based on official documents; administrative organization understood from a plethora of inscriptions and papyri; religious beliefs and artistic achievements known from the analysis of texts and *beaux arts*). Microhistory used in this (limited) way risks the amalgamation of materials taken from marginal quotations in official texts, from “naturalistic” depictions in Egyptian art, from scandalous events registered in administrative sources, and from stereotypical descriptions of people and situations in literary texts, in order to produce a very particular set of narratives. Thus reduced

to the role of a minor—albeit lively—branch of social history, microhistory can nevertheless fall into intellectual irrelevance. However, a more productive path of microhistorical research may follow its ability to “give voice to the voiceless”—thereby helping recover their lives and achievements—through the careful integration of archaeology and texts, and through the accumulation of a multitude of “small” but meaningful research cases in order to build alternative narratives and thus balance the biased, and so often stereotypical, information provided by official records and monuments (Smith 2010; Busmann 2016). In this respect, the dry climatic conditions of Egypt have contributed to the exceptional preservation of organic remains that may provide invaluable information about small communities, their everyday activities, health conditions, etc. As part of a “total history” of the Egyptian past, the contributions of microhistory are its potential of focusing on neglected topics, its exploration of productive but apparently trivial paths of research, and its appeal to archaeology and the social sciences in order to rediscover entire aspects of ancient Egyptian culture hardly documented at all.

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### *Bibliographic Notes*

Some authors have produced innovative microhistorical research thanks to the analysis of exceptional archives (Vernus 1993; Meskell 1999; Allen 2002; McDowell 2009; Donker van Heel 2012 and 2014). In other cases, iconography and texts provide invaluable information about the importance of informal networks of authority (Eyre 2004; Kóthay 2006; Seidlmayer 2007; Moreno García 2013a). Village life emerges as an arena of conflict and hierarchy dominated by “big men” (Agut-Labordère 2011), while areas inhabited by mixed populations shed light on both acculturation and the display of cultural-identity markers (Sparks 2002; Bietak 2016; Bader 2013; Moreno García 2017a). Gender studies and popular beliefs help balance prevailing images of Egyptian society that tend to be based on the roles and social values of people of status (Friedman 1992 and 2000; Pinch 1993; Eyre 1998; Dubiel 2012a; Kemp et al. 2013; Donnat-Beauquier 2014). Temple-related conflicts, and the strategies developed by the protagonists involved in them, provide fertile ground for microhistorical research (Vittmann 1998; Moreno García 2006).



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