LOCAL TRADITIONS IN EARLY EGYPTIAN TEMPLES

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Egyptian non-mortuary temples are one of the central institutions of Egyptian kingship from the Middle Kingdom onwards. Their iconographic and textual models, based on the idea of an exclusive interaction between the king and the gods, display a strong continuity over several centuries and suggest little local variation. However, their precursors of the 3rd millennium BC do not appear to share these features, and this has given rise to a discussion about the spread of royal concepts and the cultural cohesion of Egypt in this early period. This paper explores the degree of local variation in early temples on the basis of architecture and selected votive types, arguing that some of the a priori assumptions of the discussion must be better understood. Despite several theoretical, methodological and empirical difficulties in the interpretation of the archaeological record, the evidence suggests a strong theological, archaeological and historical setting for the temples in their local milieu, with only loose contacts with the king.

Local traditions and Egyptian temples

It is tempting to perceive of Dynastic Egypt as being a culturally homo-geneous civilisation unified by the concept of sacred kingship for more than 3000 years because the kings intended their monuments to show continuity and little variation. The temples of Egypt seem to reflect this conception most obviously. Their decoration reveals a strong devotion to the maintenance of traditional textual and iconographic models and conveys the message that the kings are exclusively entitled to interact with the gods. Monumental temples displaying these features have been dis-covered throughout Egypt and still dominate the image of ancient Egypt due to their exceptionally good states of preservation. They suggest the spread of royal culture and royal concepts from the south to the Delta.

This simplistic scenario is derived from the later periods of Dynastic history, especially from the New Kingdom onwards, when kings erected large stone-built temples at nearly every major site in Egypt. However, as the culture and society of the Middle Kingdom is increasingly studied with regard to its local setting (Grajetzki 2006), the temples appear to play a vital role within the local communities (Kemp 1995: 39–41). This

phenomenon challenges simple king-centred models of the cultural and social cohesion of Egyptian civilisation. It raises questions about how the mechanisms of cultural differentiation and social integration worked and what impact power relationships had on these mechanisms.

Moving backwards in time, monumental temples disappear from the archaeological map of provincial Egypt. More and more excavations from the 1960s onwards confirm that the precursors of the later royal monumental temples were small sanctuaries made of mud-brick. If temples epitomised Egyptian kingship, as presumed above, it must be admitted that provincial Egypt was hardly integrated into the concepts of Egyptian kingship developed in the Late Predynastic and Early Dynastic periods. Instead, the temples seem to display local traditions, and this impression is fuelled by later evidence, i.e., local aetiologies and pseudo-historiographies of Ptolemaic temple inscriptions as well as hieroglyphic, hieratic and demotic texts on papyrus (Quack 2008).

Twenty years ago, B.J. Kemp (1989: 65–83, 2006: 111–135) reviewed the archaeological evidence for early provincial temples and initiated an on-going discussion of local traditions in the 3rd millennium BC (O'Connor 1992; Seidlmayer 1996: 115–119; Bussmann 2010). He assumed that the local temples of the 3rd millennium reflected a cultural setting beyond that of royal Egypt. Only in the Middle Kingdom, according to Kemp, were these temples colonised by the king and the local 'Preformal' traditions replaced by 'Early Formal' temple buildings of the kings. Kemp argues that Early Dynastic Egypt was only partially pervaded by kingship, and that the lights of Egyptian culture were not yet switched on in provincial Egypt in this period. His arguments are based on R. Redfield's (1960: 40–59) cultural anthropological paradigm of the 'Great and Little Traditions', the former representing the distinctive high culture of the ruling elites, the latter representing local traditions of the ordinary people.

However, the analysis of local traditions turns out to be theoretically, methodologically and empirically complex. How can we measure localness, and how close are local traditions to high culture? How far can different cultural expressions be related to specific social persons? Does local tradition mean theologically local concepts, archaeologically local workshops or historically local settings? The following paper highlights some of the aspects involved in these problems. Subsequent to Kemp, two interrelated hypotheses will be discussed: 1) the greater the variation, the stronger the local traditions; and 2) the stronger the local traditions, the less kingship has succeeded in penetrating provincial Egypt. The first hypothesis requires characterisation of the degree of variation, while the
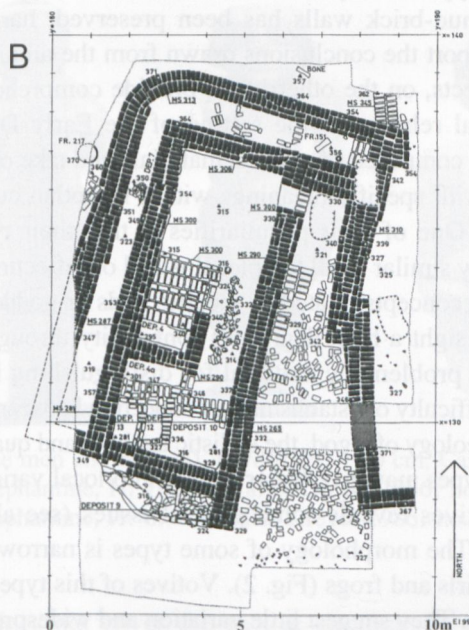
Fig. 1. Individual temple layouts in the Old Kingdom.
a) Elephantine, layer IV (after Dreyer 1986: fig. 4).
b) Tell Ibrahim Awad, layer 2c (after Eigner 2000: fig. 3).

second hypothesis concerns the historical implications that lie at the heart of Kemp's concept.

Local variation: architecture

Compared to the temples of later periods, the most outstanding features of the early provincial temples are their small sizes and their individual layouts. The archaeology of the temples of Elephantine (Dreyer 1986) and Tell Ibrahim Awad (Eigner 2000; van Haarlem 2009) — the best documented examples — show several breaks in their building history (Fig. 1). Yet, their layouts were not fundamentally changed for nearly a millennium. Local variation is great, and the repetition of the architectural layout over several centuries points to the existence of a locally specific architectural tradition.

Local variation: the faience votives

As the early Egyptian temples were not made of stone, and as no decoration on their mud-brick walls has been preserved, hardly any texts or images can support the conclusions drawn from the architectural analysis. The votive objects, on the other hand, provide comprehensive, if controversial, material relating to the setting of the Early Dynastic temples. The votives are composed of various materials and take on forms that may be associated with specific meanings within Egyptian culture (cf. Dreyer 1986: 59–97). One of their peculiarities is that their typological range seems to be very similar in all temples. Instead of reflecting locally distinctive theological concepts related to specific gods or goddesses, the votives suggest at first sight a high degree of conformity throughout Egypt, thus making them a problematic material for distinguishing local variation.

Due to the difficulty of establishing a connection between the votive image and the local theology of a god, the stylistic analysis and quantitative distribution of votive types may give better insight into local variation. Analysis of the faience votives reveals some general issues (see also van Haarlem 2009: 62–63). The morphology of some types is narrowly defined; good examples are girls and frogs (Fig. 2). Votives of this type occur in all temples nationwide. They suggest little variation and widespread homogeneity.

In contrast, the representations of boys and men allow for more diversity. These types are portrayed standing, sitting or squatting (Fig. 3). Their hair either covers their ears in a style reaching to the shoulders, or
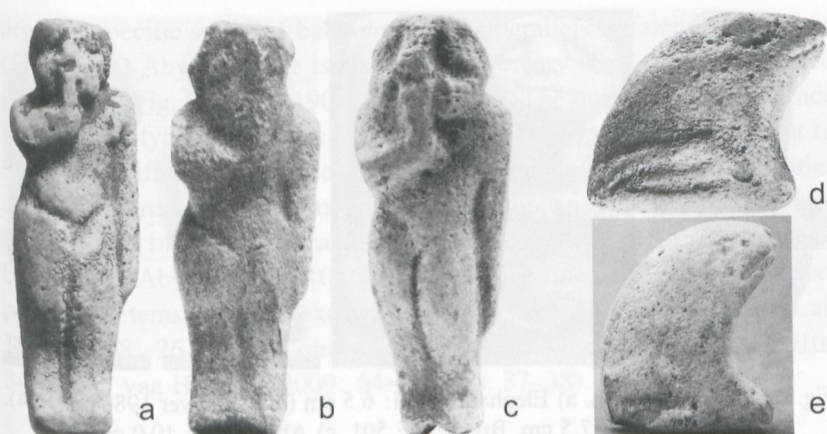
Fig. 2. Faience girls and frogs. a) Elephantine, H: 7.3 cm (after Dreyer 1986: no. 46). b) Abydos, H: 6.2 cm, Manchester 1185. c) Abydos, H: 6.0 cm, Cairo JE 36125. d) Elephantine, H: 3.8 cm (after Dreyer 1986: no. 171). e) Abydos, H: 4.8 cm, Chicago OIM 7958.

Fig. 3. Faience men and boys. a) Abydos, H: 11.0 cm, Cairo JE 36128. b) Elephantine, H: 10.5 cm (after Dreyer 1986: no. 7). c) Elephantine, H: 6.7 cm (after Dreyer 1986: no. 16).

in a style that does not cover the ears at all. Both of these styles are attested with and without additional colour. Women are represented in even a wider range of attitudes, with different hair styles, heights and so forth (Fig. 4). As far as boys, men and women are concerned, diversity

Fig. 4. Faience women. a) Elephantine, H: 6.5 cm (after Dreyer 1986: no. 34).
b) Abydos, H: 7.5 cm, Brussels E.501. c) Abydos, H: 10.0 cm,
Cairo JE 36129.

is great, but the variation is as great from temple to temple as it is within
the corpus of each individual temple. It is difficult to term this phenom-
enon a local tradition because the individual objects do not unite clearly
into locally specific types. The differing quantitative distribution of types
in the faience votive corpora complicates the analysis methodologically.
At Elephantine, 115 anthropomorphic faience figurines are attested, at
Abydos the number is 34 and at Hierakonpolis there are only four; this
makes typological clustering difficult (see Table 1).

Nevertheless, local specifics can be recognised on two levels. Some
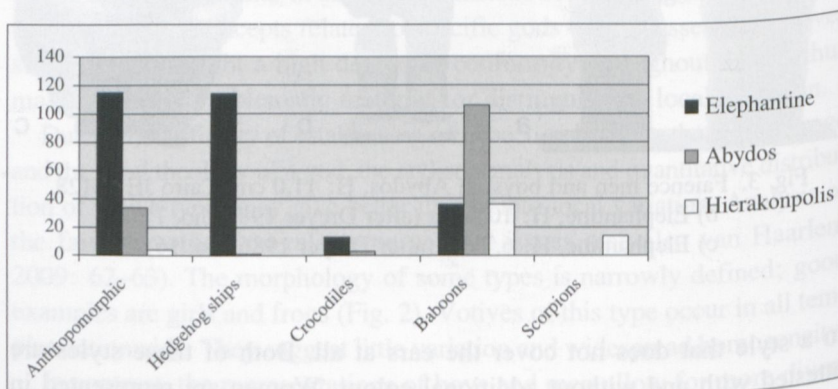types occur several times at one site and only there. At Elephantine, there

Table 1. Quantitative distribution of specific types of faience votives from
Elephantine, Abydos and Hierakonpolis.

are two specific series of baboons without parallels in faience elsewhere (Fig. 5). At Abydos, there is a series of five very large baboons attested only there (Fig. 6; Petrie 1903: pl. 6.49–52). The quantitative preference for specific types at specific sites compared to other sites might point to locally specific variation (see Table 1). Examples are: the large quantities at Elephantine of anthropomorphic faience figurines (115 items), hedge-hog ships (114 including fragments) and crocodiles (13); the number of baboons at Abydos (over 106 items); and the faience figurines of scor-pions (14 items) attested exclusively at Hierakonpolis (Hendrickx et al. 1997–1998: 26–28; for quantitative comparison cf. Bussmann 2010: 343–351; van Haarlem 2009: 64–91, figs. 37–38).

Fig. 5. Two series of faience baboons. Elephantine, H: 5.8–6.5 cm
(after Dreyer 1986: nos. 137–140).

Fig. 6. Two series of five very large faience baboons from Abydos.
a) H: 21.0 cm, Cairo JE 36089. b) H: 22.3 cm, Cambridge E.23.1903
(photo by the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge).

Local variation: the limestone votives

The limestone votives are less numerous, and it is even more difficult to find typological sequences. Many of them are individual objects, the iconography of which does not meet the standardised level of elite culture (cf. Petrie 1903: pls. 9.185–186, 10.213). At Abydos, four crudely-made very large baboons (Petrie 1903: pl. 9.190–193) — one of which is in the British Museum (EA 38048; Spencer 1980: cat. no. 2) — are a local characteristic.

Some of the limestone votives seem to be inspired by locally attested types of votives in other materials and point to local production. For example, a limestone baboon from Elephantine parallels a specific type of faience baboon attested there (Dreyer 1986: cat no. 162 derived from cat. nos. 145–146). The limestone scorpions from Hierakonpolis can also be equated with scorpions made of faience (Fig. 7), provenanced parallels for which from elsewhere are unknown to me.
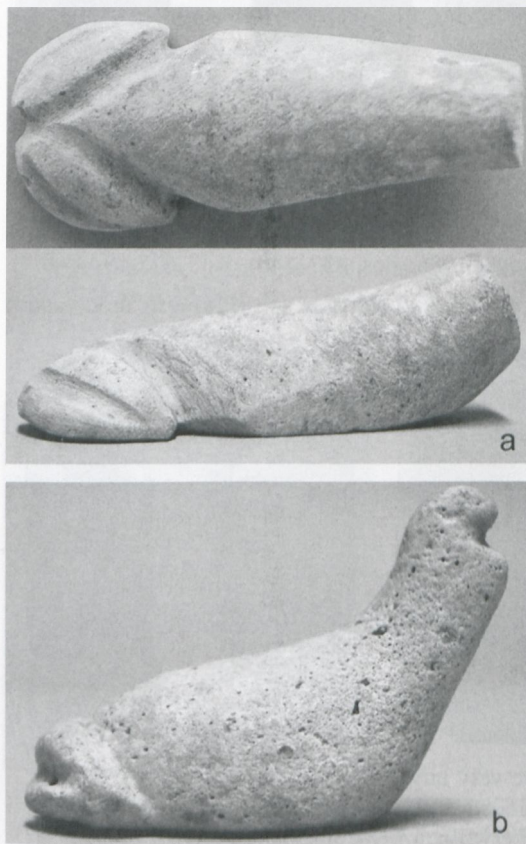

Fig. 7. Scorpions from Hierakonpolis.
a) limestone, L: 11.0 cm, Cambridge E.14.1898.
b) faience, L: 7.0 cm, Cambridge E.18.1898.

Local variation: the ivory votives

The most comprehensive corpus of ivory votives was found at Hierakon-polis. For a long time the term 'Hierakonpolis ivories' was used to refer only to the beautiful anthropomorphic statuettes. Many of them are exceptionally large, with reconstructed heights from 15 cm up to 40 cm. For detailed typological analysis, we must await further documentation; however, some individual statuettes can be assembled into narrowly defined types. Several male statuettes wear specific types of girdles and penis sheaths (Fig. 8). As a rule, their eyes seem to have been inlaid. The female statuettes suggest that a standard type existed (Fig. 9). They are represented nude, and their attitude is with legs together, one arm down the side of the body and the other beneath the breasts; their hair is arranged in a tripartite fashion or in one single mass at the back. In con-trast to male statuettes, the eyes of the female statuettes were modelled out of the ivory and not hollowed out for inlay.

Comparison with the second great corpus of ivory votives recently discovered in the cache from Tell el-Farkha is revealing (Ciałowicz 2007: figs. 5–32, this volume). Despite an iconographic affinity, the ivory statu-ettes from Tell el-Farkha have a completely different design. Many of them do not exceed 10 cm or even 5 cm in height. They are represented standing on a base in various attitudes, many wearing dresses. The miniature dwarf

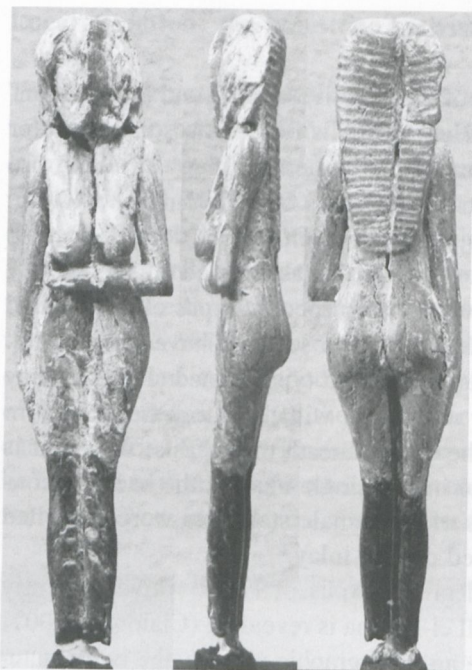Fig. 8. Ivory man from Hierakonpolis, H: 14.2 cm, Philadelphia E.4896.

Fig. 9. Ivory woman from Hierakonpolis, H: 14.0 cm, Philadelphia E.4902.

figurines, apparently made for suspension, unlike the Hierakonpolis ivories, are extremely similar to one another. The whole corpus of ivory statuettes from Tell el-Farkha has close stylistic parallels among the ivories from nearby Tell Ibrahim Awad (van Haarlem 2009: cat. nos. 11–13, 15–16, 33). Both sites may have been served by the same workshop. Thus, the statuettes from Hierakonpolis and the Delta sites were made according to locally specific iconographic rules that generated a whole series of items in a very similar style.

Comparison of the non-anthropomorphic ivory votives from the different temples reveals further local specifics. Uraei made of ivory are repeatedly found at Tell el-Farkha and only at that site (Ciałowicz 2007: fig. 27, this volume: fig. 33). Numerous objects displaying royal or king-centred iconography are found at Hierakonpolis and only there (Quibell 1900: pl. 15; Whitehouse 1987).

Interestingly, an unquestionable relationship between temple votives and kingship is expressed only in the ivory votives and this underlines the elite status of this material. Funerary parallels for the ivory votives are known only from the royal tombs at Abydos, tombs of the upper elite and their subsidiary tombs and from the larger Early Dynastic burials

of the Memphite region (Bussmann 2010: 389–395).[1] From this fact, it might be concluded that communication of the new kingship was addressed to the upper elite in the first instance. Moreover, ivory temple votives with royal iconography are largely confined to Hierakonpolis, revealing the exceptional role that this temple played at the beginning of Dynastic history.

Many ivory objects, however, are typologically individual. This applies to several ivories from Tell el-Farkha (Ciałowicz 2007: figs. 12–13, 25–26, 29, this volume) and to many ivory objects from Abydos (Petrie 1903: 23–24, pls. 2–3) and Tell Ibrahim Awad (van Haarlem 2000, 2001, 2002), which can hardly be grouped into clearly defined types, let alone locally specific types.

Degree of local variation

How does this brief survey relate to the first hypothesis concerning the degree of local variation? The material has to fulfil two criteria if its distribution is to be considered as being organised according to local traditions: 1) on a countrywide level, diversity must be recognisable; and 2) at the same time, diversity must display regularity at the local level. This means that several examples of a locally specific type must be preserved in order to speak of a local tradition.

On the one hand, the above review of the votives suggests that the degree of variation depends on the material and type. Some faience votives like frogs and girls look extremely similar throughout Egypt and do not fulfil the criterion of diversity. Other faience types like men, women and boys are very diverse, but display little local regularity. Limestone votives generally tend to more diversity. The ivory statuettes from Hierakonpolis and the Delta sites fulfil both criteria most closely, although again there are a large number of statuettes with individual features. It seems that a common iconographic pool was shared throughout Egypt with artistic conventions of varying degrees of cohesiveness. Beyond these shared conventions, a more loosely defined art existed without necessarily forming distinct local traditions.

On the other hand, some locally specific characteristics can be recognised. This is true for some types that recur only at one site, and for the

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[1] For ivory statuettes from the tomb-like structure at north Saqqara, see Kawai this volume.

quantitative distribution of specific types at different sites. Examples of this are specific types of faience baboons at Elephantine, the large faience and limestone votives from Abydos, the great amount of hedgehog ships and crocodiles at Elephantine, and the significant number of scorpions and ivories with royal iconography from Hierakonpolis. Together with the architecture of the temples, these votives suggest the overall local settings of the temples, rather than one being fuelled by the uniform art of the residence.

The king and provincial Egypt in the Early Dynastic period

The ambiguous evidence of artistic cohesiveness makes it unlikely that kingship encountered strong local traditions that it had to overpower. Instead, following the second hypothesis, it seems as if kingship had complete control over the provincial temples. Yet, much of the votive material escapes the rules of standardised royal 'high culture'. Explicit royal iconography is largely confined to some ivory votive types from Hierakonpolis, which provide a glimpse at the forms the promotion of the new kingship took. Most of the other votives have no obvious relationship to concepts of kingship.

It should be added that the relationship between the king and provincial Egypt is reduced here to the question of how it is reflected in the archaeology of the early temples. It is, of course, much more complex and requires the study of the complete evidence of cemeteries, settlements and inscriptions, as well as further theorising.

Critique of Kemp's concept

Kemp (1989, 2006) examined the early temples in an attempt to free them from the burden of interpretational patterns developed for later temples. Arguing against the evolutionary views of high culture art historians, he has promoted a concept that allows for artistic expressions on different social levels beyond the king and the elite. Yet, the two hypotheses presented in this paper and developed on the basis of Kemp's concept seem to have led to dead-ends. The reason for this might be theoretical shortcomings concerning some of the implicit assumptions.

Contrary to Kemp's assumption, the rules governing iconography are not identical with the rules within power relationships. A type, distributed

countrywide with little morphological variation, need not indicate homo-
geneity prescribed by the ruling elite, and a typologically individual piece
does not necessarily mean that the person who produced or used this
object escaped the power of the king. Thus, the degree of iconographic
variation cannot simply be considered a mirror of power.

Kemp conceptualises the relationship between the Great and Little
Tradition in terms of power and conflict, as does J. Assmann (1991: 16, 28).
The Great Tradition of the ruling elites is understood as originating from
outside and aggressively invading the natural, free and authentic 'Prefor-
mal' local traditions. However, the Great and Little Traditions can be
viewed as part of a mutual exchange relationship (Marriott 1955).
The Great Tradition can be developed out of local traditions and be rec-
ognised in local contexts as part of its own culture. In return, local art
can be modelled according to the more standardised, exclusive art of high
culture. Just as power is a complex social arrangement rather than mere
oppression, the Great and Little Traditions depend on each other in a
multitude of ways. In consequence, the Little Tradition can look very
similar to the Great Tradition even if on a less sophisticated level.

It seems convincing to understand the Great Tradition as the culture
of the elite and the Little Tradition as the culture of the ordinary people.
Although different individuals do have specific socio-cultural profiles, it
is often difficult in praxis to determine the absolute social status of an
object and to relate it to a specific socially defined person. This relation-
ship works better for the exclusive culture confined to the elite. In con-
trast, the more roughly made faience and limestone votives — the motifs
of which might in some cases be derived from elite models — could have
been used by elite as well as by non-elite persons. In a wider context,
discussions of social groups and their cultural profiles will have to take
into consideration that the social status of objects and architectural and
textual models are subject to change over the course of time and that
defining social groups heavily depends on theorising society in general.

Conclusions

Archaeologically, the above review tends to support the assumption that
the votive objects were produced in local or regional, rather than centrally
controlled, workshops. This applies especially to the limestone and ivory
votives. Only one kiln has so far been identified as a faience workshop
of the Old Kingdom. It is located near the temple area of Abydos and

might have been used for local faience production (Nicholson & Pelten-
burg 2000: 180–181). In the New Kingdom, the production of glass and
faience is closely intertwined, and there are arguments for considering
the social embedding of these technologies as belonging to royal work-
shops in this period (Nicholson & Peltenburg 2000: 182–184). However,
the Old Kingdom votives display some local peculiarities and make little
references to the iconography of kingship. Faience technology seems
therefore to be part of local communities in the 3rd millennium B.C.

Theologically, the Old Kingdom rock inscriptions at Sehel (Seidlmayer
2006: 228; Gasse & Rondot 2007) and in the Wadi Hillal at Elkab
(Müller-Wollermann & Vandekerckhove 2001) strongly suggest that local
processional feasts highlighting local aspects of a god or goddess already
existed in the Old Kingdom. Although processional feasts are better
known from New Kingdom sources owing to the greater importance of
temple feasts during that period, it seems safe to conclude that these feasts
developed from earlier local practices.

Historically, the early provincial temples underwent a macro-historical
transformation from local to royal institutions during the 3rd millen-
nium BC, while archaeology clearly reflects the different embedding of
this overall process in local horizons (Bussmann in press). Hierakonpolis,
with its large amount of elite ivory and stone votives, mace-heads, mon-
umental votives and monumental architecture, is a clear exception during
the period of state formation and cannot serve as a model for other tem-
ples (cf. McNamara 2008). Abydos had its heyday in Dynasty 6 when
the kings were involved in the erection of the temple and ka-chapels, and
the vizier Djau had his statue cult installed (Goedicke 1967: 81–86).
The increased number of travertine vessels of late Old Kingdom type
reflects this development (Petrie 1903: pls. 14.289–291, 21.5–10).
These examples show what royal engagement and elite involvement look
like in the archaeological record. Such is not found at Elephantine, Tell
Ibrahim Awad or Tell el-Farkha, and not even at Abydos in the Early
Dynastic period. These temples are deeply rooted in a provincial milieu
characterised by loose contact with the court and king.

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