
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Scaling the State: Egypt in the Third Millennium BC

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Discussions of the early Egyptian state suffer from a weak consideration of scale. Egyptian archaeologists derive their arguments primarily from evidence of court cemeteries, elite tombs, and monuments of royal display. The material informs the analysis of kingship, early writing, and administration but it remains obscure how the core of the early Pharaonic state was embedded in the territory it claimed to administer. This paper suggests that the relationship between centre and hinterland is key for scaling the Egyptian state of the Old Kingdom (ca. 2,700–2,200 BC). Initially, central administration imagines Egypt using models at variance with provincial practice. The end of the Old Kingdom demarcates not the collapse, but the beginning of a large-scale state characterized by the coalescence of central and local models.

Imagining the state

In his book *Seeing like a state*, James Scott (1998) argued that pre-modern states did not penetrate society to the same degree as their 20th century successors did. According to Scott, only the latter were able to implement ideologies in wider society, including high-modernist fascism and communism, whereas pre-modern states were of a smaller scale and blind towards the terrain and the people they administered. A major tool for establishing statehood, Scott says, is standardization, for example of towns, landscapes, and production patterns. He argues that standardization transforms a heterogeneous society into a simplified entity making it legible, and thus controllable, for the state.

Discussions of early historical as opposed to modern European states originate in late 19th

and early 20th century sociology. They gained a stronger empirical foundation when archaeologists started engaging with the debate in the 20th century (Claessen and Sokolník 1978; Feinman and Marcus, 1998). A leading recent protagonist, Norman Yoffee (2001; 2005) replied to Scott that archaic states did develop strategies similar to those of modern states. Understanding 'legibility' literally, he argues that the invention of writing in Mesopotamia was a tool designed to standardise thoughts for control by the political core of archaic states. He adds that standardization occurred beyond writing, such as the production of grain containers and weights, legal discourse, and irrigation practice.

Standardization and examples of social engineering have been observed also in fourth and third millennium Egypt. Non-elite burial equipment becomes simpler towards the turn from the predynastic to the dynastic period in the later fourth millennium (Wengrow, 2006: 151–175), and hieroglyphs

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are more standardized towards the beginning of the Old Kingdom (Regulski, 2010). Planned court cemeteries and pyramid towns of the mid third millennium (Alexanian, 1995; Jánosi, 2005; Tavares, 2011) show that the political core shaped its immediate social environment according to specific imagined models. The lack of comparable evidence from provincial Egypt, unless undiscovered so far, corroborates Scott's hypothesis that state planning in pre-modern societies was restricted to the centre.

From a prehistoric perspective, Old Kingdom Egypt, the first great cycle of royal rule in a unified country (ca. 2,700–2,200), is a polity of a much larger scale than anything that existed before (Midant-Reynes, 2000; Wenke, 2009). It ticks most of the relevant boxes for being classified as a state, such as kingship, monumental display, writing, urbanism, and a multi-layered administration. Yet, Barry Kemp notes the almost complete absence of monumental royal display outside the pyramid cemeteries during much of the third millennium. He concludes from a comparison with later periods that Old Kingdom Egypt was a 'country of two cultures', central and local, and that the first dynasty kings did not 'throw a cultural switch that instantly lit up the whole country' (Kemp, 2006: 113, 135). Although a minority opinion, Christian Guksch (1991) even argues that Egypt transformed into a state only in the Middle Kingdom during the early second millennium.

Similarly, opinions are split over the scope of administration, the executive arm of kingship and traditionally one of the key criteria of statehood. Several contributors to the volume *Ancient Egyptian Administration* (Moreno García, 2013a) have recently outlined the diachronic development of administration in third millennium Egypt. Some, like Eva-Maria Engel (2013: 36), argue that the available evidence is too much biased towards the centre to draw a conclusion about the administration of the hinterland prior to the late Old Kingdom. Others, including Moreno García

(2013b: 93), suggest that late 3rd millennium administrative structures date back to the first dynasty but do not surface in the brittle record of the early dynasties.

The divergent views result from the somewhat hybrid nature of the Old Kingdom. From a bird's eye perspective, it looks as if a small court community invented the state once social conditions had allowed, but that not much state happened outside the court. No doubt, pyramid construction must have required increased exploitation of natural and human resources. Archaeological evidence from across North-Eastern Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean corroborates interaction on an interregional scale (Sowada, 2009; O'Connell 2012). However, compared to the Middle and Late Bronze Age (broadly the second millennium BC), the scale and permanency of these activities is restricted.

I propose to explain this clash of perceptions as a matter of scale. Scale is different from territorial expansion or geographical distribution of specific features. Rather, I define it as the degree of coalescence between central and local models. I argue that royal administration imagined the territory of Egypt with models different from those relevant in local contexts. Only in the course of the third millennium did central and local models merge, establishing the basis for a territorial polity to function more efficiently. The approach reconciles definitions of states as 'imagined communities' (Anderson, 1983), focusing on ideological foundations, with those emphasizing what states do (Yoffee, 2005: 20). Administration is understood as mediated through a language whose constructed dimension needs considering for interpretation.

An assessment of the scale of the Old Kingdom state is related to, but different from discussions of state formation in Egypt (Regulski, 2008; Wenke, 2009; Köhler, 2010; Anđelcović, 2011; Campagno, 2011). The latter usually focus on growing social complexity, the development of royal ideology, the

emergence of phonetic writing, the cultural homogenization of the Lower Nile Valley, and increasing interregional interaction during the fourth and early third millennium. These processes have reached a first zenith by the time of the Old Kingdom. The direction of research on third millennium governance therefore shifts from explaining why the state formed towards understanding how and whether it functioned.

Identifying relevant models

The discussion of scale in the sense outlined above requires the identification of ancient models and an explanation of their relevance. Models are templates used for negotiating reality. They help agents pattern the chaotic stream of information surrounding them and serve as reference points for structuring thoughts and activities. Models simplify diverse practices and experiences and define the categories with which a society describes and constitutes itself (Münch, 2013 and Kóthay, 2013).

In the research literature, kingship is by far the most dominant theme explored in the context of the state (Silverman and O'Connor, 1995; Hill *et al.*, 2013). Ancient models relating to kingship are royal names, titles, epithets, and visual representations, tomb architecture and burial equipment of kings. For questions of scale, however, models of kingship are of limited use because they define the centre of the state rather than the entity of which kingship is the centre.

Three ancient Egyptian models will be discussed below. The first defines Egypt as 'the two lands', Upper and Lower Egypt, a model with a long-lasting impact on thinking about Egypt. The second model was almost equally important in Ancient Egypt, i.e. Egypt as the sum of 'nomes'. A simple interpretation of nomes is as administrative districts, but they were, in fact, of high symbolic value throughout Pharaonic history. Finally, Egypt was imagined as a series of major deities and temples scattered throughout the country.

The relevance of the models arises from their geographical implications. Egypt is usually classified as an early territorial rather than as a city state. Trigger (2003) argues that the integration with the hinterland is key for territorial states to survive. All three models give insight into how the political core articulated the territory of Egypt on a symbolic level. At the same time, they interfere with administrative practice, as will be shown below, and therefore inform the approach chosen in this paper.

Egypt: 'the two lands'?

In Pharaonic visual and written culture, Egypt is commonly referred to as 'the two lands', i.e. *ta-shemau*, 'the narrow land', and *ta-mehu*, 'the broad land'. The model conveniently maps on the shape of the cultivation, stretching along the Nile Valley in Upper Egypt on the one hand and broadening in the Delta on the other. Egyptian monumental display has explored the model widely. To offer a standard example, kings regularly wear the white crown of Upper Egypt and the red crown of Lower Egypt in symmetrically arranged scenes.

The model has been overwhelmingly successful. It is so ubiquitous in Egyptian sources that modern perceptions of ancient Egypt easily align with the North-South divide at the expense of alternative scenarios. The unification of Upper and Lower Egypt in the late predynastic period and later in the Middle and New Kingdoms is sometimes portrayed as if things fall into their predestined place and return to a naturally given entity.

Geography and archaeology tell a slightly different story (**Fig. 1**). Reconstruction of the palaeo-landscape of North-Eastern Africa is still on-going, but it appears that the current hyper-arid climate in Egypt has been comparatively stable over the past six thousand years, at least on a global scale (Nicoll, 2004; Kuper and Kröpelin, 2006, Holodway *et al.*, 2012).

The Delta became the agricultural powerhouse of the Egyptian state in the Bronze Age.



Fig. 1: North Africa and the Near East today. (Google Earth).

In the fourth millennium, it was smaller than today and not yet as efficiently controlled for agricultural exploitation (Butzer, 2002). Still, it was certainly an object of aspiration for any kind of larger polity based on surplus economy. In addition, the Delta provided access to trade networks stretching over the Levant into the Mesopotamian heartland where a nascent civilization provided desirable ideas and objects for emerging elites in Egypt (Wengrow, 2006: 135–150). Larger predynastic and Early Dynastic settlements (4th and early 3rd millennium BC) were found in the central and Eastern Delta (Tristant, 2004). Sites like Buto (Hartung *et al*, 2007; www.dainst.org), Tell e-Farkha (Chłodnicki *et al*, 2012), and Tell el-Iswid (Tristant *et al*, 2011; www.ifao.net) confirm the important role of this area (**Fig. 2**). Clay sealings discovered in associated layers are evidence of a new type of administrative practice borrowed from the East where sealing and counting with clay have a long prehistory.

From all available evidence, Upper Egypt was the motor of those processes that led to the formation of the Pharaonic state. Increasing social stratification, the elaboration of funerary culture which laid the foundation of Old Kingdom pyramid cults, and the creation of a visual language for Pharaonic kingship developed at central places in the Nile Valley, i.e. Abydos/This, Naqada,

Hierakonpolis, and Qustul (Wilkinson, 2000; Wengrow, 2006; Wenke, 2009).

The Nile valley south of the Qena bend, the Upper Egyptian heartland, is narrow and agriculturally not particularly rich (Butzer, 1976). Before the Aswan High Dam was built in the 1960s, its geography used to be more similar to Lower Nubia than to Middle Egypt where the Nile Valley is significantly broader. Not surprisingly, cultural material originating in Lower Nubia (the so called ‘A-group culture’) appears as far North as at Hierakonpolis during the predynastic period (Gatto, 2011). The rapids of the first cataract at Aswan are certainly a natural border separating Egypt from Nubia. But it is also a catalyst of interaction (Török, 2009; Raue *et al* 2013). It binds people together on either side in a way felt more relevant on a local level in day-to-day routine than the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt.

Other areas are entirely excluded from the model of the ‘two lands’. The rocky landscape of the Sinai and the Eastern desert is different from the river oasis and was inhabited by semi-nomadic Bedouin (Barnard and Duistermaat, 2012; Förster and Riemer, 2013). They probably suffered and profited at the same time from the emergence of the Pharaonic state. On the one hand, Egyptians penetrated from the river into their habitat for the exploitation of minerals, especially copper and gold in the Southern part of the Eastern desert. On the other hand, expeditions from the emerging civilization along the Nile offered to Bedouin a wider range of options for the exchange of materials and ideas. The area to the west of the Nile declined during 6,000 to 4,000 BC from an inhabited steppe to a depopulated arid desert with only a belt of oases providing opportunities for settled life (Kuper and Kröpelin, 2006). It remained an alternative trade route to sub-Saharan Africa outside the more densely populated Nile valley.

This review reveals a diversity of regional dispositions and some structural dynamics of interaction. The Delta and the Levant

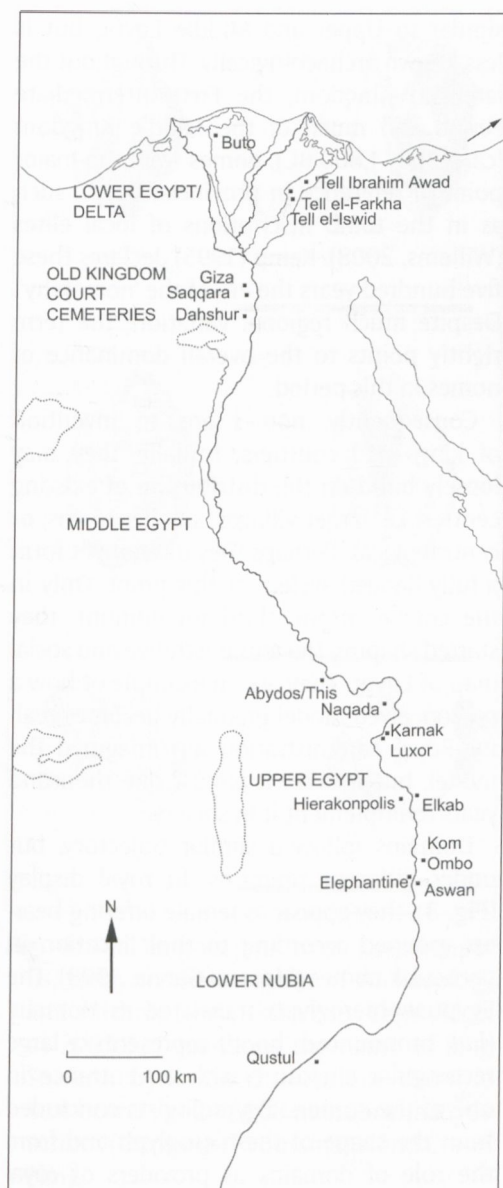


Fig. 2: Map of Egypt with sites mentioned in the text. (Compiled by R. Bussmann).

form a close zone of interaction and share the sandwich position between two centres of rapid social development in the Nile Valley and Southern Mesopotamia (Levy and van den Brink, 2002; Miroshedji, 2002; Guyot, 2008). Upper Egypt and Lower Nubia drive the emergence of kingship and central places. Elites from Upper

Egypt aspire north for access to the rich agricultural hinterland in Middle Egypt and the Delta. Upper Egypt remains important as a trade and transport route to the south where desirable raw materials are located in the adjacent desert area.

The 'two lands' is thus a description of reality as much as an interpretation thereof. The model grossly simplifies the diversity of natural environments and black-boxes what, in fact, is not a given entity, i.e. Egypt. It serves the purpose of central elites who profited most from the unification whereas it was irrelevant or perhaps even not understood on a local level.

Nomes and domains

Nomes and domains are key entities in the administrative language of third millennium Egypt. They carry a heavy symbolic weight and require engagement with the idiosyncratic way in which archaic states imagined themselves.

Upper and Lower Egypt were divided in a series of nomes (Helck, 1974). In a profane sense, nomes are administrative districts each identified with a specific symbol (Fig. 3). However, they are also deeply ingrained in ancient Egyptian religious thought. In Egyptian myth, for example, the body parts of Osiris, the god of the netherworld and the deceased father of the living king, were dispersed throughout the nomes, the sum of the latter representing Egypt as a whole. According to sources from around the mid-first millennium onwards, each nome kept a relic of Osiris and was associated with its own theology, deities, and temples (Beinlich, 1984; Leitz 2012).

The oldest complete list of nomes is displayed on the walls of the White Chapel of Sesostri I in Karnak in the early second millennium BC. An earlier list is preserved fragmentarily on the walls of the valley temple of King Sneferu, ca. 2,500 BC (Fakhry, 1961). References to nomes date back to the first dynasty (Engel, 2006), all found in a royal context. In combination, the early material

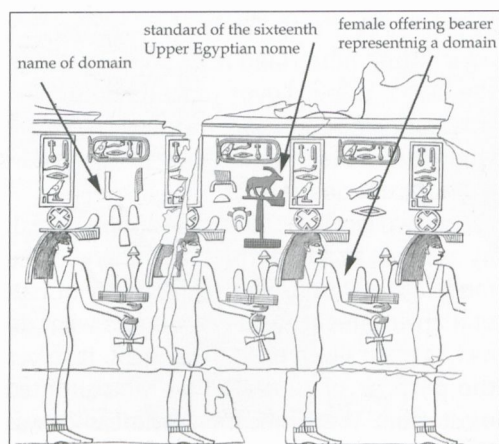


Fig. 3: Blocks from valley temple of Sneferu at Dahshur. According to the hieroglyphs on their head, the female offering bearers represent 'domains of Sneferu'. The names of the domains are written in front of them, here 'Great is Sneferu', 'Joy of Sneferu', and 'Gaming pieces of Sneferu'. The domains are grouped according to their location in nomes, here the sixteenth nome of Upper Egypt shaded grey. Architecturally, the figures were originally oriented towards the statue of the king. (After Fakhry, 1961: Fig. 16).

and the later theological texts suggest that nomes govern the administrative and religious landscape of Egypt from the beginning of Pharaonic history.

Archaeologically, the nomes are elusive prior to Dynastic Egypt. The material culture of the predynastic period neither varies along the lines of later nome borders, nor do the nome symbols feature in predynastic imagery. These observations and the strong association of nomes with royal administration speak in favour of the assumption that nomes are a model created for administration rather than a Pharaonic emulation of pre-existing small-scale polities.

The relevance of nomes changed from the late Old Kingdom onwards. Like beads in a chain, tombs of provincial elites started popping up at each nome capital along the Nile. The situation in the Delta was probably

similar to Upper and Middle Egypt, but is less known archaeologically. Throughout the late Old Kingdom, the First Intermediate Period and much of the Middle Kingdom (ca. 2,300–1,800 BC), nomes were the major point of reference in provincial Egypt, such as in the tomb inscriptions of local elites (Willems, 2008). Kemp (1995) declares these five hundred years the era of the 'nomarchy'. Despite much regional variation, the term rightly points to the overall dominance of nomes in this period.

Consequently, nomes are an invention of kings and courtiers. Initially, they may loosely build on the distribution of existing centres, i.e. larger villages, smaller towns, or central places. Perhaps they did not yet form a fully-fledged system at this point. Only in the course of the third millennium, they started shaping the administrative and social map of Egypt. They are an example of how a preconceived model gradually becomes reality. Royal administration has imagined the model, but it takes it almost one thousand years to implement it in society.

Domains follow a similar trajectory, but under different premises. In royal display (**Fig. 3**), they appear as female offering bearers grouped according to their location in particular nomes (Moreno García, 1999). The Egyptian hieroglyph translated as 'domain' (*hut*, pronounced 'hoot') represents a large rectangular enclosure with an entrance in one of the corners. Egyptologists concluded from the shape of the hieroglyph and from the role of domains as providers of royal funerary offerings that domains were agricultural estates located throughout Egypt (Papazian, 2008). It is unknown, however, whether royal domains replaced existing estates or were founded on *terra incognita*.

The archaeology of rural Egypt is poorly known other than in the form of excavated village cemeteries (Seidlmayer, 2006). An investigation of domains is therefore largely dependent on visual and written evidence. As a general difficulty, administrative terms more often than not translate ambiguously

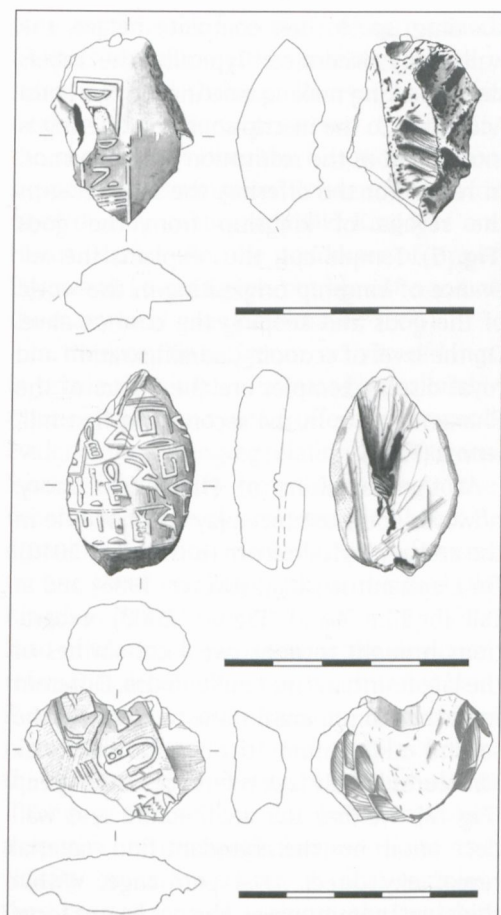


Fig. 4: Seal impressions from Hierakonpolis, today in the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University Cambridge. **a)** 2005.537 mentions the name of king Sneferu, **b)** Z 45932 mentions the title 'seal bearer', **c)** Z 46008 mentions the title 'scribe'. (Drawings: R. Bussmann and C. von Elm).

into the material record. Although one should expect that a *hut* has a specific material correlate, the archaeologist will have to reconcile the reality 'on paper' with material remains on a less immediate level.

To start with a philological comment, the word *hut* is also used in the combination *hut-ka*, 'domain of the soul = chapel, tomb', and *hut-neter*, 'domain of the god = temple'. Detlef Franke (1994: 118–124) argues that *hut-ka* is, in essence, not a tangible

structure on the ground, but an economic unit. Archaeologically, a *hut* might therefore materialize in remains of administrative practices, such as seal impressions, rather than as a building. Seal impressions (Fig. 4) were found in many provincial towns of the third millennium, such as at Elephantine (Pätznick, 2005), Elkab (Regulski, 2009), Hierakonpolis (Bussmann, 2011), Abydos (Petrie, 1902; 1903), Buto (Kaplony, 1992), and Tell el-Farkha (Chłodnicki et al, 2013). It is impossible to establish from the seal inscriptions whether the sealing activity was part of a domain. Interestingly, however, royal models of administration are at variance with provincial administrative practices. For kings, the Egyptian hinterland was organized in nomes and domains, not towns and temples as in the later documentary evidence. In contrast, the archaeological record suggests that towns are the actual administrative interfaces in provincial Egypt feeding agricultural surpluses into royal networks.

In her seminal study of hundreds of names of Old Kingdom domains, Helen Jacquet-Gordon (1962) argued that the majority of domains were located in the Delta and Middle Egypt. The distribution pattern confirms that the Delta and Middle Egypt are the economic backbone in third millennium Egypt. Moreover, she observes that the names of domains increasingly included the names of local deities, for example the domain 'Wekh-wishes-that-king-Teti-lives', Wekh being the local god of the nome capital Meir in Middle Egypt (Jacquet-Gordon, 1962: 312). She concluded that local shrines got more and more involved in the administration of royal domains. Her results set the stage for interpreting the archaeology of local shrines discussed in the following paragraph.

The temple model

After the third millennium, the local temples of Egypt emerged as the dominant interfaces between local and central administration (e.g. Grandet, 1994; Haring, 2013). Several second millennium temple buildings are still



Fig. 5: Temple relief in Luxor. King Amenhotep III makes offerings to the god Amun and receives the regalia of kingship. (Photo: R. Bussmann).



Fig. 6: New Kingdom temple of the goddess Satet on Elephantine island. Reconstruction by the German Archaeological Institute. (Photo: R. Bussmann).

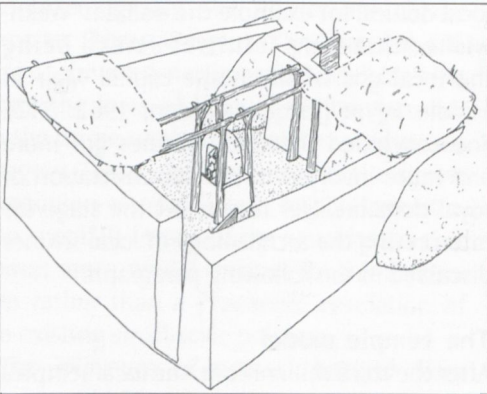


Fig. 7: Old Kingdom shrine of Satet on Elephantine island. (Reconstruction drawing by R. Bussmann).

standing up to their complete height, the walls fully decorated. Typically, the reliefs show the king making offerings to the gods. According to the inscriptions, the offering is interpreted as the restitution of the cosmos. In return for the offering, the king receives the regalia of kingship from the gods (**Fig. 5**). Temple cult thus explains the relevance of kingship originating in the world of the gods and keeping the cosmos alive. On the level of economy, administration and royal display, temples are the pillars of the Pharaonic state in the second and first millennia (**Fig. 6**).

At the beginning of Pharaonic history, however, local temples play a minor role in the archaeological record (Bussmann, 2010). On Elephantine island (Dreyer, 1986) and at Tell Ibrahim Awad (Eigner, 2000), excavations brought to light two local shrines of the late fourth to third millennium. Different from the monumental stone buildings of the second millennium, the small mud-brick structures largely lack references to kingship (**Fig. 7**). Neither the architecture and wall decoration, nor the abundant find material reveal any direct royal patronage. Within their local communities, shrines were a focus of votive practice and local festivals. The shrine of Elephantine was surrounded by grain silos, an indication of its economic relevance on a local level. Accordingly, nomarchs regularly held the office of overseer of priests at the local temple in the late Old Kingdom, perhaps also earlier (McFarlane, 1992; Moreno-García, 2005).

From all that the archaeological, inscriptional, and visual evidence can tell, royal administration does not connect to the local temples prior to the late Old Kingdom. Kings do recognize the relevance of temples and deities, but of different ones. On the third dynasty reliefs of the step pyramid at Saqqara, King Djoser is depicted performing rituals of kingship in front of a series of shrines called the *per-wer* and *per-nu*, the Upper Egyptian shrine and Lower Egyptian shrine (Friedman, 1995). The ritual was probably performed

on a plaza in the forecourt of the pyramid. Chapels run along either side arguably representing local shrines. However, there are neither inscriptions preserved to identify the chapels, nor does the historical context support this assumption. Relevant deities for royal display in the early Old Kingdom are Horus, Hathor, Re, the goddesses of Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt, but almost none of the many local gods (Seidlmayer, 1996).

In the late Old Kingdom, activity of kings in provincial temples increased. Royal architraves, statues, and votive offerings are good evidence for a changing relationship between local shrines and the crown. According to the decoration of the pyramid temple of Pepi II, domains *and* local deities delivered goods for the royal mortuary cult in the late Old Kingdom (Stockfisch, 2005: 125–127). What kind of economic transactions the depiction refers to is debatable. Of greater interest here is that central administration now recognized the importance of local temples within the economic organization of the hinterland.

Kings penetrated into local shrines within a specific institutional framework. In the vicinity or in forecourts of local temples, they erected chapels serving the worship of a royal statue and called 'domain of the ka-soul', *hut-ka* (Lange, 2006; Bussmann, in press). The cult of the royal statue was funded from royal domains, similar to those discussed above. Once offerings had been presented to the statue, they were distributed among the individuals involved in the offering cult. (Goedicke, 1967; Papazian, 2012: 101–118). What the inscriptional and visual sources portray as offerings has a clear economic base in the domains.

Following the model proposed by Jacquet-Gordon, local temples attracted increasing royal interest because they got involved in the administration of domains set up for the royal mortuary cult in pyramids, and for royal statues in local temples. They functioned like magnets in the hinterland of the state in third millennium Egypt. Unnoticed by the central government, local temples gradually

emerged as the administrative node of larger villages and towns. The denser the web of royal domains in the hinterland, the stronger was the involvement of local temples in the central economy. This process laid the foundation for the success of temples in second and first millennium Egypt.

Scaling the state

Gordon Childe (1945) argued that monumental royal tombs mirror periods of transition towards territorial states. Quoting Childe, Miroslav Bárta (2013: 163) portrays the fourth dynasty as the beginning of a fully-fledged administration in Egypt. This is the period in which pyramids balloon to hyper-monuments (around 2500 BC) much larger than their more human-scale successors. But one can read Childe more closely. Although the Egyptian state was based already from the first dynasty on territory, the gigantism of fourth dynasty pyramids demarcates the turning point of the territorial *integration* of the country.

Two interrelated features stand out in a cross-cultural comparison of early Egypt: the strong emphasis on funerary culture in royal display and the weak urban structure as opposed to city state civilizations (Trigger, 2003; Yoffee, 2005). Both impact on the formation of the Pharaonic state as the royal funerary cult drives the economic exploration of the country and the development of models for its territorial organisation.

Since the late predynastic period, domains deliver royal grave goods. In the course of the first dynasties the amount increases up to the thousands of stone and pottery vessels discovered in the subterranean chambers of the step pyramid of Djoser (Lauer, 1939). During the fourth dynasty, another element of pyramid construction develops, i.e. the pyramid temple. It is located to the east of the pyramid and serves the permanent royal funerary cult. In fact, towards the late third millennium, while pyramids are still of considerable size, the pyramid temple becomes the actual centre of the mortuary complex.

The archives of the pyramids in Abusir demonstrate that the royal pyramid cult supplies a long list of priests and servants with food (Posener-Kriéger 1976; Posener-Kriéger et al, 2006). The increasing demand for supplies might have prompted the more intensive colonization of the hinterland.

In the best sense of Scott's argument, the nascent Pharaonic state is blind towards the territory it rules. The state portrays Egypt as a unity of 'two lands', but Upper and Lower Egypt share as much with their neighbours to the South and North-East respectively as with each other. Life-styles outside the cultivated area are excluded from the model. The state imagines Egypt as a series of nomes populated by domains that serve the royal mortuary cult. Community organisation in provincial Egypt, however, clusters around local shrines, institutions off the radar of central administration.

This hypothesis is not to say that the state did not function. Pyramid construction would have been impossible without a high degree of central organization. The workers' settlement excavated in Giza is a good case in point on archaeological grounds (Lehner and Tavares, 2010: www.aeraweb.org). Yet, few of the categories created by the state are visible outside the court. It is as if royal administration had invented a car with a high-speed engine in the centre, but the engine was unable to move the entire car. The pitfall is to conflate the car with its operating, i.e. the state with how well it worked.

It took the Pharaonic state one thousand years before the administrative models of the centre started coalescing with local practice. The process was mutual. Nomes were introduced by kingship around the first dynasty or a bit earlier. Perhaps they built on the distribution of local centres, but their systemization and vesting with symbolic value was a royal initiative. Although initially king-made they shaped the administrative map and the provincial mindset towards the late third millennium. Another important royal model, domains were founded for the cult of the deceased king throughout

the country, preferably in the agriculturally rich areas of Middle Egypt and the Delta. They served their purpose well given that the royal funerary complexes flourished. Gradually, however, they merged with provincial organization dominated institutionally by local temples.

Methodologically, the important role of local temples prior to the late third millennium is inferred from their development from local shrines in the third to the dominant institutions of Pharaonic society in the first millennium. The archaeological record does not support any simple projection of the later into the earlier phases. However, the success story of temples requires an explanation. It is suggested here that it originates in the blending of central with local concerns in the late third millennium. Ultimately, the hinterland provided the model through which the idea of the Egyptian state was mediated in the long term.

The collapse of the Old Kingdom state has sparked wide interest among archaeologists and Egyptologists, partly because it echoes widely in the Ancient Egyptian literary tradition (Posener, 1969; Müller-Wollermann, 1986; Butzer, 1997; Moeller, 2005; Bárta, 2014). Explanations range from climate change and the loss of royal control over provincial Egypt to an economic crisis. Politically, the territory controlled by kingship shrank to Northern Middle Egypt and perhaps the Delta, while Upper Egypt was split into a few smaller polities. Egypt was not a unity of 'two lands' any more.

But the interlude between the Old and the Middle Kingdom lasted only for one hundred and fifty years. From the perspective of structural history, the 'First Intermediate Period' looks like a short stumble in a process of governmental transformation, irrespective of how agents contributed to or experienced it. Perhaps the terms 'state' and 'administration' draw too much the picture of Western nation states, but they help in theorizing the scale of pre-modern polities. To return to Scott, the Egyptian state of the second millennium saw better. In a sense, the Middle

Kingdom state was an improved version of the Old Kingdom. Be it to the benefit or at the expense of people, it operated more efficiently and gradually laid the foundation of the Egyptian empire in the Late Bronze Age.

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