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Egyptian Archaeology and Social Anthropology

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Abstract and Keywords

The article explores anthropological perspectives on pharaonic Egypt (ca. 3300–332 BCE). Central authority absorbed economic resources via local temples but had no interest in penetrating the minds of the people. The body horizon was the scale within the reach of individuals, underpinned by the organization of thought toward the ego in the center. It is typical of life in villages, where the physical and social experiences of intimacy converged in magical practices. Funerary culture epitomizes the body horizon, and its importance in Egypt reflects the village nature of early Egypt. Kingship is the center of Egypt's Great Tradition, a term sometimes conflated with elite culture, learned tradition, or literacy. Communication of kingship changes from a funerary-based to a temple-based template reflecting the transition to a more urban society. Diachronic change in the archaeological record is seen as pivotal for exploring the nature of Egyptian society anthropologically.

Keywords: anthropology, archaeology, body, civilization, Egypt, funerary culture, individual, Great Tradition, magic, village

Disciplinary Perspectives

Egyptian archaeology is blessed with an exceptionally dense archaeological record reflecting the transformation of human life from prehistory to the modern world. The northeastern corner of Africa witnesses the emergence of one of the earliest civilizations on the globe, one that is popular widely beyond academia. Due to environmental change, population explosion, and the colonial past of archaeological fieldwork in Egypt, sites and monuments are objects of political conflict surrounding heritage management. Egyptian archaeology could be expected to lead agendas in archaeology and anthropology (Gosden, 1999; Skibo et al., 2007; Garrow and Yarrow, 2010; Shankland, 2012), yet it plays a marginal role in discussions of landscape archaeology, materiality, the body,

ethnoarchaeology, global heritage, and theoretical approaches to the material world more generally.

To write an article on Egyptian archaeology and social anthropology—here understood as being identical with cultural anthropology—sounds like crossing artificially two different entities. However, modern disciplinary boundaries mask the shared threads in the earlier history of both disciplines. In terms of literary style, Wilkinson (1837) and Erman (1885[1894]) presented pharaonic Egypt in a fashion similar to ethnographies of the 19th and early 20th century. They portrayed it as an integrated whole sliced into environment, religion, law, governmental structures, household, dress, leisure, and more, preparing the ground for the inclusion of ancient Egypt in Spencer's (1925) comparative *Descriptive Sociology* series compiled with the help of W. M. F. Petrie. By this time, ancient Egypt was recognized, with varying undertones, as an early civilization in evolutionary anthropology (Champion, 2003*a*, 2003*b*; Wengrow, 2003; Stevenson, 2015). On a political level, colonialism and nationalism was a major framework for the archaeological exploitation of Egypt in the 19th century (Reid, 2002; Hassan, 2003; Colla, 2007) and for anthropological fieldwork in the early 20th century (Lewis, 1973). Institutionally, public museums were created in the West for the display and interpretative control of exotic worlds both ancient and contemporary (Gosden, 1999: 15–26; Moser, 2006; Riggs, 2010*a*).

However, due to different intellectual roots and increasing professionalization, the disciplines drifted apart during the 20th century. Social anthropologists trace the origins of their discipline back to moral philosophy and the comparative study of culture (Barnard, 2000: 15–26; Erikson, 2001: 9–23), whereas Egyptian archaeology was inspired by the decipherment of hieroglyphs, 19th-century European orientalism, and Biblical and Classical writings (Jeffreys, 2003: 4–5). Adams (1997) characterized the differences between the two disciplines at the end of the 20th century as an opposition of—in his words—humanism, particularism, elitism, and historicism on the Egyptological side versus social science, comparativism, proletarianism, and functionalism in anthropology. Although a simplified and outdated summary, it highlights valid tendencies and helps us understand the absence of Egyptian archaeology in wider archaeological theory originating in the (re-)engagement of archaeologists with anthropology and the social sciences in the 1960s (Trigger, 2006: 392–418).

Social anthropology and prehistoric archaeology share, among other things, an overlapping interest in premodern ways of life in noncomplex societies. This makes it easier, in principle, to align prehistoric Egypt with an anthropological and archaeological agenda (Wengrow, 2006; Stevenson, 2009). In contrast, pharaonic Egypt, the traditional focus of Egyptian archaeology, is often synthesized along the lines of political history and

the history of ideas. The neat integration of text and art typical of pharaonic monuments and the dense written record afford highly specialized skills that may be seen as an obstacle to wider theorizing. Moreover, texts and visual culture increase the complexity of data against which synthetic models from within archaeology and anthropology need to be tested.

The relationship between data and analyzer and the methods and styles of representation emerging from it are perhaps the strongest dividing line between Egyptian archaeology and social anthropology. Egyptian archaeologists and historians analyze an objectified record fossilized over several centuries, whereas social anthropologists interact with living people who may share the knowledge of their analyzers. Crucial to all disciplines, however, is a source-critical approach. The reflection on how data are produced can provide fertile ground for shared thinking about human behavior. Although the evidence from the past is more fragmented compared to the range of transient practices available to the anthropologist, none of the disciplines deals with a “complete” record, and the documentation of data in the field—archaeological, textual, or anthropological—captures only a fraction of the complexity of life. Interpretation therefore requires theoretical inferences at all levels in all disciplines, and a purely data- and method-driven perspective on their relationship, although no doubt important, monopolizes the conversation in an unfruitful fashion.

The disciplinary map varies globally and nationally among higher education systems and intellectual climates. Whenever archaeology is understood as a sub- or sister-discipline of social and cultural anthropology, such as in some US and UK departments, there is a greater chance for Egyptian archaeology to be studied from an archaeological and anthropological perspective. On the European continent, it is usually subsumed under a language-dominated Egyptology and focuses on the historical periods. Egyptology programs offered at Egyptian universities tend to adopt the European model and, locally, add elements of heritage management, conservation, and tourism. Although anthropology and Egyptian archaeology were flexible enough in the 20th century to allow individual scholars to migrate between the two (Blackman 2000[1927]; Frankfort, 1948, 1951; van Gennepe, 1960; Goody, 1986; Gange, 2013), neither discipline was of a central concern for the other.

A major pull toward the explicit engagement of Egyptian archaeologists with anthropology, after an earlier advance (Weeks, 1979), has been the volume *Egyptology and Anthropology: A Developing Dialogue* (Lustig, 1997). Most contributors would still lead an updated list of anthropologically informed publications in Egyptian archaeology, including Smith on ethnicity and imperialism (2003), Richards on mortuary variability and landscape (1999, 2005), and Trigger on cross-cultural comparison (1993, 2003). More

recently, Meskell (1999, 2002, 2004; Meskell and Joyce, 2003) has engaged with New Kingdom Egypt, Egyptian object biographies, and heritage discussions, and Lehner (2000) has applied Complex Adaptive System theory to ancient Egypt, both authors using an explicit anthropological framework. Theoretical discussions in Egyptology have increased overall in recent years (Nyord and Kjølby, 2009; Verbovsek et al., 2011), but Wendrich (2010) laments the slow progress in Egyptian archaeology. Baines (2011) has reviewed the (weak) engagement of Egyptologists with contemporary anthropology in the later 20th century. O'Connor (1997) argues that scholars like Kemp (1995, 2006) and Seidlmayer (1987, 1990, 2006, 2007)—and Willems (2001, 2008)—are representative of a larger group of Egyptian archaeologists whose writings reflect knowledge of, but rarely establish explicit links to, relevant anthropological literature.

This article follows a similar route and develops discussion of three related themes in the Egyptian context: early civilization, the body horizon, and Great and Little Traditions. It is written for archaeologists, anthropologists, and Egyptologists interested in thoughts on theory and method arising in an applied context. The topics covered have different dynamics but are interrelated through a recurrent concern with the role of the small scale within pharaonic society (ca. 3300–332 BCE), argued here to be a fertile area for a reconciliation of anthropological agendas with the material record.

Early Civilizations at Grassroots Level

Social anthropologists understand their discipline as a comparative study of human life. Pharaonic society has left a substantial record but is a difficult case study because the preserved remains are biased in multiple directions: toward the elites, the desert, and durable materials. However, the grand comparative theory for which archaeology, including Egyptian archaeology, is irreplaceable is social evolution (Yoffee, 2005; Smith, 2012). Pharaonic Egypt has the position of an early civilization in this narrative. Richards and Van Buren (2000) have reviewed the angles from which early civilizations have been studied, including Childe's checklists of archaeological criteria, Jaspers and Eisenstadt's Axial Age model (see also Assmann, 1992a), culture historical and processual approaches, World-Systems theory, and Baines and Yoffee's (1998) model of Egyptian and Mesopotamian high culture. More recently, Wengrow (2010) has highlighted the importance of cosmologies and interregional exchange among emerging elites for the formation of civilizations in northeastern Africa, Asia, and Europe.

Discussion of early civilizations is intimately connected to questions of power. Wittfogel (1957), a contemporary of fascism and communism in Europe, lent a voice to a reading of

pharaonic Egypt as a despotic state based on a centralized water management regime. His hydraulic hypothesis has been largely rejected by Egyptologists, but the vision of an all-pervasive state lurks in the background of Marxist-friendly frameworks where civilization led to the exploitation of the lower social classes by new elites (Trigger, 1993, 2003; Flannery and Joyce, 2012). Scott (1998) questioned the ability of premodern states to achieve the degree of social engineering typical of 20th-century high-modernist ideologies. Yoffee (2005: 91–112) replied that standardization of material culture and visual display, including writing, would reflect efforts of early states toward simplification and legibility, and thus controllability of society, albeit on a smaller scale.

The preference of kingship, administration, theology, elite art, and literature for these definitions is, to a certain extent, inherent in the nature of cross-cultural comparison of early civilizations. Elite culture is better preserved and researched, quantitatively easier to handle, culturally somehow “denser,” and distinctive enough from society to society to allow for comparison. From this perspective, civilization is elite business upheld by the control of a populace that lacks social or cultural ties to the exclusive group at the core beyond labor organization. Consequently, elites are credited with innovation, and their ideologies are seen as the embodiment of civilization. It remains obscure, however, where these ideas come from and how they are rooted in the fabric of their respective societies (i.e., whether the emergence of civilization transforms societies down to a grassroots level or is restricted to negotiation within the core elite).

The local dimension of early civilizations is increasingly being recognized. Yoffee calls for greater attention to individual agency in, rather than definitions of civilizations (2005: 20) and sees the interaction between the local level and the sociocultural core as an important context for preventing a progressive reading of social evolution (2005: 131–160). Kemp (2006: 78–92) reviews the evidence for local traditions of early Egyptian towns woven later into the framework of pharaonic formal thought. Based on ancient and more recent documentary evidence and environmental features, Eyre (1999) and Lehner (2000) reconstruct the complexity of rural village economy in ancient Egypt.

Examples from the archaeological record add to nuancing the discussion for ancient Egypt. The establishment of central authority in provincial Egypt and the spread of royal symbols must not be seen as self-evident and varies historically. On Elephantine island, located at Egypt’s southern border opposite modern Aswan, third-millennium kings successively erected a fort and an administrative center. Both buildings paid little respect to existing local structures and failed to install royal administration in the long run (Seidlmayer, 1996). It was not until central administration clung to the local temple that kingship was established meaningfully and permanently, here and elsewhere in Egypt (Bussmann, 2010). The fusion of a local institution with central concerns led to monumental display of kingship visually being spread more widely across the country in

the first and second millennia. Later second-millennium royal palaces and buildings along the Nile point to a stronger physical presence of the royal court in the country, a phenomenon compared by some with the *Reisekönigtum* of medieval Europe (Hagen, forthcoming).

These comments feed into the voices of a growing number of scholars who challenge the notion of ancient Egyptian administration as a clearly structured apparatus of power fully operational since the accession of the first pharaoh. Moreno García (2013) argues that, due to corruption, administration was a problem creator rather than solver, that it provided options of distinction and rivalry rather than a fixed trajectory for promotion in office, and that it suffered from inefficiency. Eyre (2009) believes that bureaucracy was much more restricted than is usually assumed and did not permanently penetrate into kinship-based forms of loyalty and dependency. Although Egyptology lacks extensive palace archives that might change the picture, Eyre's assumption finds a certain correlate in the archaeological record. For example, clay sealings from third- and early second-millennia Elephantine (i.e., stamped pieces of mud originally attached to doors, baskets, and other objects) show only a limited number of seals impressed on papyrus documents (von Pilgrim, 1996: 238; Pätznick, 2005: 61–62). Comprehensive lists, complex tables, royal decrees, or written reports exchanged between center and the periphery of the country seem to have been the exception rather than the rule.

However, royal administration was able to operate on a massive scale. To give but a few examples, royal expedition leaders to quarries and mines recruited up to 10,000 people who required provisioning, equipment, and security (Eyre, 2010). Some of the expedition members died, and many might have been prisoners of war and were forced into expeditions. Documentary evidence from a different context indicates that people tried to escape royal control (Quirke, 1988). Current excavations of the workforce settlement near the Giza pyramids show signs of both procession of materials on an industrial scale and control of people (Lehner and Tavares, 2010). However, it was a short-lived initiative lasting less than a few decades.

Taken together, these diverging viewpoints suggest that royal authority in ancient Egypt had the means to penetrate deeply into the lives of individuals and communities in periods of centralized power but explored this potential only on a case-by-case basis as required. It was either not able to restructure social relationships permanently and to thus reconfigure the minds of people or, more plausibly perhaps, it had no interest in it. The concern of central administration was the absorption of economic resources but not the organization of communities on a local level. The integration of local and central affairs was increasingly developed through the provincial temples and, in the long run, led to the appropriation of local cults by royal ideology (see the later discussion on “Great and Little Traditions”).

Kingship has an impact on society beyond political or economic rule. It functions like a magnet. The closer to it officials are, the stronger they align with the king. This is evident from the location of tombs of high officials close to the royal tomb, rather than near their home towns, and from their tomb decoration and inscriptions focusing, whenever possible, on the interaction with the king at the expense of other social ties (Guksch, 1994). Those on the periphery cannot escape the overall orientation of the magnetic field. They may have a local rather than royal reference point (e.g., their patrons), but these aspire to the center. Thus, the mortuary landscape of pharaonic Egypt is governed by administrative rank (Richards, 2005). This may sound trivial and, indeed, needs much chronological and local specification, but the constructed nature of the situation becomes evident in periods when kingship is weak or lacking and burial customs change (Seidlmayer, 1987). It is, therefore, unnecessary to assume that kingship reigned actively down into the humblest hut, but it unfolds a gravitational force affecting all members of Egyptian society.

Researching pharaonic civilization at a grassroots level affords some consideration of how the lower levels of society can be reached empirically. Individuals across a wide social spectrum are mentioned in documentary, literary, and medical texts (e.g., Fischer-Elfert, 2005), but they are often difficult to identify archaeologically. Seidlmayer (2007) correlates individuals depicted in the tomb decoration of the provincial elite at Beni Hassan with local cemetery organization. The top and subaltern administrators were buried in rock tombs and their dependants further down the slope in tombs with mud-brick chapels. Tomb decoration shows ordinary washers, fishermen, and peasants, but the mud-brick tombs would still belong to those depicted as overseers whose titles appear on objects found in the mud-brick tombs. Although tomb decoration and other visual material is an important type of evidence for daily life, it must not be mistaken as a simple social panorama. The lack of female workers, children, and aged people shows that the choice of themes is highly selective and centered on activities relevant for the tomb owner.

Quantitative analysis is used in archaeology to describe how differences were established in the material world in the absence of texts and images (for pharaonic Egypt; e.g., Alexanian, 2003, 2006; Richards, 2005; Köhler, 2008; Bietak, 2010). Although the resulting graphs should not be conflated with something like social structure (Barrett, 2001), they allow comparison of the behavior of people from a wide social spectrum in equal terms, beyond the elite perspective inherent in most visual and documentary evidence.

A widely explored example is the living quarters of Amarna, the disembedded capital of Egypt's "monotheistic" king Akhenaton. Royal administration laid out the estates of the highest officials but had no interest in the accommodation of the rest of society. Smaller

houses rapidly filled the space between the estates. Kemp (2012) portrays Amarna as a series of village communities, each clustering around a patron as its social and economic center. House sizes differ immensely. Quantitative analysis suggests that the inhabitants of the smaller houses aspired strictly to comfort and status (e.g., thickness of house walls, porches, bathrooms, and a columned room), whereas the behavior of those living in the large estates cannot be measured on statistical grounds alone (Shaw, 1992). The new theology of Akhenaton was embedded in a specific visual language, but traces of it are found predominantly in the larger houses (Stevens, 2006). Throughout the settlement, religious practices and imagery of the traditional religion flourished, whereas only the upper echelons of Amarna society were allowed access to the new visual display.

Although the religious setting is distinctive, and quantitative analysis of the site is faced with archaeological and methodological difficulties, Amarna is instructive on a broader level for understanding Egyptian civilization at the grassroots level. The “villagers” were not subject to royal engineering and organized their lives on a communal basis. Although few of them will have held administrative positions, they were affected by royal affairs because the position of their respective patron depended on his success in daily peer rivalry at court. Royal ideology was not designed to penetrate into the minds of the “villagers” but mattered as a resource for distinction. Quantitative correlations can be read as a reflection of dynamic competition and close peer observation among the lower social groups longing for physical and, higher up the ladder, social improvement of their situation.

The Body Horizon

Whereas the previous section has taken a systemic view on civilization, reflecting central concerns, the discussion now focuses on the body. The topic invokes postprocessual issues of individuality, agency, personhood, gender, and the physical experience of life and has attracted increasing interest in the social sciences and humanities over the past decades (Borić and Robb, 2008; Koch, 2012). The ancient Egyptians explored the human body widely, such as in religious texts, for measurements, and in medical and funerary treatment. Egyptian archaeologists have recognized the social construction of the body as an object for the display of identity and engaged with phenomenological discussions of embodied cognition and the senses (Meskell, 1999, 2002; Meskell and Joyce, 2003; Nyord, 2009; Wendrich, 2012). A comprehensive study of the body in ancient Egypt is, however, currently lacking (Frood, 2010: 482–484; Riggs, 2010*b*). Departing from a case study, I combine physical, social, and cognitive aspects and define the body horizon as a social scale underlying an ego-centered rationale for the organization of thought.

Whereas previous approaches to the body in ancient Egypt tend to be descriptive, I use the body horizon for explanation, especially of funerary culture.

The case study is based on Seidlmayer's (1990: 123–210, 2006) and Dubiel's (2008) analysis of burial equipment in Middle Egyptian cemeteries near the modern villages of Qau el-Kebir, Mostagedda, and Matmar. The cemeteries date to the late Old Kingdom, the First Intermediate Period, and the early Middle Kingdom (ca. 2700–1900 BCE). The period is characterized by a regionalization of Egypt's culture and political structure in the first part and recentralization in the second. It is viewed as the heyday of provincial culture in Egyptian archaeology. Funerary archaeology is the prime evidence available for Middle Egypt and easily draws attention to body issues.

The province was administered from the ancient provincial capital *Tjebu* where the decorated rock tombs of the governors and their families are located. The bulk of ordinary cemeteries stretches along the edge of the desert and belongs to the rural population living in the villages of the area. The mud-brick superstructures of the tombs have vanished and only subterranean pits, shafts, and chambers are preserved of the architecture. Although it is one of the most comprehensive sets of excavated cemeteries in Egyptian archaeology, the record is biased. The excavators concentrated their efforts on intact tombs whose owners were buried with objects that were desirable for museums and donors. Distribution patterns can therefore not be checked against the total number of burials at the site. The focus on equipped tombs may have resulted in the richer (i.e., less poor) segment of the rural community being overrepresented in the excavation reports; or, to the contrary, the excavated tombs belong to mid- to low-ranking individuals whereas richer tombs were of particular interest for tomb robbers, therefore entirely looted, and left aside by the excavator.

The skeletons were sexed whenever possible. Most belong to female and male adults; children are vastly underrepresented, with only 15% of excavated burials. Burial equipment is gender-sensitive although not mechanically gendered (if the results of sexing are correct). Cosmetic vessels, jewelry, and mirrors, for example, were found predominantly, but not exclusively, in female burials. In the funerary community of the Qau region, rank differences were communicated most clearly (rock vs. mud brick tomb) followed by differences of gender and finally age.

The following discussion builds on Dubiel's analysis of the distribution of seals and amulets among the funerary population. The majority of them were found in burials of women and children. The few men equipped with seals and amulets might have been understood as "equal" with women and children perhaps because they had not reached the position of a head of a household in their lifetimes. Women and children wore seals since the late Old Kingdom in conjunction with amulets and beads strung on necklaces,

whereas men wore them on their wrist no earlier than the beginning of the Middle Kingdom when central administration re-emerged. Dubiel (2008: 145) concludes that seals in burials of women and children were understood to function as part of amulets and personal adornment, as opposed to administrative devices when found in male burials. She argues that men did not appropriate a custom previously confined to women and children but rather imitated elite male administrators in a new political climate. This is an example of a “thick description” (Geertz, 1973), in which archaeological, social, and historical contexts are combined to detect cultural dimensions of an object type not visible at the object level.

The imagery of amulets and stamp seals, both their three-dimensional form and the sealing pattern, is fed by a shared iconographic repertoire. Some forms have a counterpart among hieroglyphic signs; others are derived from the local repertoire of votive objects offered in provincial temples (Bussmann, 2010). The designs were further developed over the decades, and new forms, not known from a previous elite context, were added. The images cut into the base of seals gradually dissolved into geometric patterns and floral designs forming the origin of seals in state administration in the Middle Kingdom (Wegner, 2007: 299–361).

These developments are evidence of creative minds. Different from elite-centered notions of civilizations, the rural population is innovative and does not adopt passively the scraps that fall down from High Table. Rather, people outside the core elite draw blithely on available resources, prestigious ones and others, and create new forms. In the case of sealing patterns, inventions in provincial Egypt are the origin of media used later in state-controlled contexts, thus reflecting a bottom-up rather than top-down process.

The meaning of seals, amulets, and votive objects is frequently explained with reference to royal texts and imagery. For example, amulets in the form of a crocodile are interpreted as expressing the hope for rebirth and sexual potency because these meanings are suggested in the royal pyramid texts and the royal books of the netherworld (Dreyer, 1986: 76; Wiese, 1996: 144–145). However, these religious texts might not have been known at all outside the core elite, and it remains difficult to imagine how a 15-year-old mother at Qau would have defined the meaning of the crocodile amulet, why she might have chosen it for protection, or why she was buried with it (local knowledge? color? availability? wordplay? enchantment?).

These explanations are based on the assumption that meaning is inherent in objects. However, meaning is ascribed to objects through practices, and the seals and amulets discussed here form part of practices relating to the body. They were worn on the body during lifetime and populated the dead body in the burial. Dubiel (2008: 71–74), referring to a later papyrus, demonstrates that seals and amulets were used in conjunction with

medical treatment and spells for the protection of mother and child. Fertility, birth, and child-care were life-threatening experiences for ancient Egyptian women and must have dominated much of their thought and physical well-being. Although the danger is marginalized in the written and visual evidence and difficult to grasp archaeologically, a range of texts, paintings, and objects echoes the importance childbirth must have had (Szpakowska, 2008: 23–44; Meskell, 2002: 69–79). Late second-millennium temple scenes of the royal conception and “birth houses,” monumental chapels attached to Egyptian temples of the Roman period, show that childbirth was also increasingly explored as a theological model for kingship.

The papyrus is part of a rich tradition of similar medico-magical texts (Borghouts, 1978). They concentrate on the body and present it as constantly absorbing and secreting substances through which it is embedded in the material world. Leitz (2005: 41–43) argues plausibly that the indigenous distinction between *heka* and *pekheret* in these texts, often translated as (psychological placebo) “magic” and (scientific) “medicine,” rather be understood as oral and material treatment. His interpretation suggests that *heka* and *pekheret* originate in a shared rather than diverging rationale. Both apply knowledge to the body around which scattered ideas, practices, and images are arranged, including seals and amulets.

The so-called Letters to the Dead are a related text corpus and add a social dimension to the discussion. They were written on pots or papyri and placed in the tomb of ancestors or of other kinship members. The texts, as far as we understand them, include prayers for a good birth or complaints to ancestors about siblings violating inheritance arrangements (O’Donoghue, 1999; Donnat, 2002, 2009). Some are written on platters in a circular way, drawing the attention of the reader toward the center where the dead body of an ancestor is depicted (Gardiner and Sethe, 1928: 5–7, 21–22, 26–27, pl. V and IX.1). This arrangement expresses visually the egocentric nature of the Letters to the Dead, similar to medico-magical texts focusing on the body.

The ego is socially the center of these texts and related to persons in his or her close environ. Mother and child, the spirits of ancestors, siblings, neighbors, and heirs are the kinds of persons involved. They are connected to the ego through body fluids or other forms of physical contact. The way of thinking reflected in these texts suits small, close-knit communities such as those, one would imagine, in ancient Egyptian towns and villages. People here know each other. Their lives circle around a limited number of others, and there is little one can do without somebody observing it. The dependency on a few people and a lack of alternatives easily creates a climate of suspicion and malevolence to which magic can be an answer in everyday life. To what extent magical practitioners confirmed or challenged existing order on a local level remains to be investigated.

I prefer to approach these communities through the lens of the body rather than an “individual versus society” model (Strathern, 1996). Agency and the individual in Egyptian archaeology are, with a few exceptions, discussed in elite contexts, whereas those down the social ladder who had limited means for distinction are approached through quantitative analysis in the first place (Parkinson, 1996; Assmann, 1996: 150–153; 259–277; O’Connor, 2000; Vischak, 2006; Smith, 2010: 172–185; Weiss, 2012). To present oneself as a unique individual, such as Egyptian biographies, prayers, names, titles, statues, stelae, and tomb decoration do, is the prerogative of a few. De facto, the individual is an elite object of analysis, the body is not.

Moreover, the term “individual” lacks the physicality dominating life in ancient Egypt. “Body” expresses more clearly the relevance of physical contact for social relationships and the management of life. Health, hygiene, and the aspiration for comfort, for example, govern life in houses and can be a key for interpretation of architecture (Kemp, 2012: 206–207). Practices focusing on the body include others within the close social environment and include spitting, urinating, placing herbs or amulets on the body, licking, swallowing inscribed papyri, and bleeding (Ritner, 1993: 73–110; Pinch, 1994: 76–89).

These practices belong to what I call the *body horizon*. It is the scale that individuals understand as within their reach. The body is the center where the physical and social experiences of proximity and intimacy converge. The rationale of the body horizon is characterized by the orientation of thoughts toward the ego in the center. It is an applied modus juxtaposing available resources in a patchwork that suits the need of the ego.

Recognition of the body horizon impacts upon interpretation of ancient Egypt. The focus on body treatment and ancestor cult make funerary culture an epitome of the body horizon. Funerary literature is, almost by nature, literature of the body horizon. It is one of the most prolific areas of textual production in ancient Egypt and includes texts written on tomb walls, coffins, funerary equipment, and papyri providing the deceased with relevant knowledge for survival in the afterlife (Hornung, 1997; Taylor, 2010). Egyptologists of an older generation have dismissed funerary literature as a reflection of muddled minds, others as magical. The distinction between magic and “proper” religion has caused misunderstanding and might be better defined as different contexts of thought. If magic is understood as the stream of thought belonging into the body horizon, then funerary literature may well be defined as magic. In fact, some funerary spells are also used in medico-magical spells (Quack, 1999) or are followed by instructions similar to those in medico-magical texts, both showing the overlap of funerary and magical traditions on a textual level. Different from theology, literature of the body horizon is not concerned with the systematization of thought. As a consequence, the rationale of magical texts is not the sum of individual texts and thoughts expressed in them. Rather, the way texts and ideas are arranged to serve an ego reveals their meaning.

The same applies to the imagery of seals and amulets. It is not the individual image that carries meaning but the way images are, literally, strung together to form a visual repertoire of the body horizon. This frees seals and amulets from being a representation of formalized religion in rural Egypt. People simply united available resources on the body for protection. They may have attributed meaning to things without knowledge of the meaning that Egyptologists reconstruct for individual images on the basis of royal culture. In this sense, a shell can be as “meaningful” as an amulet in the form of a crocodile or a seal with a royal name.

Perhaps one can go a step further from here. I have portrayed the body horizon as something typical of villages. It certainly plays an important role beyond small-scale communities, but I imagine the village as a context where it is particularly overt. Kemp (2012: 20) argues that the pharaonic mindset has never ceased to operate within the village horizon. Similarly, Lehner (2000) sees the household as the social model pervading the organization of life in Egypt. If funerary culture is understood as an epitome of the body horizon typical of life in small-scale communities, these comments contribute to explaining why funerary culture has become so dominant in ancient Egypt. I return to this point in the following section.

Great and Little Traditions

I have paid little attention to diachronic change so far. However, for the Egyptian archaeologist, chronological variability is a major axis for arranging differences in the evidence that afford explanation of something previously not recognized or taken for granted. As such, it is similar to the importance of cultural variability for social anthropologists. Egyptian temples are a good case in point. Excavations since the 1970s show that temples developed only over time into the monumental structures that archaeologists had previously recognized. Kemp (2006: 111–135) framed Egyptian temple development with reference to a model proposed by social anthropologist Robert Redfield. A wider discussion of the model brings together some of the thoughts developed earlier and reveals the potential and difficulties arising from interdisciplinary borrowing.

Redfield (1956) observed Great and Little Traditions among the 1930s peasants of Mexico. He argued that what he also calls “high and low culture,” “classic and folk culture,” “learned and popular tradition,” and “hierarchic and lay culture” were constantly transformed into each other through exchange among people. His student McKim Marriott (1955) called the diachronic absorption of local elements by Great Traditions “universalization” and the translation of elements of the Great Tradition into

local contexts “parochialization.” Dumont and Pocock (1957*a*, 1957*b*, 1959) criticized the assumption that villagers perceive local religion as one unified field organized along the same principles of belief as those in Great Tradition. Tambiah (1970) and Goody (1986: 22–32, with ancient Egyptian example) argued that writing can lead to the accumulation of conflicting traditions over time and result in the Great Tradition becoming ambiguous. Stewart (1991) introduced the nature of institutions maintaining traditions. He claimed that the Orthodox Church in modern Greece would accept alien elements as long as its core tenets were not threatened. Outside analyzers would identify pagan survivals in a syncretized religion in which practitioners see the various elements of their belief system cohering sufficiently on a synchronic level. Little Traditions, he says, are characterized by personal experience, local settings, and individual events presented in oral narratives lost in the historical record. He points out that practices of high-status, urban groups could be at variance with the Great Tradition, and he thus distinguishes between tradition and how people use it.

Redfield’s terminology was adopted in ancient world studies, but the subsequent discussions in anthropology were not fully recognized. Redfield was a professor of anthropology in Chicago until 1958. He might have met in person Assyriologist Leo Oppenheim who had fled Nazi Austria and, in Chicago, established close relationships with the anthropology department. Oppenheim (1964: 12, 22) argued that the stream of written tradition as reflected in learned literature needed to be set against noncanonical writings, such as letters. His argument reads like a first remote echo of Redfield’s model, and his book was widely received among Egyptologists whose writings it may have informed.

Kemp (2006: 111–112) emphasizes that high cultures across the world are stylistically distinctive, originate in courts, and succumb folk culture. Folk culture, in contrast, often remains unchanged and can oppose high culture. Kemp is one of the few Egyptologists who give empirical examples of Little Traditions and remarks that they usually surface in the archaeological record only after having transformed in the patronizing channels of high culture. Trigger (2003: 542–543) maintains that only the ruling classes are innovative. Ordinary people, he assumes, would tend to reproduce passively the little harmonized customs of more ancient times, absorbing only from time to time elite innovations. Maisels (1999: 354–359) argues that Great Traditions are a corollary of social evolution and legitimated across society by virtue of universalization and parochialization. He uses the Egyptian myth of the Ennead of Heliopolis as an example but does not explain how it reflects these processes. Assmann (1991: 16–31) models culture in a dualistic framework and equates Egypt’s Great Tradition, the essence of culture, with “memory.” He sees it as the fixed, intentional, explicit, and exceptional; conveying messages; the basis for identity construction in Egypt as reflected in the

hieroglyphic script and stone monuments, especially tombs; and object of the hermeneutic approach of philology and art history. “Use,” in contrast, is a synonym of Little Traditions: the implicit, fluid, and perishable; manifest in unintentional remains of a strictly functional nature; scaled for the human body; reflected in the hieratic script and mud brick architecture; and object of archaeology. Baines (1997: 225–226) sees temples as “guardians” of Great Tradition, which was the concern, however, only of the elite who had access to temples. Richards (1999: 90) equates Great Tradition with state cult and Little Traditions with domestic religion. Wegner (2010: 119) defines kingship as the essence of Egypt’s Great Tradition. Frankfurter (1998: 34, 87–98; see also Dijkstra, 2008: 1–42) focuses on the institutional transformation of local cults from pharaonic into Christian times. He acknowledges interaction between Great and Little Traditions, the former being institutionally manifested in national temples, the latter in local shrines. Quack (2008) argues that geographical inscriptions preserved on Ptolemaic and Roman temple walls and in ritual manuals are part of Egypt’s late, pre-Christian Great Tradition. However, he is reluctant to define the integration of local traditions with central theology—by analogy with India—as “sanskritization” because he sees Egypt as more homogeneous.

This review shows that the model does not translate unequivocally into the Egyptian evidence. Some arguments, such as the passiveness of ordinary people and the self-referential nature of elite culture, have already been discussed in earlier sections of this article. Most Egyptologists take the systemic view of the outside analyzer and give little thought as to how Little Traditions can be retrieved from the record as a context for Great Traditions. Great Traditions tend to be presented as a well-integrated whole and are interpreted as a reflection of power. The difference between people, objects, and ideas is not clearly articulated, thus overlooking that both elites and other social groups interacted with Great and Little Traditions even if in different ways. The static opposition bolsters a view on ancient Egypt as a disconnected society of rulers and a ruled workforce. It lacks a dynamic element that would explain diachronic change other than top-down colonization or bottom-up appropriation. Tradition is equated with people rather than understood as a resource for individuals to make deliberate use of.

Those positions focusing on temple cult come closest to the anthropological origin of the model and deserve further explanation. Monumental stone temples for gods and goddesses were built from the Middle Kingdom onward until the Roman period (ca. 2050 BCE–395 AD; Arnold, 1992; Wilkinson, 2000). Their decoration usually shows the interaction between kings and deities in daily and festival rituals. Documentary evidence reveals that this is a theological interpretation of practices conducted, in reality, by priests in front of a divine statue. The relevance of the temple cult is evident from the accompanying texts. They allude to the Horus and Osiris myth, Egypt’s national myth of

royal succession. The texts interpret temple ritual as the constant re-establishment of the cosmos by the king: the king returns the robbed eye of Horus to the gods and, in return, is handed over kingship by the gods. Temple cult is, therefore, a permanent explanation of the relevance of kingship for keeping the cosmos alive. The integration of temple, cult, and kingship is exclusive to the sociopolitical core and represents Egypt's Great Tradition from the Middle Kingdom onward.

Excavations over the past four decades have brought to light the forerunners of monumental temples dating to the beginning of Dynastic Egypt in the late fourth millennium (Dreyer, 1986; Busseman, 2010). Descending the stratigraphy layer by layer and moving backward in time, references to kingship become fewer and fewer. The earliest temples are undecorated mud brick shrines nestling in provincial settlements side by side with the houses of the inhabitants. They are crammed with votive objects often made of faience, rarely of prestigious materials, and sometimes even simple stone pebbles were used to approach the local deity. No inscriptions are preserved on the votive objects to tell us what people might have prayed for. However, the iconographic repertoire of the third millennium votive objects overlaps strongly with the imagery of seals and amulets discussed earlier. For this reason, I suggest that the concerns were similar and centered on issues of the close social environ. The early shrines of Egypt are institutions of the body horizon on a community level. They breathe the spirit of intimacy, whereas kingship and theology are far away. Local cosmoses may have been hierarchical and formalized but not necessarily based on royal models. The diversity encountered in early local shrines is a reflection of Egypt's Little Traditions.

During the third millennium, local shrines were gradually incorporated into Egyptian kingship. From the early second millennium onward, local gods were displayed in temple decoration crowning the king who stylized himself as son of the local deity. The local deity was thus universalized, while kingship was parochialized. Whenever kingship held sway in a temple, popular religion was pushed to the periphery of the temples where votive objects were discovered (Pinch, 1993). The increasing exclusion from temples might have prompted a stronger focus on domestic religion and the erection of private chapels (Bomann, 1991). The architecture of chapels and tombs of some high officials in the late second millennium was modeled on temple plans, thus demonstrating that the temple had become a dominant template worth being copied by nonroyals. In the first millennium, temples became "cultural stores" (Assmann, 1992*b*), similar to the palace archives of Neoassyrian kings. Their decoration and inscriptions absorbed a diverse range of traditions and presented them within the framework of royal temple cult. By this time, bronze figurines of deities as displayed in temple iconography were used as votive offerings (Roeder, 1937), and the names of deities featured regularly in private names (Ranke, 1952: 243–248). The transformation of shrines from local to royal institutions was

paralleled by a process of urbanization, and local temples emerged as the ideological and administrative interfaces between towns and the crown (Bussmann, 2014).

The observations may suffice to glean some insights of wider anthropological and archaeological interest. Archaeological stratigraphy reveals on the ground the growing scale of an institution and the diachronic relationship of Great and Little Traditions. Egypt's Great Tradition of the second and first millennia is an exclusive, formalized version of third-millennium Little Traditions and, in this form, was appropriated by and spread across social groups outside the core elite. Elite culture, the focus of cross-cultural comparison, needs to be seen as part of this continued up- and down-scaling of ideas and practices through time.

Chronological change is also pivotal for approaching the implicit dimensions of Egyptian culture. The growing number of individual prayers to deities after the third millennium and the display on stelae of individuals adoring a deity, especially in the later second millennium, is often seen as a reflection of "personal piety" (Luiselli, 2011: 1–13). Interpretation of the term is debated among Egyptologists, but the general understanding is that people had developed a closer relationship to the gods in the later second millennium than in earlier periods (Weiss, 2012). As seen earlier, however, archaeology tells a different story. People are gradually excluded from access to the gods. The change of media in which Egyptian society communicates reflects, I suggest, that the relationship with deities has become controversial for people. People start to materialize in objects, images, or writing what matters to them, in this case the dissociated relationship with gods. Therefore, breaks in the diachronic record indicate that something formerly belonging to the sphere of the implicit changed its status toward explicit knowledge.

A greater focus on cultural templates, the frameworks in which themes surface, is fertile also for comparison within and among societies. The preceding discussion demonstrates that the integration of temple, cult, and kingship is Egypt's Great Tradition during the second and first millennium. In the third millennium, Great Tradition is modeled on a funerary template. Pyramids (i.e., the royal tombs) epitomize kingship, and the royal funerary cult in the pyramids drives the economic integration of the country. The decoration of Old Kingdom pyramids is an expanded version of nonroyal funerary iconography and has little to do with temple cult and the maintenance of cosmos. I suggest that the choice of the funerary mode for communication of early pharaonic kingship is due to the village nature of Egyptian society. Initially, pharaonic Egypt is not an urban civilization such as Mesopotamia (Postgate, 1994). Third-millennium city states in Babylonia are characterized by large temples performing a function similar to the royal funerary cult in contemporaneous Egypt. Elite culture in Egypt of this period is dominated by the funerary modus and transformed only gradually to temple-based templates typical of urban settings.

Conclusion

Ancient Egypt is an early civilization, but one in which the small scale prevails. Pharaonic society is thick and cohesive. Physical contact and face-to-face communication create the relevant social bonds. The experience of physical and social intimacy, the ego-centered body horizon typical of village life, is the beating heart of Egyptian culture. It is a breeding milieu digesting Great Tradition as much as feeding it. Funerary culture may have been so dominant among Egyptian elites—ordinary Egyptians had comparatively simple burials—because pharaonic society, when developing its monumental tradition in the late fourth and early third millennia, was still village minded. With growing urbanism in the second millennium, funerary templates were increasingly paralleled by temple templates reflecting the transition to an urban, temple-based society.

The nature of pharaonic society reveals itself in change. This is why a diachronic approach is not just an alternative route into ancient Egypt but key for an anthropological inquiry. Temporality, understood in archaeological terms as longevity in stratigraphic sequences, has been presented herein as a lens for exploring the depth to which kingship penetrated Egyptian society. Moreover, diachronic change helps phenomena surface in the record that might previously have been implicit. Once they became controversial, they changed into an objectified, explicit status and were ready for control, manipulation, and other responses. The example discussed refers to Egyptian “personal piety” as an expression of distance rather than closeness to the gods. In this respect, anthropological discussions of materiality (Miller, 2005) can be beneficially developed in the diachronic framework of Egyptian archaeology.

There are different directions that future research can take. The lower stratum of pharaonic society is still underexplored and deserves fresh data from the field. Filling this gap is relevant because the view from the periphery reveals best how the sociocultural core is constructed. The rural nature of ancient Egyptian society is widely recognized but not fully factored in as a catalyst to interpret high culture. Few attempts have been made at using direct historical analogies from modern rural Egypt to develop a possible scenario of the Egyptian past (Eyre, 1999). References to ancient Egyptian “survivals” tend to be undertheorized. When projected back into the past, they are based on simple copy-paste operations that overlook changing cultural, social, and environmental frameworks (Blackman, 2000[1927]). A discussion of direct historical analogies involves cross-cultural comparison, an area in which the lower social groups of ancient Egypt have not yet received full appreciation. Archaeological ethnography, ethnoarchaeology, and experimental archaeology constitute a further field of immediate overlap between archaeologists and social anthropologists.

From a comparative perspective, a stronger emphasis could be placed on templates, designs, and the material dimension of culture, which tend to be stripped off to access the “content.” A reconsideration of forms means that one would not explore what sacred kingship entails but how the frameworks of representation (e.g., funerary or temple templates) govern what can be said about kingship; not the rules of kinship (matrilineal, patrilineal) but how communication of kinship varies in different social, historical, and cultural contexts; not what a god is in ancient Egypt but how the divine can surface within the symbolic forms and material world of Egyptian society. In a similar vein, Boivin (2008: 1–81) has criticized the preference of academics for superorganic ideas at the expense of tangible surfaces as a result of the long, idealistic tradition in the West. These perspectives offer a good basis for a cross-cultural comparison of materiality.

Heritage studies is another promising field for increased collaboration, including with conservation studies (Hassan et al., 2009; Quirke et al., forthcoming). The Arab Spring might offer opportunities for developing new forms of archaeological practice in Egypt and open discussion of what in the past matters to Egyptians today and how it should be handled. This might also stimulate research on the Egyptian past from after the Pharaohs through medieval times until today, delineating traditions, appropriations, and meanings during the “missing millennium” (el-Daly, 2005).

Anthropology encourages us to sympathize with the local. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that pharaonic Egypt, despite its monumental grandeur, looks essentially small scale when viewed from an anthropological perspective. Others will describe ancient Egypt as literate, African, or polytheistic. None of the definitions explains everything. They are nevertheless important because they help arrange brittle data within meaningful visions of ancient Egypt. The vision proposed here recognizes civilizational achievements, such as kingship, administration, literature, and the monumental discourse, as distinguishing Egypt from all earlier societies. However, the main interest is in the people who were entangled in these ideas, the way they consumed and produced them, and what their world may have meant to them rather than to us. This is different from empathy alone claiming false accessibility to the view of the indigenous. It means, however, to enter a dialogue at eye level with people whose lives were as complex as ours.

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