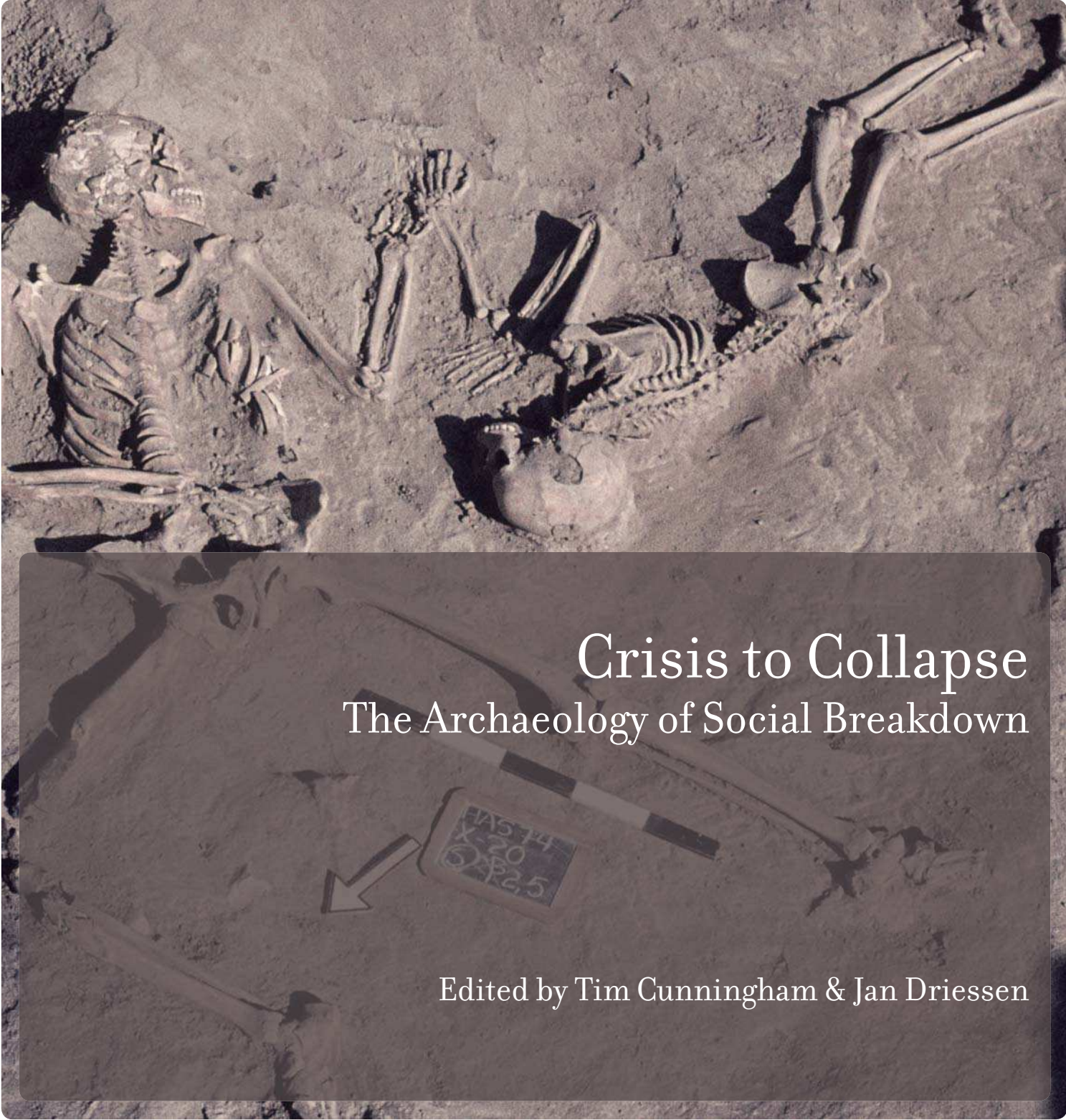


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A photograph of an archaeological excavation site showing several human skeletons in various positions, some with their heads covered by large, rounded objects. A measuring tape and a small label with handwritten text are visible in the foreground.

Crisis to Collapse The Archaeology of Social Breakdown

Edited by Tim Cunningham & Jan Driessen

14. Temporary and Permanent

Status Race and the Mechanism of Change in a Complex Civilisation: Ancient Egypt in between 2900 and 2120 BC¹

Miroslav Bárta

When looking at the history of a distant past, there are in principle two ways to view it. One can understand the past as a single continuum which slowly, step by step, changes over time. Or one can complicate the analysis a bit more and look for certain patterns in the progression of history. In archaeology, quite logically, the situation is biased as, more often than not, we lack primary sources of information. The archaeological record is never 'complete' and this is one of the reasons why the projects in the field must continue. Nevertheless, despite all the challenges of dealing with past processes, there is always a fair possibility of arriving at a better understanding of the past, especially when utilising information from recent, multidisciplinary projects in the field.

This brief outline of the history of the third millennium BC in Egypt will reconsider the mechanism of social and state development in the Early Dynastic and Old Kingdom periods. These cover almost one thousand years of human history, dating roughly to the period between 2900 and 2120 BC. Based on standard chronologies of Ancient Egypt, this is a total of eight dynasties:

Archaic Period (2900-2592 BC)

First Dynasty (ca. 2900-2730 BC)

Second Dynasty (ca. 2730-2592 BC)

Old Kingdom (ca. 2592-2120 BC)

Third Dynasty (ca. 2592-2544 BC)

Fourth Dynasty (ca. 2543-2436 BC)

Fifth Dynasty (ca. 2435-2306 BC)

Sixth Dynasty (ca. 2305-2150 BC)

Seventh Dynasty, lasted for only several weeks

Eighth Dynasty (ca. 2150-2120 BC)

(Chronology based on Hornung *et alii* 2006).

During this time period, Ancient Egypt underwent several major development stages, starting with the foundation of the first territorial state in history, the establishment of a very efficient bureaucratic apparatus, the construction of stone built monumental architecture, and the expansion of sophisticated religious concepts and ideology coupled with high material culture.

Yet, to answer a very simple question, namely 'how has all this happened?' requires us to piece together as much archaeological, historical and environmental data as possible.

1. Multiplier Effect and Punctuated Equilibria

What the contemporary archaeology of historical periods in Egypt seems to confront on a daily basis is above all a very simple observation: that on a particular site, things remain 'the same' for a long period of time and then, after this period of rather uneventful development, they rapidly change. The whole social-political system is exposed to a series of vital changes that influence basically every component (subsystem) of the society. At the same time, it is always a series of seemingly unrelated features which undergoes vital transformation (Bárta 2015a).

Take, for instance, Egyptian non-royal tomb development during the Third Dynasty and the very beginning of

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the Fourth Dynasty. The tombs in the Third Dynasty display several common features – mud brick architecture, varying sizes, limited decoration in the chapels, very few (if any) inscriptions, specific burial equipment including many stone vessels, extensive offerings, *etc.* Then, seemingly all of sudden, the very same category of tombs at the beginning of the Fourth Dynasty displays significant changes in virtually all aspects associated with tomb development. The size of the tombs becomes standardised, they are built of limestone, offering chapels become limited, the decoration becomes standardised and so does also the substructure, consisting of a shaft and a single burial chamber. Symbolic prayers – the so-called *hete-di-nisut* formula – were invented and became an indispensable part of the inscriptions within the tomb's chapel and new classes of pottery are introduced to cut the costs of the funerary offerings, cult and burial equipment. Full-size stone vessels disappear almost completely (Bárta 1995). This process, reflected through the specific category of tombs, was only a consequence of a much broader development within society; tombs and cemeteries were only mirroring various aspects of social, political, economic, administrative and religious development and changes within the society of the period (Baines & Lacovara 2002; Ikram & Dodson 2008; Bárta 2012, with references).

When confronted with such significant changes, one unavoidably starts to be challenged with thoughts such as: was this just a chance development or is this a micro-level recognition of something that has a potential to be related to a more general trend? The next step in the inquiry may then be: is this principle a single-episode, or can further investigation discover similar critical events in the history of the examined period (such as the Archaic Period or the Old Kingdom)? In fact, there is a longer history of such an inquiry. For our purposes we will need to go back in time to 1972.

In that year, Steven J. Gould and Niels Eldredge published their seminal study addressing the phenomenon of punctuated equilibria as related to evolutionary biology (Eldredge & Gould 1972). For us, it is not the whole theory of living organisms that is of concern, but two underlying concepts which may be of high significance when dealing with human-agency based social systems. Gould and Eldredge suggested that once species appear in the fossil record they will become stable, showing little evolutionary change for most of their geological history. This state is called *stasis*. When significant evolutionary change occurs, it is generally restricted to rare and geologically rapid events of branching speciation (which is called cladogenesis). For us, as archaeologists, is of interest that instead of smooth, slow and continuous Darwinian evolution, the authors suppose that change happens in the form of rapid events. The new state of things enjoys again a prolonged period of *stasis* (uneventful development) until a new 'leap' (or multiplier effect period, see below) takes place. The basic principles of this theory have been tested widely in the social sciences, humanities and even in international politics, so this is far from the sole attempt to evaluate the usability of Eldredge and Gould's approach (Diehl 1998; Gould 2002). Interestingly, only very recently the very same principle has been identified in economy. The authors of a study published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences in 2011 declare that even financial markets are exposed to the process of 'switching' – events causing abrupt changes in the prices of individual commodities – and that there are non-linear characteristics inherent in these processes (Preis *et alii* 2011).

Now the question is how do such processes work? For this issue we can find inspiration in the work of the British prehistorian Colin Renfrew who coined the concept of the 'multiplier effect' (Renfrew 1972). Renfrew understood the 'multiplier effect' as a very quick process in which smaller and originally independent changes (that taken in isolation would have no far-reaching impact) happen simultaneously and have a combined – or 'multiplied' – effect which leads to thorough and rapid changes within the society in most of its aspects, such as state administration, economy, social hierarchy, architecture, arts, or religious concepts (Renfrew 1972: 37). Therefore, identification of the multiplier effect periods can be used to identify the most interesting and in fact fundamental turning points in the history of the examined society. These brief periods in which all-components of the society are subjected to profound changes may be used to achieve a finer and clearer structure of the flow of history in time, and her segmentation into smaller meaningful units separated by periods of *stasis*.

Looking at these two theories together, it may be useful to test the concept of punctuated equilibria in archaeology coupled with the multiplier effect, which will help to understand the proper mechanism of the punctuated moments in history (for a detailed outline for the Old Kingdom see Bárta 2015a).

Before we enter the historical periods of Ancient Egyptian history, it is important to note that Alice Stevenson, in her recent review of the prehistory of Egypt, decided not to follow the traditional pattern of defining cultures and their individual stages, but applied a differentiated chronology of the prehistoric periods based on a Bayesian

analysis of radiocarbon data (Stevenson 2016). She thus proposes five significantly different – yet overlapping – clusters. Each can be characterised by different attributes based on the evolving complexity of society in the Nile valley. Her proposed stages are as follows:

(1) Neolithic/Badarian (*ca.* 4400-3800 BC): characterised by the emergence of a new concept of place through agropastoralist activities;

(2) Naqada IA-IIB (*ca.* 3800/3750(?)-3450 BC): a period of experimentation related to the construction of slowly emerging local communities and evolution of elite cosmologies;

(3) Naqada IIC-D (*ca.* 3450-3325 BC): defined by the rapid growth of social networks and the invention of new means of power and dominance, as well as evidence for the incipient appearance of the concept of the kingship;

(4) Naqada IIIA-B (*ca.* 3325-3085 BC): characterised by the processes of elite growth, centralisation, and the explicit formulation of the royal ideology, and even the formation of the institution of the king (compare Josephson & Dreyer 2015);

(5) Naqada IIIC/First Dynasty (*ca.* 3085-2900 BC): characterised by a profound shift in the scale and nature of royal power.

Stevenson rightly posits that each of these phases can be described by using different characteristics consisting of specific sets of strategies, and different sources of archaeological and iconographic evidence related to power, presentation, the performance of domination and superiority, and, eventually, varying social complexity. To some extent, thus, her approach resembles the punctuated equilibria and multiplier effect concepts.

With the arrival of historical sources, despite their being meagre at the beginning, we can enjoy the fact that monuments, historical events, unique visual arts and 3D artefacts and natural phenomena, as well as written sources as such can be linked with specific historical persons of rulers, unlike in prehistory. As a consequence, it is often tacitly supposed that certain kings, or specific characteristics of their rules can thus be seen as indicators of the changed character of the time (compare Wilkinson 1999; Shaw 2000). Ancient Egyptian history therefore also appears to display the traits that we shall expect if the punctuated theory coupled with the multiplier effect should be operational.

The connection between concrete history, different sorts of evidence and historical individuals allows us to use the reigns of most prominent rulers to establish benchmarks in time for changes in society as a whole. These processes were always complex and were based on deep changes in most of the components of the society. It is thus possible to identify the most important turning points in Egyptian history during which the society was exposed to complex changes. These can then in turn be used to chart the punctuated trajectory of Egyptian history. These periods were always characterised by a multiplier effect which helps to identify the individual stages or ‘leap’ moments in the third millennium BC history.

We will see shortly that with the major punctuated equilibria periods were distributed irregularly in time, it may be observed that the time span between the earlier two periods is longer than the span between the later periods. At the same time one can notice that the final period of the Old Kingdom is characterised above all by the disappearance of the periods of uneventful development or *stasis*. This specific observation may be, in fact, one of the most important characteristics of the closing periods immediately preceding the time of major turbulence and disproportionate loss of complexity in a given society. Indeed, such a loss of complexity of the system is so big that it ‘kills’ the performance and effectiveness of most of the institutions of the state.

At the same time, the observation that most of the punctuated equilibria periods coincide with the beginning of a new dynasty (Period 1 – Narmer, Period 3 – Djoser, Period 4 – Sneferu, Period 5 – late Fourth, early Fifth dynasties) may indicate that the Ancient Egyptian historians were well aware of the fact that the outset of a new dynasty in principle heralded a new era. This feature becomes very clear at the transition between the Second and Third Dynasties. There was no significant change of kinship between the dynasties – Khasekhemwy, the last king of the Second Dynasty was father of Djoser, first king of the Third Dynasty. Djoser, as far as we know, acknowledged fully the testimony of his father, and yet, his reign was considered as one of the most important turning points in Egyptian history. However, the claim that every dynasty marked a significant new beginning would be far from reality.

Let us now review the principal characteristics of the punctuated equilibria periods. It will be shown that all of these periods were characterised by far-reaching changes affecting the principal components of the society – social

stratification, administration, religion, ideology, monumental architecture and arts in general and the world of artefactual culture.

2. Overview of the Punctuated Equilibria Periods

Period 1 – beginning of the First Dynasty around 2900 BC. During this stage the unified Ancient Egyptian territorial state came into being. At its top stood the king representing the institutionalised idea of kingship, surrounded by an elite which consisted mostly of the members of his family. The first king of this unified state was called Narmer, who established a new residential centre of administration in already existing Memphis and initiated the development of the administrative system of the state based on professional institutions and representatives thereof (**Fig. 14.1**). The country's population began to be formally taxed, which is attested by the written sources. The institution of sacred kingship became fully established and was symbolised, above all, by exclusive iconography and distinct burial facilities. This state of affairs remained stable for approximately 100 years, before the next punctuated period emerged (for the period see Emery 1962; Wilkinson 1999).

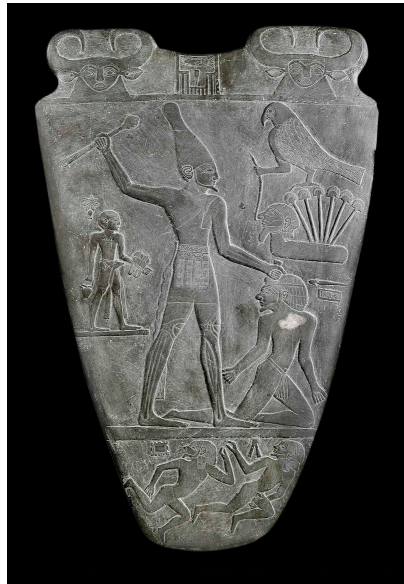


Fig. 14.1. RECTO OF THE FAMOUS NARMER PALETTE SHOWING THE KING SMITING THE ENEMY (EGYPTIAN MUSEUM, CAIRO, PHOTO S. VANNINI & LABORATORIOROSSO)

Period 2 – reign of king Den in the middle of the First Dynasty, around 2800 BC (**Fig. 14.2**). The growing complexity of the state made this king substantially review all major aspects of the state administration. The immediate outcome was unification of the administration of the king's household and increased complexity of individual state departments. Den was probably the king who founded the central institution of the 'House of the king' – *per nisut* – which was the central redistributive institution in the state. One of the most important components of this institution was the treasury responsible for the collection of the taxes. This in turn led to a significant rise of the number of administrators employed by the state, as reflected by the newly developing large cemeteries. Den also completely changed the philosophy of the royal tomb, which started to be constructed in a way that enabled it to be completed before the actual death of the king. Den also terminated a growing complex society in Lower Nubia that represented a major threat to the developing Egyptian state. In the northeast, in the area of what is today southern Levant, Den closed Egyptian emporia that formerly organised foreign Egyptian exchange trade with neighbouring regions. On a religious level, king Den is the first known ruler who started to use the name of 'King of Upper and Lower Egypt' implying that it was only during his reign that the country was fully united. In accordance with this, the first iconographic evidence for the combined crown of Upper and Lower Egypt is also attested (Emery 1938; Godron 1990; Wilkinson 1999).



Fig. 14.2. LABEL OF KING DEN IN A TYPICAL PROTOTYPICAL ATTITUDE OF AN EGYPTIAN KING (BRITISH MUSEUM, LONDON, PHOTO M. BÁRTA)

Period 3 – reign of king Djoser, beginning of the Third Dynasty, around 2590 BC. Djoser is well-known for setting several new standards within the society (Baud 2002). He ordered to build the first-ever stone mortuary complex in Saqqara (**Fig. 14.3**). To some degree he could profit from the evolving tradition of the late Second Dynasty initiated by his father Khasekhemwy who used stone extensively during the construction of his tomb at Abydos (limestone) and a sanctuary in Hierakonpolis (red granite). During Djoser's reign, the development of the ancient Egyptian writing system reached a new level as it started to be able to record grammatical sentences. This is in marked contrast to the preceding period during which written messages were limited to the enumeration of titles of officials or offerings of objects (Köhler & Jones 2009). The burial stela of Merka may be used as the most sophisticated example of all inscriptions for officials at this time (Regulski 2010). From Djoser's reign onward, decorated tombs make more frequent appearance (Quibell 1913; Bárta *et alii* 2010). The state is able now to organise and finance large expeditions abroad to provide otherwise inaccessible commodities such as copper or timber.



Fig. 14.3. VIEW OF THE PYRAMID COMPLEX OF DJOSER – FIRST IN EGYPTIAN HISTORY BUILT COMPLETELY OUT OF STONE, SAQQARA (PHOTO M. BÁRTA)

Period 4 – reign of Sneferu which started around 2540 BC. Now we can see that the distance between the individual periods of change is becoming shorter, in this case being less than fifty years. The prime source for the history of the first five dynasties, the so-called Palermo Stone, shows that the state experienced another major reconstitution. This was represented by markedly more detailed record keeping, the growth of the offices of the state and the disappearance of the regular ‘following of Horus’. This ‘following of Horus’ meant that the king with his court travelled regularly throughout the country during the first three dynasties to execute power, decide juridical cases and to collect taxes (Wilkinson 2000: 90-91).

From the early Fourth Dynasty onwards, the king seems to pursue a more appropriate policy (given the growing complexity of the state administration) and reside in a permanent residence in Memphis located to the east of what is nowadays the pyramid field of Abusir and Saqqara, about 30 km south of Cairo, to the west of the river Nile. Moreover, Sneferu instigated a completely new policy directed towards state (*i.e.* king) sponsored building works. The fact that the state machine incorporated a relatively high number of officials and administrators placed pressure on the resources of the state. Therefore Sneferu oversaw a marked standardisation of the non-royal tombs in terms of their size. At the same time, these circumstances probably contributed to major changes in the artefactual culture of the period, with an emphasis on economisation. Instead of expensive and laborious stone vessels for the cult and burial equipment of the tombs, pottery called Meidum ware starts to be produced massively. This pottery – mainly red polished and high-quality fired bowls – quickly replaced the original stone vessels. They were accompanied by the ‘invention’ of miniature bowls and plates that replaced real vessels and real portions of offerings in the mortuary cults of individual members of the elite of the day. Last but not least, the decoration of cult chapels begins to include offering formulas (texts with prayers for regular and plentiful offerings and guaranteed afterlife for the buried individual), which represent yet another major token of the general tendency towards economisation and increased symbolism connected with mortuary cults (Barta 1968; Bárta 1995; Alexanian & Seidlmayer 2000) (**Fig. 14.4**).



Fig. 14.4. MINIATURE PLATES AND BOWLS, ONE OF THE MAJOR INNOVATIONS IN THE REIGN OF SNEFERU LEADING TO THE ECONOMISATION OF THE MORTUARY CULTS (EXCAVATIONS OF THE CZECH INSTITUTE OF EGYPTOLOGY IN ABUSIR, MASTABA OF QUEEN-MOTHER KHENTKAUS (III), PHOTO M. FROUZ, ARCHIVE OF THE CZECH INSTITUTE OF EGYPTOLOGY)

Sneferu also paid close attention to the provinces, where he did everything to demonstrate his supremacy and place a firm grip on the country. In order to reach this goal, he built small symbolic pyramids which were meant to communicate his permanent yet highly symbolic royal presence in areas which had the highest political and economic importance for the king. These included sites which are nowadays known as Elephantine, Edfu, Hierakonpolis, Naqada, Abydos, Zawiyet el-Meitin, Seila and Abu Rawash. All of them without exception were either ancient centres of religious or political importance such as, for instance, Abydos – the cemetery of predynastic and Early Dynastic kings, Hierakonpolis – ancient cult centre of the god Horus (one of the most important deities of the king and his divine protector), Zawiyet el-Meitin – located within one of the agriculturally most prominent areas, or Sila – marking one of the principal entryways into Faiyum oasis arriving from the Nile valley (Dreyer &

Kaiser 1980; Bárta 2005a; Bock 2006; Marouard & Papazian 2012).

In the realm of monumental architecture, the pyramid complexes of Sneferu mark another milestone in the development of the royal tomb. They bear an explicit testimony to the fact that the solar religion took on supremacy in his time. This can be recognised in the orientation of his complexes. He built three in total (one in Meidum and two in Dahshur) for reasons that lie beyond the scope of this article. What can be said, however, is that all of them were orientated in an east-west direction and emphasised the role of the sun in the contemporary religion. It is certainly not by chance that his son, king Khufu (who initiated the grandiose cemetery on the Giza plateau) was called god, and his son Radjedef (buried in Abu Rawash) introduced to the royal titulary the name ‘son of (the solar god) Ra’. Elaborate biographic inscriptions made their appearance in tombs dating to the reign of Sneferu. They demonstrate another major leap in both the sophistication of the writing system and the growth in complexity of state administration of the period (Baud 2005).

Period 5 – represents the transition from the Fourth to the Fifth Dynasty, about half a century after the death of Sneferu. In the meantime the monumental pyramid complexes built by Khufu, Khafra and Menkaura in Giza and the Fourth Dynasty reached an apogee. The closing part of the Fourth Dynasty was heavily influenced by the fact that there was no ultimate successor to the throne after the death of Menkaura. Eventually Shepseskaf became the last king of the Fourth Dynasty around 2440 BC, and was succeeded by his brother Userkaf. Together they reigned about ten years (Bárta 2013; for the period of the Fifth Dynasty as such see Verner 2014) (**Fig. 14.5**).



Fig. 14.5. THE PARTICULAR FORM OF THE TOMB OF SHEPSESKAF RESEMBLING A MASTABA, SOUTH SAQQARA (PHOTO M. BÁRTA)

The already mentioned Palermo Stone makes a change precisely where the Fourth Dynasty stops. The Fifth Dynasty starts on the *verso*. Also the nature of the recorded information changed a great deal. The individual entries are considerably more detailed and focus principally on the lists of pious donations on the part of the kings to divine temples and royal mortuary complexes (Wilkinson 2000: 148).

Simultaneously, it is very easy to discern ground-breaking innovations in the governance of the country. As was shown, the complexity of the state administration had grown in several major leaps. The task of running and administering the country became simply so complex that even the extended family of the king was not capable doing it. Thus it became indispensable to start to engage more and more officials of non-royal origin. These officials in turn reached even the highest steps in the administration of the country, such as the office of the vizier (roughly the equivalent of a prime minister, yet much more powerful) (Strudwick 1985) (**Fig. 14.6**). The statue of an ample Egyptian official rendered as a scribe becomes an icon of the Fifth Dynasty period (Scott 1989; Piacentini 2002). To a large extent, it is only with these developments that the use of the term ‘Egyptian state’ becomes fully justified (Bárta 2013: 163) (**Fig. 14.7**).



Fig. 14.6. A UNIQUE RELIEF SHOWING THE SECOND KING OF THE FIFTH DYNASTY, SAHURA, SEATED AND RECEIVING MEMBERS OF HIS NUMEROUS FAMILY (PHOTO M. FROUZ, ARCHIVE OF THE CZECH INSTITUTE OF EGYPTOLOGY)



Fig. 14.7. SCRIBAL STATUE OF THE OFFICIAL NEFER, REIGN OF NYUSERRA. IT SYMBOLISES THE AUTHORITY AND GROWING POWER OF THE OFFICIALS OF NON-ROYAL ORIGIN OF THE PERIOD (EXCAVATIONS OF THE CZECH INSTITUTE OF EGYPTOLOGY IN ABUSIR, COMPLEX OF NEFER, PHOTO M. FROUZ, ARCHIVE OF THE CZECH INSTITUTE OF EGYPTOLOGY)

During this period of transition, both Shepseskaf and Userkaf (likely sons of Khentkaus (I) buried in Giza) had to compete for their full authority. Shepseskaf chose to return to the heart of the pyramid fields of Abusir and Saqqara and established his eternal residence in South Saqqara. His tomb assumed the shape of a sarcophagus and was located in such a way that when looked at from the northeast, *i.e.* from Memphis, it resembled a rising sun among two pyramids, those of Sneferu in Dahshur. On the other hand, Userkaf located his pyramid to the northeast of Djoser in such a manner that the centre of his pyramid sits on a line created by the centres of the South pyramid of Sneferu and Shepseskaf's tomb. Userkaf, clearly re-establishing political order at the beginning of Fifth Dynasty, chose as his Horus name 'The one who performs Maat' very likely implying his wish to be connected with Sneferu whose Horus name was 'Lord of Maat' (Bárta 2016). Last but not least, from

the wealth of data originating from individual titularies of the officials of the day, we may infer that Userkaf established a specific group of men carrying the title ‘priest of Maat’ who were probably very loyal officials performing Maat on behalf of the king. What this all means, we can only imagine, but it is for sure that Mafia-like structures are not a modern invention.

The royal ideology of the Fifth Dynasty kings underwent significant modifications in terms of strategies and emphasis. Starting with Userkaf, the five kings of the Fifth Dynasty built sun temples which are, in both design and purpose, an entirely new phenomenon. These solar temples were built in a similar fashion as the royal funerary temples and thus consisted of three interconnected parts – valley temple, causeway and the upper/cult temple. Unlike in the royal complexes, there was no pyramid but instead a huge platform on which stood an obelisk, the principal symbol of the solar religion and the sun god Ra. The primary function of these temples was to cement the connection and interdependence of the king and the sun god Ra. In order to achieve this, solar temples were supplied by the decision of the king directly from the residence. The offerings were ‘solarised’ – dedicated to the sun and only after that redistributed into individual mortuary temples of the kings and as payments in kind to individual officials employed by the temples as priests. No less in importance was the fact that it was the king himself who in this specific way promulgated his personal and exclusive role in the solar cult. This was caused by several factors, of which we are only able to identify a few. It is certainly of interest that while the sun temples were built, the high priest of the sun god Ra serving in his principal cult centre in Heliopolis is not attested. At the same time, the underlying concept of maintaining the running of the sun and mortuary temples implied that it was solely the person of the king, and no one else, that had (at least formally) the upper hand in the whole process of the economic cycle control.

During this period we witness a strong tendency towards another symbolic leap in royal ideology, similar to the one experienced during the reign of Sneferu. The pyramid temples became more elaborate and intricate in their decoration and thematic coverage. This stands in sharp contrast with very small size of the pyramids (Verner 2002; El Awady 2009).

Period 6 – is linked with king Nyuserra, who ruled roughly in the middle of the Fifth Dynasty and ascended the throne around 2400 BC, some thirty years after the demise of Userkaf. Nyuserra was, as has emerged recently, one of the most important rulers of the whole Old Kingdom (Bárta 2005b). His reign heralded another series of major innovations or entirely new concepts. In the sphere of administration, Nyuserra introduced the office of the Overseer of Upper Egypt who was responsible for the administration of Upper Egypt. This was undoubtedly an attempt to solve the increasing independence of wealthy officials and their families, particularly in the provinces (Brovarski 2013). Here we have the real origins of what later became widespread universal nepotism (Richards 2002).

In terms of religion, the period witnessed the introduction of the cult of Osiris which was primarily associated with non-royal persons and which was probably a consequence of the proliferation of the non-royal elite, starting at the beginning of the Fifth Dynasty. During Nyuserra’s reign, prominent officials began to gain significantly more influence, power and, as a result, also independence. These officials also demonstrably elaborated the mechanisms which enabled them to maintain their offices, and subsequently pass them onto their family members, essentially making their positions hereditary. This was very important because these offices guaranteed a certain income and status.

The resulting synthesis of these trajectories was the appearance of two essential tomb types. The first type was represented by monumental, multi-roomed and lavishly decorated mastabas, while the second type consisted of relatively poor family tombs. In the family tomb type, many members belonging to the family were buried in a single tomb, often with one central cultic place. Many new themes appear for the first time in the decoration of the non-royal tombs. Both tomb types, though much different in their nature, transmit through their material forms the same concept of inheritance of status and offices in the state administration and at the court. They thus served as major architectural forms to mediate the importance and influence of the patrons – the tomb owners and their families even in the afterlife (Weeks 1994; Bárta 2006; Krejčí 2010) (**Fig. 14.8**). These tombs thus became very important instruments for legitimisation and authorisation to execute certain offices occupied by the surviving members of the particular family.



Fig. 14.8. THE LARGE OFFERING HALL OF THE OFFICIAL MERERUKA, REIGN OF TETI, SAQQARA, WHICH EMBODIES YET AGAIN THE STATUS AND INCREASING INDEPENDENCE OF THE OFFICIALS IN THE SIXTH DYNASTY (PHOTO M. BÁRTA)

It is an important observation that the reign of Nyuserra is at the same time both the peak of Old Kingdom state development and the beginning of its long decline. It is thought-provoking to see that the original positive factors which contributed to the fantasy-captivating rise of the Egyptian state at the beginning of this long development turn into negative ones which start not only to inhibit actual development, but on the whole, to erode the system. To name but a few illustrious factors: the monumental projects, the initiation of certain formal and state-inherent procedures such as the taxation system, major technological innovations, and the growth of the administration. All of them appear to impact in a negative way the state's fitness.

Nyuserra and all the kings following him paid attention to their symbolic presence in the provinces. This can be inferred from the architectural remains in the provinces, which represent the construction of temples and cultic structures (Bussmann 2010). Nyuserra also largely relied on marriage alliances to ensure and support his politics. He expanded and made a common norm the praxis of marrying royal daughters to high officials of the state. This policy was pursued with the belief that marriage alliances would win the king the much needed loyalty of wealthy officials. This policy is attested at least from the time of Userkaf, yet it becomes widespread from the reign of Nyuserra onwards (Bárta & Dulíková 2014).

Finally, we have to mention one major external factor. It is the environmental change that made itself discernible in the time of Nyuserra and had a serious impact on the final stage of the Old Kingdom. What the contemporary sources show is that the climate was becoming dryer and the annual Nile floods were becoming less and less plentiful (Bárta 2015b). This increasing and enduring climate and hydrological instability certainly had, from a long-term perspective and in combination with internal inhibiting factors, very severe impact on the society and state as such.

3. Noble Decline

Following the reign of Nyuserra, the rest of the Fifth and the whole Sixth Dynasty emerge as a period in which one reform attempt to save the state's efficacy and king's exclusive role followed after another (Bárta 2015a). These reforms focused mainly on the administration of the provinces (Kanawati 1980). The deteriorating situation resulted in the fact that Unas, last king of the Fifth Dynasty, decided to decorate the inner walls of his pyramid in Saqqara with the so-called Pyramid texts. These texts were not a unified literary piece of work but

much more a heterogenous collection of different magical spells and religious ideas that served to communicate the exclusivity of the royal office and to guarantee and ensure that the king would reach the afterlife, where he would convene with the Egyptian gods (**Fig. 14.9**).

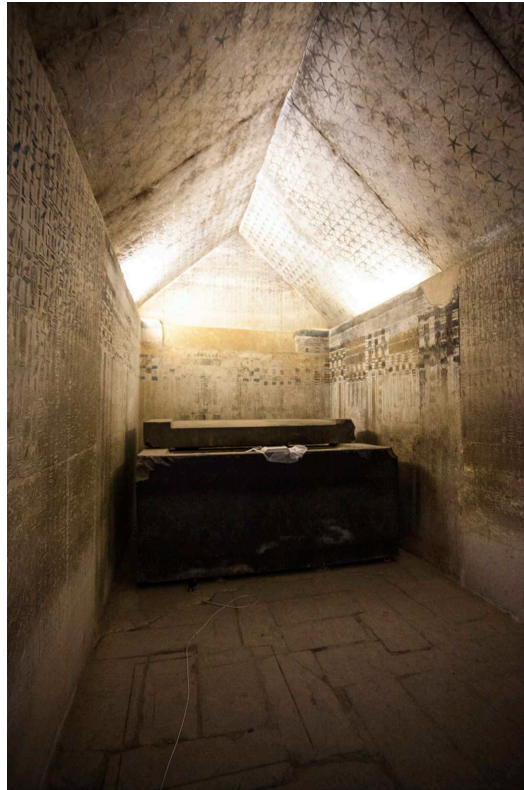


Fig. 14.9. PYRAMID TEXTS DECORATING THE BURIAL CHAMBER OF THE PYRAMID OF UNAS, ANOTHER SHORT-LIVED PRIVILEGE OF THE KING TO EMPHASISE HIS UNIQUE STATUS (PHOTO M. BARTA)

Much later Manethonian tradition has it that his immediate successor, king Teti, the founder of the Sixth Dynasty, was murdered by his own guard (Kanawati 2003). A bit later, king Pepy I uncovered a harem conspiracy. This case was investigated by his loyal official Weni, which we learn from Weni's autobiographic inscription (Piacentini 1990). These isolated historical events illustrate the difference between the degree in which the king was considered divine in nature (according to royal propaganda) and the perception of him as an 'ordinary' mortal person who could even be killed.

The Sixth Dynasty is also the time when families of the local potentates in the provinces become largely independent and infringe upon the royal rights and privileges. Surviving biographic inscriptions of the period attest clearly to this fact such as those preserved, for instance, on the walls of some of the Aswan tomb in Qubbit el-Hawa or the family of the famous Weni from Abydos (Kloth 2002; Richards 2002).

A classic example of a powerful family is represented by the official Khui, and his wife, Nebet. This pair residing in Abydos during the reign of Pepy I had several children, including two who later became known as Ankhenesmeryra /Ankhenespepy I and II because they were married to king Pepy I. Indeed, from now on, the king is not only marrying his daughters out of the family, but also seals his political alliances by marrying the daughters of powerful officials (for details on the queens and the Abydos family, see Baud 1999: 426-429, 629-631; Callender 2011: 249-271) (**Fig. 14.10**).



Fig. 14.10. SMALL PYRAMID COMPLEXES OF THE QUEENS OF PEPI I, SOUTH SAQQARA. THEY ATTEST TO THE FACT THAT ORIGINALLY ROYAL PRIVILEGES WERE STEP BY STEP ABSORBED BY THE ELITE MEMBERS OF THE SOCIETY (PHOTO M. BÁRTA)

This connection to the ruling family in the closing part of the Sixth Dynasty resulted in the dominance of Abydos and the family of Khui during the Eighth Dynasty. What happened was that after the death of the last pharaoh of the Sixth Dynasty, Pepy II, Egypt entered a very unstable situation, and in fact experienced another ‘leap’ or punctuated period. This time, however, it was a leap resulting in a sudden loss of a large part of the complexity of the system. This was the consequence of two major factors. The first factor was the long decline of the centralised state in most of its spheres of former dominance. The second, more specific factor was a consequence of the long reign of Pepy II, which resulted in many living sons by different mothers, representing in fact numerous contenders for the throne. Thus, the Seventh Dynasty lasted only for weeks or months at best when the throne was at stake. The loss of complexity is best visible through the prism of the doubted legitimacy of the succession of rule, the virtual disappearance of the administrators from the archaeological and written record (especially in the vicinity of the capital), and the cessation of the tradition of building royal mortuary complexes in the typical Old Kingdom style.

The closing part of the Old Kingdom, the Eighth Dynasty, lasted less than thirty years. Not surprisingly, many rulers made appearances for a limited period (Papazian 2015). Some of them can be directly linked to the Sixth Dynasty and Pepy II. At least some of them also tried to maintain the basic formal traits of the institution of kingship in that they built small pyramid complexes which were, in fact, only a fading shadow of the previous period (Fig. 14.11). The provinces disintegrated into largely independent chiefdoms, and some of the local chieftains even usurped some of the highly exclusive forms of royal presentation, such as Khui in El-Dara, whose names were written on a royal *serekh* and who was buried in a pyramid, or Ity from Gebelein, who was represented in his tomb as smiting his enemies precisely like an Egyptian king (Moiso 2015).



Fig. 14.11. ONE OF THE SMALL EIGHTH DYNASTY PYRAMIDS (IBI) IN SOUTH SAQQARA WHICH TESTIFIES TO THE STEEP DECLINE OF THE STATE'S CONDITIONS AT THE END OF THE OLD KINGDOM (PHOTO M. BÁRTA)

4. Status Race Phenomenon

With regard to one of the most essential pillars of Ancient Egyptian civilisation, the specific concept of sacred kingship, it is possible to observe that the fragile equilibrium between the ruler and the elite was a subtle system that underwent many changes as time went on. Many of these were part of the major changes related to the punctuated equilibria periods. It was a constant process of readjustments on the part of the king. The person of the ruler was compelled to maintain his extraordinary status not only by fulfilling the social contract and taking care of the elite and the population, but also by meeting the religious requirements and preserving his exclusive earthly role as a formally supernatural being, acting as deputy of the gods. While this was one major aspect of his existence, we have many clues showing that the profane, day-to-day experience of the elite with the king was not always of a sacred nature. Ancient Egyptian evidence, as well as parallel and comparative data from many cultures and civilisations show that it was more of an exclusive and mutually advantageous arrangement because the elite played a principal role in establishing and maintaining the ruler's legitimacy and superiority.

Evidence of harem conspiracies and even attempts to assassinate the king show that the relationship could be problematic. On the other hand, the elite operated on the premise that their existence and privileged status had been part of the fixed world order since times immemorial. Thus, this was a multidimensional relationship which, from a diachronic perspective, is referred to here as *status race*. The relationship of the king and the elite was of a very brittle nature that changed in specific contexts. The king was always pushed to look for new means to set himself off from the courtly environment. These changes and incessant search for a new divine or unearthly status was the result of the constantly rising influence of the high officials (Popitz 1986).

Quite expectedly, we can demonstrate the dynamics of this process by looking at the monumental architecture of the period, which was one of the most explicit media used in the given social and political context. Monumental architecture has several advantages over other hallmarks of power, as opposed to limited literacy, limited access to the king, or the limited communication impact of intricate iconographic motifs. The form of monumental architecture translates into intellectual terms across different social groups, it is visible from a distance, everybody can experience it, some may emulate it as a means of desired identity, and yet it is based on limited access and the concept of exclusivity. The tomb complexes of the Egyptian kings had always been characterised by several features which allow us to consider them exceptional in relation to the known non-royal constructions. These were undergoing changes in time and were as follows:

1. The king's tomb always occupied a dominant position in the specific burial ground. Often it was surrounded by the tombs of members of the royal family and/or high status officials of non-royal origin. During the First and Second dynasties, all the Abydos tombs of the kings differed from the non-royal tombs not only in size, but above all in their sophisticated system of rooms built at the bottom of open pits. All they had in common with non-royal tombs in the burial ground were the building materials used (unfired bricks, wood, matting), a superstructure that assumed the form of a mound, and also stelae, which indicated the owner of the tomb. Unlike the stelae of officials, royal stelae were always erected in pairs. They featured the Horus name of the ruler. Royal tombs also differed significantly in the amount and quality of grave goods. During the First Dynasty, the Abydos royal tombs were surrounded by dozens of pit tombs built for their servants. To be buried near the king was always a privilege. From the Second Dynasty onwards there was no longer a duty to die at the same time as the ruler, as was the case with servants under the First Dynasty.

2. The tombs in the First Dynasty built in Abydos were exceptional in size and in internal arrangements with many subterranean rooms. Moreover, they were equipped with an 'exit' in the southwest corner because the soul of the pharaoh was not deemed to reside inside the tomb, but intended to leave and join the divine world. The Second Dynasty royal tombs located in Saqqara on the other hand imitate in their undergrounds the premises of the royal residence, with all essential royal components: residential quarter with living and dining rooms, bathroom and bedroom, plus extensive magazines. The Abydos royal tombs of the Second Dynasty start to make use of stones at large.

3. The royal tomb takes on the shape of a pyramid, which distinguished it yet again from non-royal tombs as early as at the beginning of the Third Dynasty (king Djoser). The king's tomb differed both in construction method and size. The choice of stone used to build it was another royal privilege, since all sources of stones

were theoretically owned by the king. Officials were not allowed to use white limestone for the most of the first three dynasties. Moreover, it took them a long time to attain this right – the first wholly limestone non-royal mastabas were not built until the outset of the Fourth Dynasty. Other types of stone – black basalt, red granite or alabaster – were used exclusively for the construction of royal complexes and temples.

During the Third Dynasty, rulers' tombs moved definitively to the Saqqara area and were built of white limestone, while the tombs of high-ranking officials were still built only of bricks and smaller blocks of stone and preserved the same form of mastaba-shaped superstructure. Only their chapels were cased with limestone blocks, though not always. While royal tombs were designed with the purpose of enabling the ruler's entry into heaven, the afterlife of dignitaries took place within the tomb, or possibly to the west of the burial ground.

4. Another interesting fact is that while in royal tombs of the Third Dynasty great emphasis was placed on providing extensive subterranean areas designed for the storage of extensive grave goods, in non-royal tombs there was a notable move towards economisation in both the size and number of below-ground rooms. As a rule there was only one room left – the burial chamber.

5. With the beginning of the Fourth Dynasty a sudden change can be observed: the underground rooms of the pyramids are reduced to a burial chamber and several other rooms that served as storage space, plus entrance rooms. At the same time, the classical pyramid shape appeared. The decoration of the walls of different parts of the ruler's complex also emerges during the Fourth Dynasty. One of the earliest examples of this trend may be found in the Bent Pyramid complex of king Sneferu in Dahshur. During this period, non-royal tombs were at first decorated to a limited extent, usually limited to the highest-ranking officials and members of the royal family. Also, the motifs differ substantially – only the king is privileged to have depictions of gods, sending of expeditions on large seagoing vessels, or subduing enemies and evil forces.

6. During the Fifth Dynasty decoration of non-royal tombs expanded to the tombs of practically all social classes, its quality and extent depending purely on the economic means of the owners and their position in society. Another trend becomes significant for royal complexes in this period – growing areas occupied by storage rooms indicating that the administrative and economic aspects of the cult maintenance were significantly increasing, peaking in the Sixth Dynasty. In the time of Nyusera, wealthy non-royal tombs appear and start to incorporate many architectural features from the royal pyramid complexes. This was another incentive for the king to look for new means how to demonstrate his exclusive identity (**Fig. 14.8**).

7. As a consequence, at the very end of the Fifth Dynasty a further distinguishing feature appeared in the construction of the royal complexes starting with king Unas – the *Pyramid Texts*, first carved on the walls of the entrance room and the burial chamber, and later also in other parts of the underground areas of the pyramid (**Fig. 14.9**). This element in the decoration and underground 'equipment' of the tomb was not taken on by high-ranking dignitaries until the Middle Kingdom, when it appeared in altered form as the *Coffin Texts*. At the same time as the *Pyramid Texts* appeared, however, high-status dignitaries started to decorate their burial chambers. The Pyramid texts start to be taken over, however, in the time of Pepy I by his royal consorts (Mercer 1952; Faulkner 1973-1978; for the queens see Callender 2012).

The parallel development of royal and non-royal tombs indicates that they were mutually interdependent, at least this seems to be what we gather from the available archaeological and supplementary data. The development in the royal sphere was with some delay and to varying extent imitated or appropriated by the high-status elite which in turn instigated new developments in the royal sphere and the cycle repeated itself. It was a kind of positive loop which stopped only when the resources of the country became short. The emerging picture is of a status race in which the king, in order to maintain his extraordinary role had to compete for his formal and permanent exclusivity. This could be achieved only through temporary and steadily developing forms. What is of interest here is above all the fact that major innovations in the status competition are synchronous with the major periods of change in the history of Egypt during the third millennium BC.

Conclusions

To return to the beginning of the title of this article: temporary and permanent. The list of major factors related to individual punctuated equilibria stages is significantly varied and included all principal spheres of the society – governance (administration and state institutions), setup of the society, ideology and religion, art and history in general, and also artefacts as important vehicles of social contexts. All these features represent inherent components of Ancient Egyptian society which were exposed to a steady pressure for modification and interaction with each other (and very likely also for modification through interaction). Thus it is possible to define six distinct periods characterised by significant changes of all components of the society, followed by a closing period of steady decline signalling significant loss of the system's complexity.

However, this development does not emerge in a steady and continual way, but occurs by means of several major periods of considerable changes separated by relatively uneventful periods of *stasis*. The fact that most of these spheres of the society lost a significant portion of their complexity at the end of the Old Kingdom does not imply that the society vanished or collapsed. It had become simpler, which led to the proliferation of local variants of what was once a typical and rather uniform Old Kingdom culture. What endured, however, and was permanent was the underlying concept of divine kingship which was temporarily downgraded, yet survived and would ultimately be reinterpreted and elaborated during the Middle Kingdom and once again expressed in the realms of governance, society, ideology and religion, art, history and artefacts (against the collapse phenomenon as a positive trend see Ward-Perkins 2006).

The final observation is the finding that the factors which at the beginning of this process had a positive impact on the development of Egyptian society eventually transformed into negative ones, which in fact inhibited the efficacy of the system. This is a characteristic which may equal to a rule, in combination with the deterioration of the natural environment towards the end of the Old Kingdom, the broad spectrum of stresses eventually brought the society of the Old Kingdom to the brink of sustainability.

Following the systemic decline and exhaustion, the system needed more than a century to restart.

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