

Ancient Egyptian cities: monumentality and performance

JOHN BAINES

By about 3100 BCE ancient Egypt formed a large state extending northward for a thousand kilometers from the First Cataract of the Nile to the Mediterranean Sea (see Table 2.1; dates are BCE unless otherwise noted). The state inherited several regional centers in the Nile Valley that may already have been cities. A couple of them had been the centers of polities that preceded the unified state (see Map 2.1). The other main component of the Egyptian settled landscape, the Nile Delta, possessed significant, probably urban centers by the same date.

During the period of state formation (c. 3200–3000), the area near Memphis, south of the apex of the Nile Delta and of modern Cairo, saw a great increase in density of settlement, as measured by the number and size of cemeteries in the low desert flanking the Nile Valley primarily on the west. At the beginning of the 1st dynasty and the “historical” period the city of Memphis itself, whose name is first attested from a couple of generations earlier,¹ was transformed into a monumental setting by the construction of the first colossal tomb on the western escarpment near to the core settlement. Ever since then, Egypt’s largest urban center has remained in the same region, except during the Greco-Roman period, when Alexandria, the new capital founded by Alexander the Great on the coast at the northwest edge of the delta, emerged as one of the world’s great cities, declining to relative unimportance after the Muslim conquest of 640 CE. Memphis was partly complemented by the sacred city of Heliopolis to the northeast, on the edge of the Nile Valley perhaps a day’s journey away.

The regions of origin of founders of dynasties were significant in many periods. The most important of these, Thebes in the southern Nile Valley, was a primary or secondary capital throughout the second millennium, remaining

¹ Pierre Tallet and Damien Laisney, “Iry-Hor et Narmer au Sud-Sinaï (Ouadi ‘Ameyra): un complément à la chronologie des expéditions minières égyptiennes,” *Bulletin de l’Institut Français d’Archéologie Orientale* 112 (2012), 385–7.

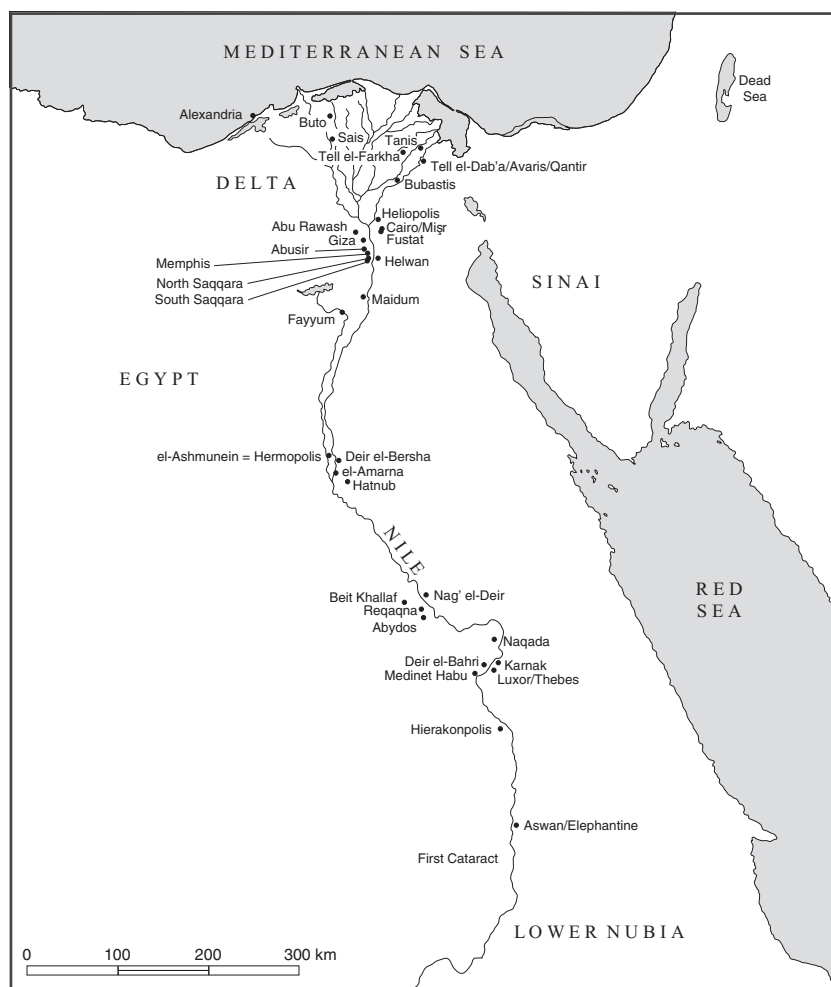
Table 2.1 Chronological table of ancient Egypt

Predynastic	c. 5000–3000
Naqada I (Nile Valley)	c. 4000
Ma'adi (delta and northern Nile Valley)	c. 3800
Naqada II (Nile Valley, later all Egypt)	c. 3500
Naqada III (late predynastic and dynasty 0)	c. 3200
Early Dynastic period (1st–3rd dynasties)	c. 3000–2575
Old Kingdom (4th–8th dynasties)	c. 2575–2150
First Intermediate period (9th–11th dynasties)	c. 2150–1980
Middle Kingdom (11th–14th dynasties)	c. 1980–1630
Second Intermediate period (14th–17th dynasties)	c. 1630–1520
New Kingdom (18th–20th dynasties)	c. 1540–1070
Third Intermediate period (21st–25th dynasties)	c. 1070–715
Late period (25th–30th dynasties, Second Persian period)	715–332
Macedonian period	332–305
Ptolemaic period	305–30
Roman period	30 BCE–395 CE
Byzantine period	395–640 CE
Muslim conquest	640 CE

important long after. Over the millennia, however, the Nile Valley increasingly became a backwater. The majority of people lived in the delta, which contained numerous cities and was close to the Near Eastern and eastern Mediterranean world, into which Egypt became more and more closely integrated.

Possible forerunners to Memphis were the regional centers of Naqada and Abydos, which emerged in the southern Nile Valley from about 3700 onward. As is common in Egypt, evidence for these places comes primarily from necropolis and ritual areas in the desert, rather than from the settlements themselves; their size and character as urban places are little known. By contrast, a significant proportion of Hierakonpolis, the southernmost center, lay in the desert near to the valley. From the later fourth millennium onward, Hierakonpolis displayed clear features of nucleation, social differentiation, and large-scale production of food and craft goods, as well as major religious buildings and monumental tombs, all of which point to an urban character, though perhaps with a modest urban population. The settlements for which Naqada and Abydos formed cemeteries and ritual areas probably developed in similar ways. Memphis was therefore the urban successor of previous small cities, and was most probably expanded under rulers from Abydos who had become the kings of all Egypt.

The Nile Valley floodplain of the third millennium was not an easy location for cities. The main river channel moved, generally in an eastward



Map 2.1. Map of Egypt, with sites mentioned in the text (drawn by Alison Wilkins).

direction, destroying all trace of human activity in its path. The most favored sites for settlements were near the river, both for access to transport and because the banks were slightly elevated and could be protected more easily against the annual late-summer inundation, which submerged almost all the floodplain (in contrast to later periods, rainfall was also an appreciable climatic element). In the later second millennium largely successful efforts were made to create extensive cities on the floodplain. This new aspiration may have responded to changes in the natural regime of the Nile; water

management could not have been more than a contributory factor. By contrast, the Nile Delta offered areas between water courses that were more or less permanently above the water table, so that towns there could have more secure settings. Some long-term stability of its environment is suggested by finds of Paleolithic flints at delta sites. A few very ancient places in the delta – such as Buto, Sais, Mendes, and Tell el-Farkha – almost certainly possessed urban character by the beginning of the third millennium, but no excavated large city there dates before the mid-second millennium, with the rise of Tell el-Dabʿa/Avaris.

Third millennium Memphis and its setting

The location of the primary urban settlement of early Memphis has been plausibly identified by drill cores as a relatively modest-sized area well beneath the modern floodplain. The site, which is inaccessible to excavation, is immediately east of the desert escarpment at North Saqqara, on the crest of which are the earliest truly monumental tombs in the region, dating to the 1st and 2nd dynasties (c. 3000–2700); these probably belonged to people immediately below the king in status. The tombs and funerary ritual enclosures of 1st dynasty kings were at the traditional site of Abydos. The mid-1st dynasty king Den possessed a complementary commemorative space at Saqqara, and such arenas may have been created for other rulers. The first three kings of the 2nd dynasty were buried at Saqqara, a couple of kilometers south of the large 1st dynasty tombs, while their successors, in a politically troubled phase, moved back to Abydos. The first king of the 3rd dynasty, Djoser (c. 2650), built the Step Pyramid, which was his tomb complex and the oldest truly colossal stone monument in Egypt, next to the 2nd dynasty royal tombs.

From that time for half a millennium, all royal mortuary monuments and most tombs of the inner elite were constructed on the low desert west of the Nile Valley, in necropolis areas connected with the city of Memphis. These areas stretched over about 80 kilometers from Maidum in the south to Abu Rawash in the north, with the main groups in the 20 kilometers between South Saqqara and Giza (locations are given from south to north because the ancient Egyptians oriented toward the south). In addition, the largest single concentration, of more than 10,000 tombs ranging in date from late prehistory to around 2600, was at Helwan on the east side of the valley a little south of Memphis; mid-ranking elites seem to have been buried there.

This wide distribution of activities was no doubt rendered practicable by the relative ease of movement and transport on the Nile, supplemented by canals leading to places away from its main channel. The functions of royal



Figure 2.1 Section of a table of gods of Memphis, relief in the chapel of Sokar in the temple of Sety I (c. 1290–1279 BCE) at Abydos (courtesy Egypt Exploration Society).

residence, administration, and monument construction were distributed across the landscape, in configurations that changed from reign to reign, rather than being contained within the densely inhabited city itself. Administration and storage were probably sited close to the riverbank because they needed a dry location and access to transport.

The urban area of Memphis formed a dense religious landscape. A table of gods of Memphis, preserved in a 19th dynasty source but probably going back in part to the Early Dynastic period, is very suggestive here (Figure 2.1).² It includes sixty-three names, some repeated, divided into seven or perhaps eight sections corresponding to areas and local landmarks. The divisions may have related to individual shrines or to small temples where several deities were worshipped. As befits the country's most major city, a number of the names are learned and rather abstruse: two leading officials of the late 5th and early 6th dynasty used some of its content to display their special knowledge, in sets of probably artificial priestly titles.

What other functions were based within the city can only be suggested. Its original extent appears to have significantly been less than 1 square

² John Baines, *High Culture and Experience in Ancient Egypt* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2013), pp. 167–70.

kilometer,³ suggesting that in addition to sacred precincts it acted as a node for activities conducted elsewhere and as a dwelling place for ordinary people. The list of gods is a witness to the cultural importance of the city, which may have contained institutions such as places for training administrators and priests, functions that were not fully distinct.

While members of the inner elite must have possessed local residences, they may have lived in rural settings near the city rather than within its confines. The values they and the king displayed on their monuments were rural rather than urban. The absence of a focus on the city can hardly reflect the reality of these people's lives, and the interest in rural matters, as well as the salience of mortuary monuments sited away from the main settlement, imparted a dispersed, mobile character to the display of power.

Display within the Memphite region

The third millennium state, especially its prime city and royal residence, was strongly oriented toward ceremonial, and ritual performances were often depicted or evoked in images. Five principal contexts of performance can be suggested.

First, the creation of monuments on a scale hitherto not seen anywhere in the world was itself a long-lasting performance that was celebrated at the end of construction, for example by the ceremonial transport of a pyramid's capstone,⁴ while the finished monument was the setting for grandiose funerals as well as a continuing mortuary cult. Because materials for a monument were brought from many regions, construction and fitting-out were highly visible, as well as involving vast numbers of people. At work sites, short-lived urban settlements developed.⁵

Second, the king enacted his role as a perpetual performance that varied in intensity of ritualization. His activities centered around the royal residence while extending into the countryside. In the earliest dynasties he seems to have moved regularly around the country. For the Old Kingdom little specific evidence of royal travel is preserved; instead, the king is shown

³ The estimates quoted by Norman Yoffee, *Myths of the Archaic State: Evolution of the Earliest Cities, States, and Civilizations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 43, relate to the region rather than the urban core.

⁴ Zahi Hawass and Miroslav Verner, "Newly Discovered Blocks from the Causeway of Sahure," *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Abteilung Kairo* 52 (1996), 177–86.

⁵ AERA, *American Egypt Research Associates*, accessed November 12, 2013, www.aeraweb.org.

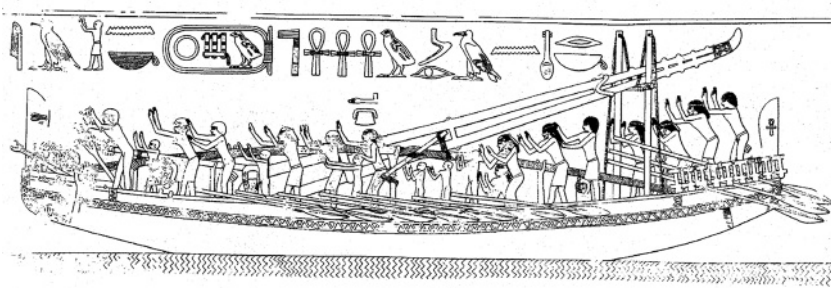


Figure 2.2 A ship's crew returning from an expedition abroad pays homage to the king, probably on arrival in Memphis. Relief from the mortuary temple of Sahure (c. 2450 BCE) at Abusir (after Ludwig Borchardt, Ernst Assmann, Alfred Bollacher, Oskar Heinroth, Max Hiltzheimer, and Kurt Sethe, *Das Grabdenkmal Des Königs Sa3Hu-Re 'II: Die Wandbilder, Ausgrabungen der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft in Abusir 1902–1908*, 7 [Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1913], pl. 13).

receiving people at his residence and going to nearby places, for example to inspect building projects.

Third, the river provided a setting for performance and an organizing metaphor for crews working on monuments. The latter point exemplifies how significant the river was for ancient life. Elite groups who served the king and the gods were termed “watches” – Egyptologists use the Greek term *phyle* – performing duties in monthly rotation.⁶ Two phyle names are nautical, meaning “starboard” and “port.” Work teams on construction sites were also classified by phyles. The arrival of a fleet from abroad was treated as a celebration during which songs in praise of the king are depicted as being sung by the ships’ crews (Figure 2.2). Images of the gods were carried on symbolic barques that would be visible during festival processions.

Fourth, worship of the gods in temples was highly developed, with regular daily service and numerous festivals. Elaborate recycling of offerings from gods to the dead and the living integrated the cult of the gods both with that of deceased kings and with the mortuary cult of the non-royal dead in the monumental necropoleis. That integration will have been highly visible, whereas the cult itself – and in principle the mortuary cult in tombs – was conducted in interior spaces to which access was severely restricted.

⁶ Ann Macy Roth, *Egyptian Phyles in the Old Kingdom: The Evolution of a System of Social Organization* (Chicago: Oriental Institute, University of Chicago, 1991).

Fifth, outside the Memphite area, most kings of the 1st and 2nd dynasties were buried at Abydos, where they constructed tombs and separate cult enclosures, the latter being torn down reign by reign, with their mortuary cult probably being integrated with those of their successors. Within the same area, the necropolis sites of Nag' el-Deir, Beit Khallaf, and Reqaqna, where some members of the central elite had their tombs, show that for many centuries a significant center existed in the region. Kings are likely to have died near their Memphite residences or while traveling. Royal funerals, including the journey to Abydos, were surely among the most important performances of power, not least because they would affirm who had succeeded the deceased ruler.

Performance of power was articulated through these arenas of action and through patterns of display, of exclusion, and of display of exclusion. Only the king could have access to all contexts of performance. Display also extended to the central elite. The city and associated monuments were provisioned from estates scattered across the country. Visits by elites to and from their own country estates were depicted as parades of flotillas on the river. The arrival of deliveries from estates is shown in the form of processions of people, dressed for celebration, who carry goods and lead animals. While this would not have been a frequent practice, the manner of its representation fits with other evidence for display.

The region – and for royal funerals much of the country – was the stage for these performances, which required repeated, extensive movement in the Memphite area, both on the floodplain and into the surrounding desert. Major events and projects would be visible across the landscape; many people would participate, mostly in subordinate roles. Within the region, settlements and fixed points were scattered. The area's overall character was not strongly urbanized, except perhaps near the riverbank. Urban dwellers and elites relied on supplies brought from rural locations both within the region and at a distance. This visible interdependence of urban and rural, elite and others may have mitigated slightly the vast distinctions in wealth and power between the ruling group and the general population.

In this wider context, the urban core of Memphis was a limited setting. The list of gods suggests that it possessed an intense religious life, presumably conducted in small temples, typically hosting several deities, to the interiors of which few had access. Service in temple cults was a privilege and brought a small income. Most officials were pluralists who derived their livelihoods from several positions. Their associated movements no doubt exhibited their importance to others.

The king's life probably involved much movement while centering on the royal residence, which had a semi-urban character, possessing workshops, storehouses, and dwelling spaces for attendants and servants. Access to the king was controlled by layers of protection as well as ritual and ceremonial rules.

Thus, one should understand the third millennium ruling "city" of Egypt not as a single urban center but as a region, shifting in extent and configuration from reign to reign, which was circumscribed by its monuments on the escarpments bordering the Nile Valley and brought together by connections among them, as well as possibly extending to Heliopolis.

Later Old Kingdom changes

This admittedly hypothetical picture applies most strongly to the 3rd and 4th dynasties. More than half the kings of the 5th dynasty, whose monuments were much less grandiose than those of their predecessors, were buried at Abusir, a little north of the Saqqara necropolis, and at Saqqara itself. The second major king of the 6th dynasty, Pepy I, built his pyramid at South Saqqara. Associated with the pyramid was the royal residence *mn-nfr* "The enduring-of-perfection (monument of Pepy)," which is the ancestor of the later name Memphis. That residence was perhaps on a latitude with his pyramid, near to where the city grew in later periods, southeast of its former location. Later pyramids of the dynasty were in the same area.

Thus, toward the end of the Old Kingdom kings seem to have moved near to the urban center. The location of that center shifted, probably in response to changes in the river's course. Pepy I was an innovator in the country as a whole: material from his reign is known from many provincial sites, and he constructed a network of chapels for his mortuary cult next to local temple complexes. This greater emphasis on the core city was thus complemented by a dispersed royal presence across the provinces. These developments in display and in regional centers went together with a major reconfiguration of elite residence patterns. Important people now lived and were buried locally as well as in Memphite royal and elite cemeteries. How far these changes affected the display of power within the Memphite area is less clear. Distances traveled in major ceremonies probably reduced, and kings may have identified with the city more than before. Pepy I's successor Merenre named his residence *h^c-nfr* "The arising-of-perfection (monument of Merenre)," and that name is

used in relation to Memphis in a biographical text of the Ptolemaic period, 2,000 years later, suggesting that it too was remembered as being located very near the city.⁷

Middle Kingdom examples

Configurations of cities in the Middle Kingdom are poorly understood because the Memphite area has yielded little evidence. The nearby royal residence, which was named Itjtawy, an epithet of its founder Amenemhat I, acquired a paradigmatic status, perhaps chiefly because the Middle Kingdom was a “classical” period in the perspective of later times. As in the Old Kingdom, centers of power seem to have been relatively small and strongly associated with rural values and locations. Later 12th dynasty kings sited their monuments near to the newly developing lakeside region of the Fayyum, which was valued for its sporting and agricultural potential. Several “model” towns are known from the period, the majority constructed as fortresses in Lower Nubia, which Egypt conquered. Although these proclaim a peremptory image of power, they cannot well be termed cities, and I do not consider them here.

An important characteristic of the period was the prominence of regional elites, some of whom adopted royal modes of display. Striking among them is Djehutihotep, the nomarch (chief official) of the province of Hermopolis in the mid-12th dynasty. A composition in image and text in his tomb at Deir el-Bersha shows the transport of a colossal travertine statue of him extracted from the quarries of Hatnub in the desert to the southeast. The statue is said to have been 13 cubits high (almost 7 meters) and is shown being dragged by 172 men organized in paramilitary groups. The workforce is subdivided according to sectors of the province. They wear festive clothes, and captions give the chants the groups sing as they toil; a man standing on the statue’s lap is beating time. Above the dragging lines are groups of men running and holding palm fronds, a sign of celebration still in use in the Middle East. The narrative states that the whole town – old and young and men and women – greeted the arrival of the statue, which was to be set up next to a weighing-station close to the river, where Djehutihotep was constructing a mortuary chapel alongside those of his ancestors (the wording is uncertain here). This was probably at the center

⁷ Stela of Psherenptah, British Museum EA 886, line 11.

of a small city, perhaps named Djerty. The destination may be depicted at the end of the scene, but with little visual detail.⁸

In pictorial form this composition derives from Old Kingdom royal models or perhaps from lost Middle Kingdom successors. The colossal statue and its celebratory installation also adopt royal modes, while pointing toward display within towns, which is not directly attested for the earlier period. Djehutihotep, however, does not usurp the king's status: a refrain sung by those dragging the statue is "Djehutihotep, beloved of the king."

Another Middle Kingdom development can be seen at Karnak, the temple complex of Thebes, which later became one of the largest sacred sites anywhere. Karnak was founded, perhaps on an island in the river, during the First Intermediate period. By the 12th dynasty it was a center for cults that reached into the surrounding countryside. The ancient name of Thebes means simply "Settlement/Town (*njw*)," which may suggest that it was not in origin a significant place; an anti-Theban inscription of the First Intermediate period even terms it "the mound that they forgot."⁹ Thus, Karnak may not have been associated at first with much urban development, although a sizeable population must have lived in the area. Moreover, a late Middle Kingdom inscription (c. 1650) from Karnak narrates an episode during the inundation season when the king and his retinue had to wade through the flooded temple, while a 22nd dynasty text describes a comparable but more serious event in the Luxor Temple, Karnak's companion institution a couple of kilometers upstream.¹⁰ These texts exemplify the risks involved in siting monuments on the Nile Valley floodplain.

In the late Middle Kingdom a large city developed in the Nile Delta at Tell el-Dab'a/Avaris, becoming the capital of the ethnically Levantine 15th (Hyksos) dynasty. The city was located next to two river channels. It is the first securely attested delta city among many from later periods,

⁸ Harco Willems, Christoph Peeters, and Gert Verstraeten, "Where Did Djehutihotep Erect His Colossal Statue?", *Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* 132 (2005), 173–89.

⁹ Jacques Vandier, *Mo'alla: la tombe d'Ankhtifi et la tombe de Sébekhotep* (Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 1950), p. 198, line 3 of text.

¹⁰ John Baines, "The Sebekhotpe VIII Inundation Stela: An Additional Fragment," *Acta Orientalia* 37 (1976), 11–20 (more fragments of this text have now been identified); and Susanne Bickel, "The Inundation Inscription in Luxor Temple," in Gerard P. F. Broekman, R. J. Demarée, and Olaf E. Kaper (eds.), *The Libyan Period in Egypt: Historical and Cultural Studies into the 21st–24th Dynasties: Proceedings of a Conference at Leiden University, 25–27 October 2007* (Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten, 2009), pp. 51–5.

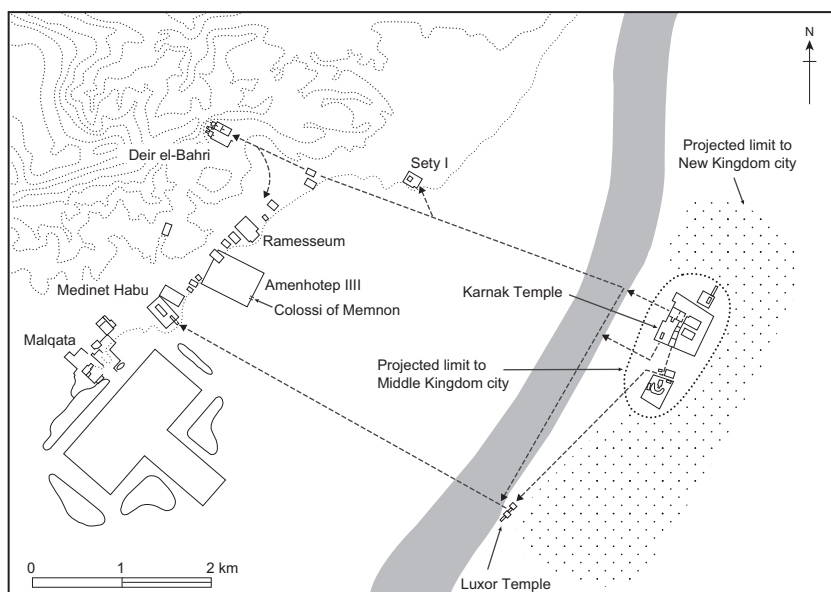
including places such as Bubastis, for which in the mid-first millennium Herodotus (2.60) described a festival attended by “700,000” people.

New Kingdom developments

The picture sketched so far is markedly different from that of the New Kingdom, when Thebes and Memphis became sizeable cities that were sited on the floodplain. How this change was achieved is uncertain, but the progradation of the Nile Valley, with some associated lowering of the water table, may have made it possible to protect larger areas from flooding than hitherto. Little points to major changes in water technology. The shaduf, a water-lifting device, was introduced from the Near East by the 18th dynasty, but it could not have had a role in lowering water levels or flood defense. Intensified contact with the Near East could have favored aspirations toward new forms of city planning, but it is not possible to draw precise parallels between regions.

During the New Kingdom Karnak developed progressively, forming the heart of the ritual and ceremonial setting of Thebes, in which the east and west banks were linked by processional ways using the river, canals, and roads on land (Map 2.2). One route ran parallel with the river from Karnak to Luxor, with some processions going by river and others by land. On a smaller scale than at Memphis, the Nile Valley and the west bank escarpment at Thebes constituted the arena of the city, within which a dense group of monumental temples developed, as well as a vast necropolis of elite tombs, with those of royalty concealed in a wadi a little way into the western desert (the Valley of the Kings). The eastern desert edge at Thebes is flat and seemingly devoid of monuments, so that the population center on the east bank was dominated by its temple complexes near the river and faced the landscape of the west bank, an area where mainly commemorative structures were scattered along the low desert for about 5 kilometers.

Egypt became an imperial power in this period. Kings were mobile, ranging in their travels and conquests from central Sudan to the Euphrates. Their principal residence was in the Memphite area, which was the state’s administrative core. Memphis expanded on the floodplain, presumably near the riverbank. Thebes became famed as a place of fabulous wealth, for example in Book 9 of *The Iliad*, where Achilles says that it has “a hundred gates from each of which emerge two hundred warriors with horses and chariots.” The city was the religious capital, receiving vast endowments for temple construction and acting as the stage for major rituals. Kings who



Map 2.2 Map of Thebes in the New Kingdom (c. 1100 BCE), showing routes of regular festivals and schematic plans of temples on the east and west banks of the Nile (adapted by Alison Wilkins, after Barry Kemp, *Ancient Egypt: Anatomy of a Civilization*, 2nd edn. [London and New York: Routledge, 2006], p. 266, fig. 97).

sought to bolster their legitimacy came to Thebes to participate in its largest annual festival, the Opet festival, which involved processions from Karnak to Luxor and back. They were confirmed or reaffirmed in their rule in a ritual within the Luxor Temple. While this would have been observed by just a few participants, the processions between the temples were depicted as involving vast numbers of participants on the river and on land. This tension between display and exclusion or concealment is a near universal expression of power and significance. The enormous scale of the temples contrasted strongly with the relatively small numbers of their personnel: temple spaces were crowded more with statues and stelae than with people.

In the Memphite area the future 18th dynasty kings Amenhotep II (c. 1428–1401) and Thutmose IV (c. 1401–1391) exploited travel from their residence to the already ancient site of the Giza pyramids and Great Sphinx to mark their aspirations. These journeys used the newish mode of transport by chariot, probably riding along the low desert, as is appreciated on horseback down to the present. Thutmose claimed to travel incognito, even

though the Great Sphinx was by then the center of a cult, with a small temple constructed under his father. In his sphinx stela Amenhotep also described feats of rowing and shooting arrows from a moving chariot that were displayed before the army along the river somewhere in the Memphite area. He claimed to have rowed a large ship single-handed 2 Egyptian *iteru* – about 21 kilometers – roughly the distance from the city of Memphis to Giza. These two texts suggest that the New Kingdom Memphis stood in relation to its hinterland rather as its Old Kingdom forerunner had, but in a landscape already dominated by antiquity.

Patterns of display changed markedly with the reign of Amenhotep III (c. 1391–1353), when Thebes, Memphis, and probably other cities such as Hermopolis were remodeled on a colossal scale within the floodplain. Plans included construction or extension of large temples as well as, perhaps more significantly, setting up avenues of sphinxes to delineate ceremonial ways on the floodplain. What was done at Memphis is known only from inscriptions of high officials. Texts from Thebes are more informative and can be compared with remains in the city itself. The most remarkable project was the excavation of vast harbor basins near the desert edge on both sides of the river, a little upstream from the city. Just downstream from the western basin was a sprawling palace complex of the king, parallel with a range of ceremonial structures along the low desert. This whole area may have been constructed primarily for the king's *sed* festival, a ceremony held in principle to mark thirty years of reign and repeated every three years thereafter. A little north of the palace was the king's mortuary temple, the largest ever constructed, which was sited on the floodplain unlike those of his predecessors. This undertaking failed, presumably because it proved impossible to manage the water regime in the medium term; the temple was being used as a quarry and a source of monumental statuary within a generation of its construction. Significantly, an inscription extolling the king's projects dwells nearly as much on the god Amun's river barque as on some buildings: the river continued to bind the city together and provide the most important arena for movement and display.

Amenhotep III's partially successful design for Thebes documents a new aim to integrate a city and its monuments quite closely, in a different style from the dispersed older mode, and to create grand ceremonial routes. As had been the case throughout the 18th dynasty, the city focused around its temples, in contrast with the enormous royal tombs of earlier periods. Residential areas were probably concentrated to the east of Karnak.

While the enactment of wealth and power was fundamental to Amenhotep III's urban projects, cosmological aspects of the cities, comparable with those known in many societies, may have been equally important. Temples represented an ideal created world in their interiors; comparable associations were now projected into the wider environment, so that the king's presence in the city would replicate divine order, especially since he acquired a measure of deification late in his reign.

The projects of Amenhotep III preceded the still more extravagant undertaking of his revolutionary successor Amenhotep IV/Akhenaten (c. 1353–1335), to build a residence for his newly proclaimed god, Aten or Re-Aten, and for his own rule, in a bay on the low desert near the escarpment at el-Amarna, next to the east bank of the Nile at the exact mid-point of the country.¹¹ The city, which was occupied for just twenty years, may have housed up to 30,000 people. It stretched in a relatively narrow band for several kilometers, with a royal palace a little to the north of the urban area, a couple of small specialized settlements further into the desert, elite tombs in the escarpment facing the city, and royal tombs some distance up a wadi.

This distribution replicated the main features of earlier cities, but in a layout on only one side of the river. The site, whose ancient name was Akhetaten "(Morning) Horizon of the Aten," was probably chosen for its properties of landscape and cosmology. A conception of the broader area was displayed in the city's boundary stelae, of which more than a dozen were carved in the escarpments on both sides of the Nile Valley (at 20 km, untypically wide here). The texts of the stelae state that the whole area, including its agricultural land, was dedicated to the god, and its extent is named as 6 *iteru* (c. 675 km²) plus fractions thereof (this cannot be reconciled with the data on the ground). Apart from el-Amarna itself, no settlement of Akhenaten's time has been identified within the demarcated area.

The spacious setting made it possible to lay out the city in a new way, while probably retaining echoes of residential patterns from its inhabitants' cities of origin. The center was devoted to temples, administrative buildings, and a palace that was not the king's main residence. To south and north were residential areas. Running through the city, roughly parallel to the river, were wide roads. Unlike the alleys of sphinxes at Thebes, these did not have monumental markers, and they did not separate ceremonial areas from

¹¹ Personal communications from David O'Connor and Claude Traunecker.

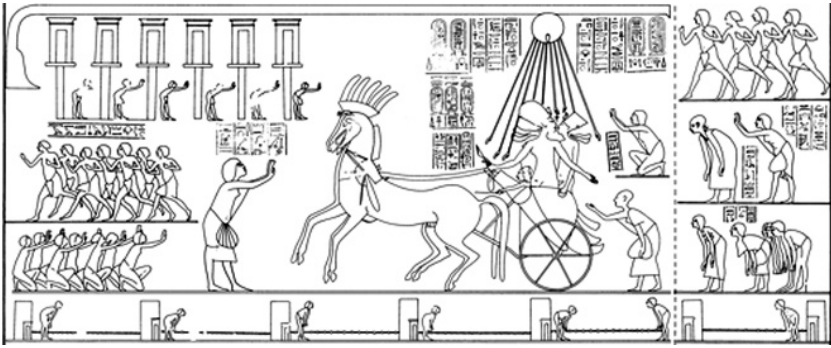


Figure 2.3 Relief in the tomb of Mahu at el-Amarna, perhaps showing the king's visit to the boundary stelae (after Norman de Garis Davies, *The Rock Tombs of el Amarna*, IV, Archaeological Survey of Egypt, 16 [London: Egypt Exploration Fund, 1906], pls. xxi–xxii).

residential ones in the same way as was done in that city. They nevertheless formed a grand setting for the royal display depicted in elite tombs at el-Amarna. The king is represented parading in his chariot, perhaps commuting from the North Palace to the city center. Tomb owners too are shown in chariots – for which there is also archaeological evidence – presumably using the same roads, if not at the same time. The king is accompanied by large military groups. One composition seems to show him visiting the principal boundary stelae, which are depicted as demarcated and linked by something like fences (Figure 2.3). Large public ceremonies are shown, some in which rewards are bestowed on high officials and one where he receives large numbers of foreign delegates. Cuneiform tablets recovered from the city, most of them in Akkadian, show that diplomats were indeed present, some of them staying for years at a time.

Many features of the pictorial record from el-Amarna, such as the military presence at peaceful ceremonies, have no close parallel from earlier periods. The city's layout, too, is not very similar to evidence from elsewhere. These differences can be accounted for in part by the desert location, which removed the constraints of flood protection, the exceptional circumstances of the king's religious revolution, and his evident desire to flout standard conventions. The basic functions of the city were probably similar to those of its predecessors, while the military had become salient over the previous couple of centuries. A significant factor in the layout seems to be the focus on wheeled vehicles, which brings requirements that are absent if only pack

animals are used. The visual record may be misleading here, because the only vehicles that were regularly depicted were chariots, although other types are known to have existed. The chariot's introduction in the 16th century probably stimulated more open and linear configurations of ceremonial space, of which el-Amarna offers a sample.

Thus, el-Amarna can suggest some but not all features of an Egyptian ruling city. The site's abandonment and destruction after just twenty years, when the traditional religion was restored, show how closely it was identified with its founder.

About a century after Akhenaten, Ramesses II (c. 1279–1213) constructed the new ruling city of Piramesse at Tell el-Dab'a–Qantir in the Nile Delta (Map 2.3), on the same site as the earlier Avaris and in a good position for contact with Asia and the Mediterranean. The detailed layout of this city is not well known, but literary "praise of the city" poems, addressed to scribes rather than to the ruling group, evoke significant characteristics. One passage runs:

His Person . . . has built for himself a fortress named "Great of victories."
It is between Syria and Egypt,
full of food and provisions.

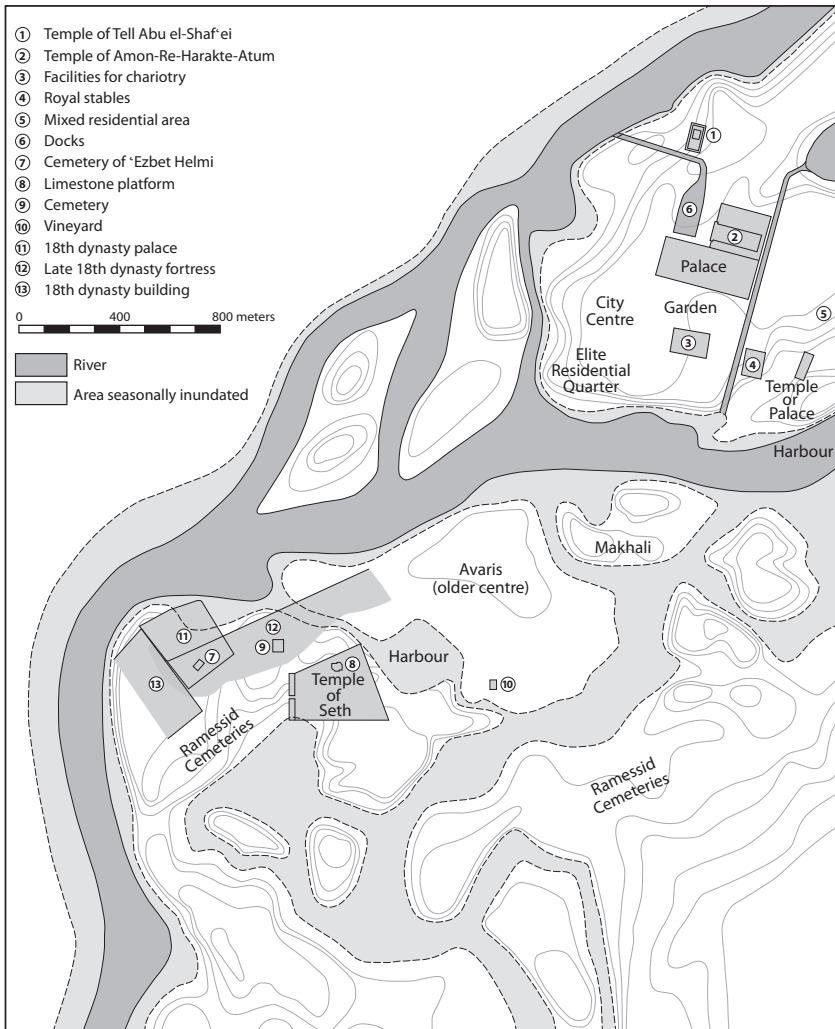
It is in the manner of Upper Egyptian Heliopolis (=Thebes),
its lifespan like that of Memphis.
The sun rises in its horizon
and it sets within it.

Everyone has abandoned their towns;
they have settled in its districts.

Its west is the estate of Amun . . .¹²

This acknowledges the principal existing cities as models, while solar and cosmological aspects are explicit, and the whole is organized according to the temple complexes (estates) of deities. Something of the attraction of home is also implied: people must be encouraged to move to the new city. Dense urban settlement is not emphasized; rather, the city is a picture of semi-rural abundance. Archaeological evidence shows that it was also a diplomatic hub – as is implied by other stanzas of the poem quoted – as well as an industrial center, with manufacturing of weaponry and of glass. Royal tombs continued to be located in Thebes, which remained a religious

¹² My translation from the Egyptian in Alan H. Gardiner, *Late-Egyptian Miscellanies*, *Bibliotheca Aegyptiaca* 7 (Brussels: Fondation Égyptologique Reine Élisabeth, 1937), pp. 12–13.



Map 2.3 Map of Tell el-Dab'a-Qantir in the late New Kingdom, when it was the capital of Ramesses II (c. 1279–1213 BCE) under the name Piramesse (drawn by Nicola Math, with kind permission of Manfred Bietak).

center, so that movement across the land continued to be a core mode of royal display.

Piramesse was short-lived. The adjacent Nile branch silted up, and the Third Intermediate period kings of the 21st dynasty (c. 1070–945) built a new

residence at Tanis, further to the northeast, on another arm of the Nile. Tanis, which took over much large statuary from Piramesse, was constructed on a grand scale with major temple complexes, and was envisaged as a new Thebes in the north, as well as the burial place of kings of two dynasties. It was the first of several first millennium royal cities in the delta, culminating in the foundation of Alexandria on orders of Alexander the Great in around 332.

Conclusion

An essential aspect of the Egyptian performance of power was the creation of cities. From the development of Memphis at the beginning of the Dynastic period to that of Fustat, precursor of Cairo, after the Muslim conquest of 640–642 CE, rulers of Egypt have established cities to mark epochs, to initiate change, and to assert their dominance and power. Their prime cities possessed features found in many civilizations. From the New Kingdom onward, the cities also assumed a physical form closer to those known in other regions.

Early cities, by contrast, appear to have been highly distinctive in their layout, being constrained in part by their location on the Nile floodplain and in part by the dominance of dispersed mortuary monuments. The values of early rulers and elites seem not to have focused on cities, while cosmological representation may have inhered more in individual monuments and necropolis sites than in the configuration of complete settlements. Their presentation of power was not limited to the city narrowly defined, but was based on the distribution of elements across the landscape, on movement among those elements, and on the interplay of display of power and concealment of what was sacred and privileged in a wide range of contexts.

Egyptian cities changed fundamentally in character during the two millennia reviewed here. The society, whose population had probably risen significantly by the late New Kingdom, became more focused on cities, which came to resemble more those elsewhere in the Near East. Cities were the prime loci of display of power. They were associated with religion, king and court, and international relations, all of these being domains that can be documented especially from pictorial sources. Just two or three dominant cities were the state's principal arenas for the performance of power. Their relationships with their hinterlands and with the entire country were vital to the communication of their meaning to the wider society.

FURTHER READINGS

- Arnold, Dieter, *Die Tempel Ägyptens: Götterwohnungen, Kultstätten, Baudenkmäler*, Zurich: Artemis & Winkler, 1992.
- Baines, John, "Kingship before Literature: The World of the King in the Old Kingdom," in Rolf Gundlach and Christine Raedler (eds.), *Selbstverständnis und Realität: Akten des Symposiums zur ägyptischen Königsideologie Mainz 15–17.6.1995*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1997, pp. 125–74.
- "Modelling the Integration of Elite and Other Social Groups in Old Kingdom Egypt," in Juan Carlos Moreno García (ed.), *Élites et pouvoir en Égypte ancienne*, Lille: Université Charles-de-Gaulle, 2010, pp. 117–44.
- "Public Ceremonial Performance in Ancient Egypt: Exclusion and Integration," in Takeshi Inomata and Lawrence Coben (eds.), *Archaeology of Performance: Theaters of Power, Community, and Politics*, Lanham, MD: AltaMira, 2006, pp. 261–302.
- Bard, Kathryn, "Royal Cities and Cult Centers, Administrative Towns, and Workmen's Settlements in Ancient Egypt," in Joyce Marcus and Jeremy A. Sabloff (eds.), *The Ancient City: New Perspectives on Urbanism in the Old and New World*, Santa Fe, NM: School for Advanced Research Press, 2008, pp. 165–82.
- Bietak, Manfred, "Houses, Palaces and Development of Social Structure in Avaris," in Manfred Bietak, Ernst Czerny, and Irene Forstner-Müller (eds.), *Cities and Urbanism in Ancient Egypt: Papers from a Workshop in November 2006 at the Austrian Academy of Sciences*, Vienna: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2010, pp. 11–68.
- "Urban Archaeology and the 'Town' Problem in Ancient Egypt," in Kent R. Weeks (ed.), *Egyptology and the Social Sciences*, Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1979, pp. 97–144.
- Bietak, Manfred, Ernst Czerny, and Irene Forstner-Müller (eds.), *Cities and Urbanism in Ancient Egypt: Papers from a Workshop in November 2006 at the Austrian Academy of Sciences*, Vienna: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2010.
- Bietak, Manfred, and Irene Forstner-Müller, "The Topography of New Kingdom Thebes and Per-Ramesses," in Mark Collier and Steven Snape (eds.), *Ramesside Studies in Honour of K. A. Kitchen*, Bolton: Rutherford Press, 2011, pp. 23–50.
- Bulliet, Richard W., *The Camel and the Wheel*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1990.
- Campagno, Marcelo, "Kinship, Concentration of Population and the Emergence of the State in the Nile Valley," in Renée Friedman and Peter N. Fiske (eds.), *Egypt at Its Origins 3: Proceedings of the Third International Conference "Origin of the State: Predynastic and Early Dynastic Egypt," London, 27th July–1st August 2008*, Leuven: Departement Oosterse Studies, 2011, pp. 1229–42.
- Cline, Eric H., and David O'Connor (eds.), *Amenhotep III: Perspectives on His Reign*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998.
- Graham, Angus, "Islands in the Nile: A Geoarchaeological Approach to Settlement Location in the Egyptian Nile Valley and the Case of Karnak," in Manfred Bietak, Ernst Czerny, and Irene Forstner-Müller (eds.), *Cities and Urbanism in Ancient Egypt: Papers from a Workshop in November 2006 at the Austrian Academy of Sciences*, Vienna: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2010, pp. 125–43.
- Janssen, J. J., "El-Amarna as a Residential City," *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 40 (1983), 273–88.

- Jeffreys, David J., and Ana Tavares, "The Historic Landscape of Early Dynastic Memphis," *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Abteilung Kairo* 50 (1994), 143–73.
- Kaiser, Werner, "Ein Kultbezirk des Königs Den in Sakkara," *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Abteilung Kairo* 41 (1985), 47–60.
- Kemp, Barry J., *Ancient Egypt: Anatomy of a Civilization*, 2nd edn. London: Routledge, 2006.
- "The City of el-Amarna as a Source for the Study of Urban Society in Ancient Egypt," *World Archaeology* 9 (1977), 123–39.
- "The Window of Appearance at el-Amarna and the Basic Structure of This City," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 62 (1976), 81–99.
- Kemp, Barry J., and Salvatore Garfi, *A Survey of the Ancient City of el-'Amarna*, London: Egypt Exploration Society, 1993.
- Köhler, E. Christiana, "On the Origins of Memphis – the New Excavations in the Early Dynastic Necropolis at Helwan," in Stan Hendrickx, Renée Friedman, Krzysztof M. Ciałowicz, and Marek Chłodnicki (eds.), *Egypt at Its Origins: Studies in Memory of Barbara Adams, Proceedings of the International Conference "Origins of the State. Predynastic and Early Dynastic Egypt"*, Krakow, 28th August–1st September 2002, Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2004, pp. 295–315.
- Lacovara, Peter, *The New Kingdom Royal City*, London: Kegan Paul International, 1997.
- Lehner, Mark E., *The Complete Pyramids*, London: Thames & Hudson, Ltd., 1997.
- Luft, Ulrich, "The Ancient Town of el-Lâhûn," in Stephen Quirke (ed.), *Lahun Studies*, Reigate: Sia, 1998, pp. 1–41.
- Martin, Geoffrey Thorndike, "Memphis: The Status of a Residence City in the Eighteenth Dynasty," in Miroslav Bárta and Jaromír Krejčí (eds.), *Abusir and Saqqara in the Year 2000*, Prague: Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, Oriental Institute, 2000, pp. 99–120.
- Nims, Charles F., and Wim Swaan, *Thebes of the Pharaohs: Pattern for Every City*, London: Elek, 1965.
- O'Connor, David, *Abydos: Egypt's First Pharaohs and the Cult of Osiris*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2009.
- "City and Palace in New Kingdom Egypt," *Cahiers de Recherche de l'Institut de Papyrologie et Égyptologie de Lille* 11 (1989), 73–87.
- "The City and the World: Worldview and Built Forms in the Reign of Amenhotep III," in Eric H. Cline and David O'Connor (eds.), *Amenhotep III: Perspectives on His Reign*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998, pp. 125–72.
- "Cosmological Structures of Ancient Egyptian City Planning," in Tony Atkin and Joseph Rykwert (eds.), *Structure and Meaning in Human Settlements*, Philadelphia: University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, 2005, pp. 55–66.
- Ragazzoli, Chloé, *Éloges de la ville en Égypte ancienne: histoire et littérature*, Paris: PUPS, 2008.
- Routledge, Carolyn, "Temple as Center in Ancient Egyptian Urbanism," in Walter Emanuel Aufrecht, Neil A. Mirau, and Steven W. Gauley (eds.), *Urbanism in Antiquity: From Mesopotamia to Crete*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997, pp. 221–35.
- Vleeming, S. P. (ed.), *Hundred-Gated Thebes: Acts of a Colloquium on Thebes and the Theban Area in the Graeco-Roman Period*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995.