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The Old Kingdom (c.2686–2160 BC)

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The term 'Old Kingdom' was imposed on Egyptian chronology by nineteenth-century historians and its connotations can be misleading. It reflects an approach to the periodicity of history about which we may now entertain serious reservations. The ancient Egyptians never used it and would have found the difference between the Early Dynastic Period (3000–2686 BC) and the Old Kingdom (2686–2160 BC) rather difficult to grasp. The last king of the Early Dynastic Period and the first two rulers of the Old Kingdom were, it seems, all related to Queen Nimaathap, who was described as mother of the king's children under Khasekhemwy and as 'mother of the king of Upper and Lower Egypt' under Djoser 2667–2648 BC. For the Egyptians even more important was the fact that the place of the royal residence did not change, but remained at White Wall (Ineb-hedj), on the west bank of the Nile south of modern Cairo.

However, the Egyptians were aware of, and acknowledged, the revolutionary contribution made by King Djoser's builders to royal funerary architecture. Large state-organized building projects exerted an immediate and profound effect on Egyptian economy and society. For us, this is the main justification of a division between the Early Dynastic Period and the Old Kingdom, although it is signalled by progress in architecture rather than personal royal changes.

Chronological Considerations and the Main Characteristics of the Period

Thanks to the information provided by a Ramessid king-list written on a papyrus in the Museo Egizio in Turin, the so-called Turin Canon, there are remarkably few weak links in the order and dating of Old Kingdom rulers. Among the chronologically significant kings, only the reigns of Menkaura (2532–2503 BC, but perhaps less) and Neferirkara (2475–2455 BC, but this is almost certainly too long) present more serious difficulties. We have no safe dates based on contemporary astronomical observation, and calculations made for other periods may change the relative position of the Old Kingdom in the chronological scheme of ancient Egyptian history. The degree of reliability with which we credit ancient sources and our understanding of the Egyptian dating system are also important. On the whole, however, it seems that 2686 BC as the beginning of the reign of Nebka (the first ruler in Manetho's 3rd Dynasty, although his position in the dynasty has recently been challenged) is secure within a margin of error of about twenty-five years.

The end of the period, about five and a half centuries later, is more obscure, but the ancient Egyptians and modern historians are in broad agreement on its characteristics. For the Egyptians, the transfer of the royal residence away from Memphis was represented by a sharp division in their king-lists. As this approximately coincided with profound political, economic, and cultural changes in Egyptian society, it is convenient to follow their example. All the same, the lack of accurate chronological indicators is daunting, and the degree of uncertainty is such that much of the often lively polemic is, in the present state of our knowledge, purely academic.

Although the division of Egyptian kings into dynasties (royal ruling houses), introduced by the Ptolemaic historian Manetho in the third century BC is generally followed, its weaknesses have rarely been exposed more convincingly than in the case of the Old Kingdom. We can establish contemporary reasons for nearly all dynastic breaks, but more often than not it would be difficult to defend them as sound historical criteria or discontinuity in the line of kings. Nevertheless, in the absence of a radical alternative, Manetho's system provides a convenient chronological scheme that avoids the more fluid absolute dates (in years BC).

During the Old Kingdom Egypt experienced a long and uninterrupted period of economic prosperity and political stability, in con-

tinuation of the Early Dynastic Period. It rapidly grew into a centrally organized state ruled by a king believed to be endowed with qualified supernatural powers. It was administered by a literate élite selected at least partly on merit. Egypt enjoyed almost complete self-sufficiency and safety within its natural borders; no external rivals threatened its dominance of the north-eastern corner of Africa and the immediately adjacent areas of Western Asia. Advances in religious ideas were reflected in breathtaking achievements in arts and architecture.

Large-Scale Building Projects as Catalysts of Change

King Djoser, known from his monuments as Netjerikhet (his Horus and *nebty* names), is one of the most famous rulers in Egyptian history. On the Turin Canon, his name is preceded by a rubric in red ink. As late as the reign of Ptolemy V Epiphanes (205–180 BC), nearly 2,500 years later, the Famine Stele on the island of Sehel, in the first-cataract region, still bore testimony to his image as a paragon of a wise and pious ruler (*djoser* means ‘holy’, ‘sacred’). Although the stele was a tendentious and spuriously historic text put out by the priests of the local god Khnum, its importance lies in the late awareness of Djoser that it conveys rather than in the historicity of the events it records.

The annals preserved on the Palermo Stone record the construction of a stone building called Men-netjeret either in the reign of Khasekhemwy, the last ruler of the 2nd Dynasty, or Djoser’s predecessor, Nebka (2686–2667 BC). We learn nothing more about the building although there is a good chance that this is the structure known as Giser el-Mudir at North Saqqara, to the south-west of Djoser’s pyramid. However, it hardly got beyond the initial stages and so the credit for the first successfully completed large stone building in the world, the Step Pyramid, goes to Djoser.

The superstructure of Djoser’s tomb is the result of six variants of the plan adopted in turn as the full potential of the new building material was being realized. Before Nebka and Djoser, stone had been used only in a limited way for elements of brick-built tombs. The final structure is a pyramid of six steps, with a ground plan of 140 × 118 m. and a height of 60 m. It stands within an enclosure measuring some 545 × 277 m., the walls of which probably imitated the façade of the royal palace. The king’s body was laid to rest in a chamber constructed beneath the pyramid, below ground level. While for us this new architectural form ushered in a new historical period, it also contains a clear link with the past. In its initial design it was a mastaba of a

rectangular ground plan, a typical royal tomb of the Early Dynastic period.

A remarkable feature of the enclosure is a large open court and a complex of shrines and other buildings, the replicas in stone of structures that would have been built in perishable materials for *sed*-festivals (royal jubilees) in the king's lifetime. Here Djoser hoped to continue to celebrate—during his afterlife—such periodic occasions in which his energy and powers, and so his ability to rule effectively, would be renewed. In the southern part of the enclosure, there is a building (the so-called South Tomb) that imitates the underground parts of the pyramid. Its function is unclear, but it may be compared to the satellite pyramids in later pyramid complexes.

Tradition had it that Imhotep (Greek form: Imouthes) was the architect of Djoser's pyramid and inventor of building in stone. Later he was deified and regarded as a son of the god Ptah and the patron of scribes and physicians, equated with the Greek god Asklepios. His historicity has been confirmed by the discovery of the base of a statue of Djoser that also bears Imhotep's name. Imhotep's tomb was probably located at Saqqara, perhaps at the edge of the desert plateau to the east of the pyramid of his royal master, but it has not yet been located and so offers one of the most exciting prospects for future fieldwork.

The fact that Imhotep was a high priest of Heliopolis is a pointer to the early importance of the sun-god Ra (or Ra-Atum). The royal residence and Egypt's administrative centre were situated in the area where the god Ptah was the chief local deity, but it is likely that Heliopolis (Egyptian Iunu, Biblical On), to the north-east of the Old Kingdom capital and on the east bank of the Nile (now a Cairo suburb), was recognized as the country's religious capital early in the Old Kingdom. Djoser was the first ruler to dedicate a small shrine there.

The striving for monumental grandeur appropriate to a royal burial can be detected early in Djoser's reign; it reflected the prevailing view at the time concerning the position of the king in Egyptian society. This view may have been further strengthened when it found an ideal means of expression in funerary architecture. In the course of the next two centuries the approach was explored to its limits, and this, in its turn, became a powerful catalyst in the development of Egyptian society. The step pyramid was now adopted as the norm for a royal tomb, but none of those planned by Djoser's successors was completed. The pyramid intended for Sekhemkhet (2648–2640 BC) was begun to the south-west of that of Djoser and its design was even more ambitious. A graffito on the enclosure wall mentions Imhotep, who

may still have been active. The ownership of the pyramid was deduced from the presence of Sekhemkhet's name on clay impressions of sealings in its underground rooms. Although the pyramid's burial chamber contained a sealed sarcophagus carved from Egyptian alabaster, this was found to be empty, and it is clear that the superstructure was abandoned when it reached a height of about 7 m.

A similarly unfinished structure at Zawiyet el-Aryan, to the north of Saqqara, is assigned with some probability, though without certainty, to Khaba (2640–2637 BC). The short duration of the reigns of these two kings (only six years each) was almost certainly to blame for their failure to complete the pyramids. Little can be said with any confidence about the family relationships between the kings of the 3rd Dynasty, but the first two, Nebka and Djoser, may have been brothers.

The 4th Dynasty (2613–2494 BC)

In the reign of King Sneferu (Horus Nebmaat, 2613–2589 BC) the external form of the royal tomb changed to that of a true pyramid. This might be regarded as a straightforward architectural development if it were not for other profound changes that occurred at the same time. New elements were added to the overall plan, and together they now formed a pyramid complex. A new orientation was applied to its plan (the main axis of the complex was now from east to west, while previously the north–south direction predominated). The pyramid temple that served as the focus of the funerary cult was built against the eastern face of the pyramid (that of Djoser is to the north). It was linked by a causeway to a valley temple, close to the edge of the cultivated area further to the east, which provided a monumental entrance to the whole complex. A small satellite pyramid was placed near the southern face of the pyramid proper. These architectural innovations must have resulted directly from changes in the doctrine concerning the king's afterlife. It seems that the earlier astronomically oriented star concepts were gradually being modified by the incorporation of ideas centred around the sun-god Ra. Although textual evidence is lacking, already at this early stage beliefs concerning Osiris were probably also beginning to influence Egyptian concepts of the afterlife.

Sneferu, probably as the result of planning that went wrong rather than by choice, had two pyramids constructed at Dahshur, to the south of Saqqara. The first is the southern Rhomboidal (or Bent) Pyramid, where the angle of the sloping sides was altered some two-thirds up its height after structural flaws had been discovered during

its construction. The other is the northern Red Pyramid (named from the colour of the limestone blocks used in the core of the structure), in which Sneferu was buried. He may also have completed a third structure at Meidum, still further south, but the ownership of this pyramid remains in doubt. Visitors who came to see it in the 18th Dynasty, some 1,200 years later, made it quite clear in their graffiti that they thought it belonged to Sneferu. It is possible that it was originally conceived as a step pyramid for Sneferu's predecessor Huni (more correctly known as Nysuteh, and perhaps also to be equated with Horus Qahedjet, 2637–2613 BC), but such a substantial contribution to the pyramid of one's predecessor would be unique in Egyptian history. Sneferu's later reputation as a benign ruler may owe much to the etymology of his name, in that *snefer* can be translated as 'to make beautiful'.

The sheer volume of material involved in Sneferu's building activities was greater than that of any other ruler in the Old Kingdom. The Turin Canon puts the length of his reign at twenty-four years, although stonemasons' graffiti found on the blocks inside his northern (and later) pyramid at Dahshur may suggest a longer reign. The problem could easily be solved if it could be shown that the eponymous occasions of a census that were used for dating purposes (the year was of the *n*th census or it was the year after the *n*th census), and that are known to have been regularly biennial during the Early Dynastic Period, now became more frequent (less regular) occasions. The contemporary dating system probably required annals or similar records to which one could refer in order to calculate dates accurately.

Manetho began a new dynasty, his 4th, with Sneferu. It seems that once again architectural changes provided the criterion for a dynastic division. The perfection of pyramid design and construction reached its peak under Sneferu's son and successor, Khufu (Herodotus' Cheops, Horus Medjedu, 2589–2566 BC), whose full name was Khnum-khufu, meaning 'the god Khnum protects me'. Khnum was the local god of Elephantine, near the first Nile cataract, but the reason for the king's name is not known. Information about the reign and the king himself is remarkably meagre. He must have been a middle-aged man when he ascended the throne, but this did not affect the planning of his grandiose funerary monument. The Great Pyramid at Giza, with a ground plan of 230 sq. m. and a height of 146.5 m., is the largest in Egypt. Unusually, the burial chamber is situated in the core of the pyramid, and not below or on ground level. The plan was, it seems, changed in the course of the construction, but hardly more than once, and the design of the superstructure was probably foreseen at the

outset. The usually quoted figure of some 2,300,000 building blocks averaging about 2.5 tons that were required may be approximate, but probably not far off the mark. The valley and pyramid temples and the causeway were originally decorated in low raised relief with scenes that conveyed the ideas of the Egyptian kingship and recorded in anticipation certain events that the king hoped to enjoy in afterlife, such as *sed*-festivals. The reliefs are, unfortunately, almost completely lost.

A dismantled boat, some 43.4 m. long and built mainly of cedar-wood, discovered in a pit near the southern face of the pyramid, has been successfully excavated and restored. Another such boat still lies in another pit nearby, but is not as well preserved. It seems likely that these craft were intended to be used by the deceased king in his journeys across the sky in the company of gods. Two more large boat-shaped pits were cut in the rock against the eastern face of the pyramid, and a fifth is situated near the upper end of the causeway.

Three pyramids that contained the burials of Khufu's queens are lined up to the east of the pyramid. A cache with objects belonging to Khufu's mother Hetepheres was also discovered to the east of the pyramid. It was undisturbed and contained some remarkable examples of furniture, but the body of Hetepheres was not present. A settlement of priests and craftsmen connected with the king's funerary cult probably grew up near the valley temples of most pyramids. Khufu's valley temple is located under the houses of the densely populated modern village of Nazlet el-Simman, below the desert plateau, but conditions are too difficult for a full excavation.

The man ultimately responsible for the successful completion of the project before the end of Khufu's twenty-three-year reign was his vizier Hemiunu, who was buried in a huge *mastaba*-tomb in the cemetery to the west of the pyramid of his royal master. Hemiunu's father, Prince Nefermaat, was King Sneferu's vizier and may have organized the building of Sneferu's pyramids. The two family lines, of the kings and their viziers, ran parallel here for at least two generations. The pyramid's date and its function as a tomb are in no doubt, despite the fact that the king's body and all funerary equipment fell victim to tomb-robbers and disappeared without a trace. However, its enormous size, the astonishing mathematical properties of its design, and the perfection and accuracy of its construction still invite unscientific explanations. It may have been the scale of the pyramid that contributed to Khufu's later reputation as a heartless despot, hinted at in Egyptian literature and reported by Herodotus.

The long reigns of Huni, Sneferu, and Khufu and the large number of royal offspring complicated royal succession. One of them, Khufu's son Hardjedef, is known from several Egyptian sources. His tomb has been located at Giza, to the east of the pyramid of his father. Hardjedef achieved fame as a wise man and supposedly author of a literary work known as *The Instructions of Hardjedef*, which continued to be read, transmitted down on papyri, throughout the rest of Egyptian history. Kawa, the eldest son of Khufu by his chief queen, Mertiotet, predeceased his father, and so the Egyptian throne passed on to another of Khufu's sons, probably by a minor queen.

The pyramid of Khufu's immediate successor, Djedefra (Horus Kheper, 2566–2558 BC), was started at Abu Rawash, to the north-west of Giza. Another pyramid, at Zawiyet el-Aryan, south of Giza, belongs to a king whose name, although attested several times in masons' graffiti, remains uncertain (readings such as Nebka, Baka, Khnumka, Wehemka, and others have been suggested). Even his place in the 4th Dynasty is disputed. Djedefra was the first to use the epithet 'son of the god Ra' and incorporate the name Ra into his own. Both pyramids were abandoned in the early stages of their construction (although, it seems, both were used for the intended burial).

King Khafra (Chephren of Herodotus, Horus Weserib, 2558–2532 BC), whose name may alternatively have been pronounced Rakhaef, was another son of Khufu, and his own son Menkaura (Mycerinus of Herodotus, Horus Kakhet, 2532–2503 BC) built their pyramids at Giza. Their plans, measurements, and the choice of building material differed from those of Khufu and show further development of ideas associated with such monuments. The ground plan (side 214.5 m.) and the height (143.5 m.) of Khafra's pyramid make it the second largest in Egypt, and a judicious choice of location, on somewhat higher ground than the pyramid of Khufu, gives the impression that it is its equal.

Khafra's pyramid complex contains a feature not repeated elsewhere, a huge guardian statue to the north of the valley temple, close to the causeway ascending to the pyramid temple and the pyramid. It is a human-headed lion couchant now known as the Great Sphinx (a Greek term that may derive from the Egyptian phrase *shesep-ankh*: 'living image'). Its size, some 72 m. long and 20 m. tall, makes it the largest statue in the ancient world. The Sphinx was not worshipped in its own right until early in the 18th Dynasty, when it came to be regarded as the image of a local form of the god Horus (Horemakhet, Greek Harmachis, Horus on the Horizon). In front of it, though apparently unconnected with it, was a building constructed according

to an unusual plan, with an open court, and this is interpreted as an early sun-temple. The designation 'son of Ra' now became a standard part of the royal titulary and both Khafra and Menkaura followed Djedefra's example in incorporating the name of the sun-god into their own.

The pyramid of Menkaura shows extensive use of granite, a more prestigious building material than limestone, but it was built on a smaller scale (side 105 m. and 65.5 m. in height), suggesting that the striving for sheer size had passed its peak. It is a precursor of the smaller and less painstakingly constructed pyramids of the 5th and 6th Dynasties. The Giza pyramids display a clear relationship in the layout of the site, but this is more likely due to the techniques used in the initial surveying than to an overall plan conceived at the outset. A theory according to which the positions of the pyramids at Giza reflect the stars of Orion in the sky is unlikely to be correct.

The pyramid complex of Menkaura was apparently hastily completed by his son and successor, Shepseskaf (Horus Shepseskhet, 2503–2498 BC). He was the only ruler of the Old Kingdom who abandoned the pyramidal form, instead constructing a huge sarcophagus-shaped *mastaba* at South Saqqara, the base of which measured 100 by 72 m. The monument is known as Mastabat el-Fara'un. Khentkawes, probably a queen of Menkaura, had a similar tomb at Giza, but a small pyramid complex was also constructed for her at Abusir. The significance of Shepseskaf's move away from a pyramid towards a sarcophagus-shaped tomb escapes us, and it is tempting to regard it as a sign of religious uncertainty, if not crisis. The Turin Canon inserts a reign of two years after Shepseskaf, but the name of the king is lost (perhaps he is Manetho's Thamphthis) and it has not yet been possible to confirm it from contemporary monuments. It seems, therefore, that all of the 4th-Dynasty kings were Sneferu's descendants. The idea of the son burying his father and succeeding him was ubiquitous in Egypt, but this was not an absolute precondition for royal succession and did not automatically confer such a right.

The precise location of White Wall (Ineb-hedj), the capital of Egypt traditionally founded by King Menes at the beginning of Egyptian history, has not yet been established. It may have been near the modern village of Abusir, in the Nile Valley approximately to the north-east of the pyramid of Djoser. The reasons for the choice of Zawiyet el-Aryan, Meidum, Dahshur, Saqqara, Giza, and Abu Rawash for the siting of the pyramids of the 3rd and 4th Dynasties are far from clear. The location of the royal palaces and the availability of a suitable building

site near the pyramid of the King's predecessor may have played a part in the decision.

Kingship and the Afterlife

For a modern mind, especially one that no longer knows profound religious experience and deep faith, it is not easy to understand the reasons for such huge and seemingly wasteful projects as the building of pyramids. This lack of understanding is reflected in the large number of esoteric theories about their purpose and origin. The profusion of these views is helped by an almost complete reticence on the subject by Egyptian texts.

In ancient Egypt, the king enjoyed a special position as a mediator between the gods and people, an interface between divine and human, who was responsible to both. His Horus name identified him with the hawk-god (of whom he was a manifestation), and his *nebty* ('two ladies') name related him to the two tutelary goddesses of Egypt, Nekhbet and Wadjet. He shared the designation *netjer* with the gods, but it was usually qualified as *netjer nefer*, junior god (although this could also be understood as perfect god). From the reign of Khafra onwards, one of his names was introduced by the title 'son of Ra'. The king had been chosen and approved by the gods and after his death he retired into their company. Contact with the gods, achieved through ritual, was his prerogative, although for practical purposes the more mundane elements were delegated to priests. For the people of Egypt, their king was a guarantor of the continued orderly running of their world: the regular change of the seasons, the return of the annual inundation of the Nile, and the predictable movements of the heavenly bodies, but also safety from the threatening forces of nature as well as enemies outside Egypt's borders. The king's efficacy in fulfilling these responsibilities was therefore of paramount importance for the well-being of every Egyptian. Internal dissent was minimal, and support for the system was genuine and widespread. Coercive state mechanisms, such as police, were conspicuous by their absence; people were tied to the land and control over every individual was exercised by local communities who were closed to newcomers.

The king's role did not end with his death: for his contemporaries who were buried in the vicinity of his pyramid and for those involved in his funerary cult their relationship with the king continued for ever. It was, therefore, in everybody's interests to safeguard the king's position and status after his death as much as in his lifetime. At this period of

Egyptian history, monumentality was an important way of expressing such a concept. Given the degree of economic prosperity enjoyed by the country, the availability of labour-force resources, and the high standard of management, there is no need to doubt that the Egyptians were perfectly capable of successfully completing pyramid projects. To look for extraneous motives and forces behind them is futile and unnecessary.

The tombs of the members of the royal family, priests, and officials of the 3rd Dynasty were separated from the exclusive areas with the royal pyramids. Almost all of these tombs continued to be built in mud brick, although early examples of private *mastaba*-tombs in stone may exist at Saqqara. However, in the 4th Dynasty such tombs, now stone-built, surrounded the pyramids, as if the tombs themselves were part of the complexes (and this, indeed, is how they may have been perceived). Because many of them were gifts from the king and made by royal craftsmen and artists, the volume of royal building activities was even larger than suggested by the pyramids alone. Extensive fields of *mastaba*-tombs built according to an overall plan, separated by streets intersecting at right angles, are unique to the 4th Dynasty and are especially known from around the pyramid at Meidum, Sneferu's northern pyramid at Dahshur, and Khufu's pyramid at Giza. We must not forget that most of the evidence used in our reconstruction of the history of the Old Kingdom derives from funerary contexts and so carries a possibility of being biased; Old Kingdom settlements have rarely been preserved or excavated (the towns at Elephantine and Ayn Asil being unusual survivals). The state of technology can be deduced from the projects in which it was applied, but detailed information is lacking. So, for example, only post-Old Kingdom sources make it quite clear that the pyramid-builders did not use wheeled vehicles (although the wheel was known).

The Old Kingdom Economy and Administration

The enormous volume of construction work carried out during the two centuries when the kings of Manetho's 3rd and 4th Dynasties held sway had a profound effect on the country's economy and society. It would be wrong to underestimate the considerable effort and expertise required in the construction of large brick-built *mastaba*-tombs of the Early Dynastic Period, but pyramid construction in stone elevated such enterprises onto a completely different plane. The number of professional builders required must have been large, especially if one takes

into account all those involved in the quarrying and transport of stone blocks, the construction of approach ramps needed by the builders, and all the logistics, such as provision of food, water, and other necessities, the maintenance of tools and many other related tasks.

The Egyptian economy was not based on slave labour. Even if one allows for much of the work to have been carried out at the time when the annual inundation made it impossible to work in the fields, a large section of the labour force required for pyramid building had to be diverted from agricultural tasks and food production. This must have exerted considerable pressure on the existing resources and provided powerful stimuli for efforts to increase agricultural production, to improve the administration of the country, to develop an efficient way of collecting taxes, and to look for additional sources of revenue and manpower abroad.

Demands on Egyptian agricultural production changed dramatically with the inauguration of pyramid building because of the need to support those who had been removed from food production. The consumption and expectations of those who joined the managerial élite increased in line with their new status. However, agricultural techniques remained the same. The state's main contribution was organizational, including such acts as the prevention of local famines by bringing in surplus resources from elsewhere, the lessening of the effects of major calamities (such as low inundations), the elimination of damaging local conflicts by providing arbitration, and the improvement of security. Irrigation works were the responsibility of local administrators, and the attempts to increase agricultural production focused on expanding cultivated land for which the state was able to provide labour forces and other resources.

This went hand in hand with the need for a better administrative organization of the country and a more efficient way of collecting taxes. The existing major centres of population, often royal estates, now became capitals of administrative districts (*nomes*), with the strategically placed capital of the country, at the vertex of the Delta, providing the equilibrium between Upper Egypt (*ta shemau*) in the south, and Lower Egypt (*ta mehu*) in the north. Old Kingdom cities are, however, overlaid by later settlements and, especially in the Delta, they often lie below the present water-table. These early settlements are therefore archaeologically practically unknown; even the capital of Egypt has not yet been excavated, and towns such as Elephantine, or Ayn Asil in the Dakhla Oasis, are exceptional. The earlier semi-autonomous village communities now lost their independence and privately owned land

practically disappeared, all replaced by royal estates. The earlier rudimentary census was transformed into an all-embracing fiscal system.

Egypt during much of the Old Kingdom was a centrally planned and administered state, headed by a king who was the theoretical owner of all its resources and whose powers were practically absolute. He was able to commandeer people, to impose compulsory labour, to extract taxes, and to lay claim to any resources of the land at will, although in practical terms this was tempered by a number of restrictions. During the 3rd and 4th Dynasties, many of the top officials of state were members of the royal family, in direct continuation of the system of government of the Early Dynastic Period. Their authority derived from their close links with the king. The highest office was that of a vizier (the word conventionally used to translate the Egyptian term *tjaty*), who was responsible for overseeing the running of all state departments, excluding the religious affairs. It was under the kings of the 4th Dynasty that a whole series of royal princes held the vizierate with spectacular success.

Titles of various officials represent a major source of information on Egyptian administration. Explicit, detailed texts, such as that of the early 4th-Dynasty official Metjen, were exceptional. The intensity of state control over every individual now increased dramatically and the number of officials at all levels of administration grew in a corresponding fashion. A consequence of this was that a bureaucratic career was open to competent literate newcomers not related to the royal family. These officials were remunerated for their services in several different ways, but the most significant was an *ex officio* lease of state (royal) land, usually estates settled with their cultivators. Such estates produced practically all that their personnel needed—internal trade at this economic level was limited to opportunist bartering—and the *ex officio* remuneration was their surplus produce. This land reverted, at least in theory, to the king after the official's term of office expired and so could be assigned as remuneration of another official. In an economic system that did not know money it was a very effective way of paying salaries of officials, but it also represented a significant erosion of the king's resources.

Royal Funerary Cults

The effect of pyramid building did not stop with the completion of the structure itself. Each pyramid complex was the focus of the cult of a deceased king that was meant to continue indefinitely. Its aim was

to provide for the king's needs and, less directly, those of his dependants—that is, members of his family and his officials buried in the tombs nearby. The primary benefactor was the king himself, who, in his lifetime, endowed his pyramid establishment with land or made arrangements for contributions from the state treasury. The cult arrangements involved presentations of offerings, although it is likely that only a small part of the produce available to these establishments ended on their altars and offering tables (and even this was probably not wasted but recycled, being either consumed by the temple personnel or redistributed more widely). Most of it was used to support priests and officials involved in the funerary cult, and craftsmen living in the pyramid town, or else it was redirected to support funerary cults in non-royal tombs. This was a distinctive ancient Egyptian way of redistributing the national produce, and its benefits trickled down through all the strata of Egyptian society. However, land donations made to pyramid establishments were protected for ever by royal decrees that made them permanent and inalienable, and the result was a gradual reduction of the king's economic power.

Arrangements for the royal funerary cult were made even in the provinces. Sneferu's cult may have focused on a number of small step pyramids, each with a ground plan of c.20 sq. m., at least seven of which are known (at Elephantine, Edfu, el-Kula, Ombos, Abydos, el-Seila, and Zawiyet el-Mayitin). Only one of them, at el-Seila, can be dated with precision to the reign of Sneferu by a stele and a statue.

Large building projects also provided stimuli for expeditions that were sent abroad to secure mineral and other resources not available in Egypt itself. These were state organized: no other form of long-distance trade was known before the 6th Dynasty. The names of Djoser, Sekhemkhet, Sneferu, and Khufu are attested in rock inscriptions at the turquoise and copper mines of Wadi Maghara in the Sinai peninsula. Djoser may have been preceded there by Nebka, if this is the same king as Horus Sanakht. The Palermo Stone contains a record of forty ships that brought wood from an unnamed region abroad in the reign of Sneferu. The names of both Khufu and Djedefra were inscribed in the gneiss quarries deep in the Nubian Western Desert, 65 km. to the north-west of Abu Simbel. Greywacke and siltstone for the making of statues came from Wadi Hammamat, between Koptos (modern Qift) and the Red Sea. Commerce or diplomacy probably explain the presence of Egyptian objects at Byblos, north of Beirut, in the reigns of Khufu, Khafra, and Menkaura, and also at Tell Mardikh (Ebla) in Syria, in the time of Khafra.

No serious threat to Egypt from abroad existed during the 3rd and 4th Dynasties. Military campaigns in foreign countries, especially in Nubia and Libya, must be perceived as exploitation of the neighbouring areas in search of ready resources. It was one of the main duties of the Egyptian king to subjugate Egypt's external enemies, and the kingship doctrine and *realpolitik* here conveniently coincided. Most evidence comes from the reign of Sneferu, but this probably was not unique, only better documented. Such crude forms of external policy seem to have been particularly common during the 4th Dynasty when the country's economy was probably stretched to its limits. Nubia was the destination of a large expedition sent by Sneferu in search of such resources as human captives and herds of cattle, as well as raw materials, including wood. The Palermo Stone records a booty of 7,000 captives and 200,000 head of cattle. These campaigns destroyed local settlements and depopulated Lower Nubia (between the 1st and 2nd Nile cataracts), apparently resulting in the disappearance of the local culture known as the A Group (see Chapter 4). During the 4th Dynasty, a southern settlement was established at Buhen, in the second-cataract area.

Monumental building provided unprecedented opportunities for artists, especially those making statues and carving reliefs. The experience in small-scale working in stone acquired during the preceding periods was turned to large-scale sculpture, with brilliant results. Royal pyramid complexes were provided with statues, mostly of the king, sometimes accompanied by deities. Although for us their aesthetic qualities are so striking, these works of art were, in the first instance, functional. Thus, the earliest preserved large royal statue, that of Djoser, was found in his pyramid temple at Saqqara. It was placed in his *serdab* ('statue-room', from the Arabic word for cellar), at the northern side of the pyramid, and was intended as a secondary manifestation of the king's *ka* (spirit), after the body itself. A similar motive must be ascribed to tomb statues made for private individuals.

The number of royal statues set up in temples increased when the developed pyramid complex appeared during the 4th Dynasty. The gneiss statue of Khafra, protected by a hawk (perched on the back of his throne as a manifestation of the god Horus, with whom the king was identified), is a masterpiece that was often imitated in later periods, but never equalled. Statues of gods were also presented to the temples of local deities, but hardly any of these have survived.

The temples and causeways associated with pyramids were decorated in superb raised relief, and the same was true of the chapels of many tombs from the mid-4th Dynasty. These reliefs were not mere

decoration but expressed concepts such as kingship in royal monuments, or fulfilment of needs in the afterlife in non-royal tombs, and their inclusion in temples and tombs guaranteed their perpetuity. The wooden niche stelae from the tomb of Djoser's official Hesyra at Saqqara (now in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo) display a high standard of relief decoration at a remarkably early period. These reliefs were created by the same artists who decorated royal monuments and, like the tombs and their statues, were royal gifts.

The hieroglyphic script now became a fully developed system employed for monumental purposes. Its cursive counterpart, called hieratic by Egyptologists, was used for writing on papyrus, but finds of such documents dating from before the 5th Dynasty remain extremely scarce.

Sun-Temples and the Ascendancy of the God Ra

Until quite recently, the rise of Manetho's 5th Dynasty used to be described in terms of a literary text set out in Papyrus Westcar. This is an incompletely preserved collection of stories, probably compiled during the Middle Kingdom and written down a little later. The Arabian Nights setting is the court of King Khufu, where royal princes entertain their fretful father by stories. Prince Hardjedef's narrative foretells the birth of triplets, the future kings Userkaf, Sahura, and Neferirkara, to Radjedet, the wife of a priest of the god Ra at Sakhbu (in the Delta) as the result of her union with the sun-god. To Khufu's sorrow, these children are destined to replace his own descendants on the throne of Egypt. The beginning of Manetho's new Dynasty, the 5th, appears to be linked to a major change in Egyptian religion and, as Papyrus Westcar shows, the division may reflect ancient Egyptian tradition.

The first king of the new Dynasty was Userkaf (Horus Irmaet, 2494–2487 BC), whose name is of the same pattern as that of the last (or perhaps penultimate) king of the 4th Dynasty, Shepseskaf. It has been suggested that Userkaf was a grandson of Djedefra, but, although there were undoubtedly some family links between him and the rulers of the 4th Dynasty, their precise nature is uncertain. We know nothing about the history of Userkaf's reign and there is no contemporary evidence to support the version of events given in Papyrus Westcar.

The main surviving architectural achievement of Userkaf's reign was the building of a temple specifically dedicated to the sun-god Ra. This was the beginning of a trend; six of the first seven kings of Manetho's 5th Dynasty (Userkaf, Sahura, Neferirkara, Raneferef,

Nyuserra, and Menkauhor) built such temples in the next eighty years. The names of these temples are known from the titularies of their priests, but only two have so far been located and excavated, those of Userkaf and Nyuserra. The sun-temple built by Userkaf is at Abusir, north of Saqqara (although it seems that current excavations confirm the view that the division between Saqqara and Abusir has been created by modern archaeologists and was not felt to exist in antiquity).

Userkaf's pyramid is at North Saqqara, close to the north-eastern corner of Djoser's enclosure. A substantial re-evaluation of rigid monumentality had taken place by this time, judging from the pyramid's small size (side 73.5 m. and height 49 m.), the less painstaking method of construction, and the evident willingness to improvise (the main pyramid temple is, unusually, set against the *southern* face of the pyramid, perhaps in order not to interfere with an already existing structure). Userkaf, whose reign lasted for only seven years, may have come to the throne as an old man.

The building of sun-temples was the outcome of a gradual rise in importance of the sun-god. Ra now became Egypt's closest equivalent to a state god. Each king built a new sun-temple and their proximity to the pyramid complexes, as well as their similarity to the royal funerary monuments in plan, suggest that they were built for the afterlife rather than the present. A sun-temple consisted of a valley temple linked by a causeway to the upper temple. The main feature of the upper temple was a massive pedestal with an obelisk, a symbol of the sun-god. An altar was placed in a court open to the sun. There were no wall reliefs in Userkaf's construction, the earliest of the sun-temples, but in Nyuserra's they were extensive. On the one hand, they emphasized the sun-god's role as the ultimate giver of life and the moving force in nature, and, on the other, they established the king's place in the eternal cycle of events by showing his periodic celebration of the *sed*-festivals. A large mud-brick replica of a barque of the sun-god was built nearby. The temples were, therefore, personal monuments to each king's continued relationship with the sun-god in the afterlife. Like pyramid complexes, sun-temples were endowed with land, received donations in kind on festival days, and had their own personnel.

The 5th Dynasty

The explanation of the origins of the 5th Dynasty given in Papyrus Westcar can be confronted by evidence contemporary with the reigns of Sahura and Neferirkara. Queen Khentkawes is identified by a unique

title in her *mastaba*-tomb at Giza: 'mother of the two kings of Upper and Lower Egypt'. The same title is known from her pyramid (recently discovered by Czech archaeologists), which is situated next to Neferirkara's pyramid at Abusir. If the Giza Khentkawes and the Abusir Khentkawes are the same person, the two sons referred to in her title were Sahura (Horus Nebkhau, 2487–2475 BC) and Neferirkara (Kakai, Horus Userkhau, 2475–2455 BC), and Papyrus Westcar is partly correct. The pyramids of these two kings are at Abusir, as are the pyramids of all the kings who built sun-temples (and probably also that of Shepseskara, 2455–2448 BC). The causeway linking the valley and pyramid temples of Sahura's pyramid complex was decorated with very accomplished reliefs which anticipated the better-known reliefs of King Unas (2375–2345 BC). These Abusir kings form a closely knit group and their monuments display many similarities.

The pyramid temple of Neferirkara has yielded the most important group of administrative papyri known from the Old Kingdom. These documents throw light on the day-to-day running of the pyramid establishment and include detailed records of produce delivered to it, lists of priests on duty, inventories of temple equipment, and letters. The pyramid complex, however, was left unfinished and its valley temple and causeway were later incorporated by Nyuserra into his own pyramid complex.

King Shepseskara (Horus Sekhemkhau, 2455–2448 BC) is the most ephemeral of the Abusir group, and no textual or archaeological evidence for his sun-temple has yet been found. This is probably due to the brevity of his reign. That of King Raneferef (Isi, Horus Neferkhau, 2448–2445 BC) was even shorter. Although his pyramid did not progress beyond its lowermost courses, the pyramid temple has recently produced papyri comparable to those found in the temple of Neferirkara.

The sun-temple of King Nyuserra (Iny, Horus Setibtawy, 2445–2421 BC) is at Abu Gurab, north of Abusir. The last king who built a sun-temple was Menkauhor (Ikauhor, Horus Menkhau, 2421–2414 BC). His pyramid has not yet been located, but the tombs of its priests and other indications suggest that it may be concealed by the sand somewhere at southern Abusir or North Saqqara.

The most striking development in Egyptian administration during this period was the withdrawal of members of the royal family from the highest offices. Another noteworthy feature was the skilful way in which sun-temples were incorporated into the economic system. Some of the appointments to the priesthood in sun-temples were purely

nominal and made in order to entitle their holder to benefits derived from such offices; these may have included temple land leased *ex officio*. The same was true of appointments to the personnel of pyramid establishments. There was no glaring contradiction between the demands of the world of the gods and the dead, and the needs of the living. One could well visualize a system where most of the national product would, in theory, be earmarked for the needs of the deceased kings, their sun-temples, and shrines of the local gods, but would, in fact, be used to support most of the Egyptian population.

Religious beliefs of the ancient Egyptians were locally diverse and socially stratified. Practically every area of Egypt had its local god, which for its inhabitants was the most important deity, and the elevation of Ra to the level of state god had little effect on this. If anything, the annals show that the kings now began to pay even greater attention to local deities in all parts of the country by making donations, often of land, to their shrines, or exempting them from taxes and forced labour.

Expeditions continued to be dispatched to the traditional places outside Egypt, especially to bring turquoise and copper from Wadi Maghara (Sahura, Nyuserra, Menkauhor) and Wadi Kharit (Sahura) in the Sinai, and gneiss from the quarries north-west of Abu Simbel (Sahura). During the reign of Sahura, there is a reference to an expedition to procure exotic goods (malachite, myrrh, and electrum, an alloy of gold and silver) from Punt, an African country somewhere between the upper reaches of the Nile and the Somali coast. Contacts with Byblos were maintained (Sahura, Nyuserra, Neferirkara). The discovery of objects bearing the names of several 5th-Dynasty kings at the site of Dorak, near the Sea of Marmara, remains ambiguous.

During the 5th Dynasty there was an increase in the number of priests and officials who were able to secure tombs by their own effort. Some of these *mastabas* are among the largest and best decorated in the Old Kingdom, as in the case of the tombs of Ty (Saqqara) and Ptahshepses (Abusir), both probably of the reign of Nyuserra. Many of them are located in provincial cemeteries rather than in the vicinity of the royal pyramids. Such loosening of the dependence on royal favour was, inevitably, accompanied by a corresponding variety in the forms and quality of artistic quality of statues and reliefs. 'Autobiographical' texts that appeared in these tombs provide new insights into contemporary society. Most of them consisted of conventional phrases and less usual topics often concerned with the tomb-owner's relationship to the king. These trends were to continue throughout the rest of the Old Kingdom.

The Kings of the Pyramid Texts

The portents of change were in the wind after the death of Menkauhor, but the nuances of the process escape us. A degree of standardization and rationalization pervaded royal building activities. Menkauhor's successors did not build sun-temples, although the position of the sun-god Ra remained unaffected. The long reign of King Djedkara (Isesi, Horus Djedkhau, 2414–2375 BC) links the Abusir group of kings with those who followed. Some of his officials were buried in the Abusir necropolis, and so attest to continuity rather than a break, but the king's pyramid is at southern Saqqara. Its modest measurements (side 78.5 sq. m., height 52.5 m.) were, with the exception of his immediate successor Unas, adopted by all the remaining major rulers of the Old Kingdom (Teti, Pepy I, Merenra, and Pepy II). *The Maxims of Ptahhotep*, a major literary work of the Old Kingdom, which summarizes the rules of conduct of a successful official, is ascribed to the vizier of Djedkara.

The reign of King Unas (Horus Wadj-tawy, 2375–2345 BC) was also a long one. His pyramid is at the south-western corner of Djoser's enclosure, but it is even smaller than that of his predecessor. Its long causeway, stretching for nearly 700 m., was originally decorated with remarkable scenes, now very fragmentary, which surpass the stereotyped means of expression of Egyptian kingship, or at least convey it in a novel way. They include records of events in Unas's reign, such as transport of columns from the granite quarries at Aswan to the king's pyramid complex. But the main innovation of Unas's pyramid, and one that was to be characteristic of the remaining pyramids of the Old Kingdom (including some of the queens), was the first appearance of the Pyramid Texts inscribed on the walls of its burial chamber and other parts of its interior. The Pyramid Texts represent the earliest large religious composition known from ancient Egypt; some of their elements were created well before the reign of Unas and map out the development of Egyptian religious thought from Predynastic times. The deceased King Unas is identified with the god Osiris and referred to as Osiris Unas. The Osirian religious doctrine is by far the most important in the Pyramid Texts, but there are also ideas associated with the sun-god, as well as the remains of star-oriented concepts and some others, probably even older. However, the complexity of the Pyramid Texts makes interpretation of individual spells difficult, and understanding of their mutual relationship is especially hard. The reason for their inclusion inside the pyramid was to provide the

deceased king with texts that were regarded as essential for his survival and well-being in afterlife. Their mere presence was probably deemed sufficient to make them effective. While the distribution of the Pyramid Texts within the structure is not accidental, it is unlikely that they are connected with such a transient event as a funeral.

The belief that after death the deceased entered the kingdom of the god Osiris now became widespread. Osiris, originally a local deity in the Eastern Delta, was a chthonic (linked to the earth) local god associated with agriculture and annually recurring events in nature. He was probably an ideal choice for the universal god of the dead, given that the myths concerning his resurrection mirrored the revitalization of Egyptian soil after the annual flood receded (which used to happen until the building of a dam at Aswan at the beginning of this century and the High Dam in the 1960s). The early stages of the development of the cult of Osiris are far from clear. He was an appropriate counterpart for the sun-god Ra and his rise to prominence may have been caused by corresponding considerations. Our written records are, however, inadequate to establish exactly when this happened. In their tombs, deceased persons are described as *imakhu* ('honoured') by Osiris: in other words, their needs in afterlife were satisfied because of their association with him. The concept of *imakhu* (which can also be translated as 'being provided for') was an expression of a remarkable moral dictum that ran through all levels of Egyptian society and that corrected the extreme cases of social inequality: it was the duty of a more influential and richer person to take care of the poor and socially disadvantaged in the same way as the head of a family was responsible for all of its members.

The 6th Dynasty

According to Manetho, the reign of Unas concluded the 5th Dynasty, and the next king, Teti (Horus Sehetepwawy, 2345–2323 BC), ushered in the 6th Dynasty. We have no definite information on the personal relationship between Teti and his predecessors, but his chief wife Iput was probably Unas's daughter. Teti's vizier Kagemni began his career under Djedkara and Unas. However, the Turin Canon also inserts a break at this point followed by a total for the kings between Menes (the first king of the 1st Dynasty) and Unas (the figure is now lost). This gives us some food for thought, because the criterion for such divisions in the Turin Canon invariably was the change of location of the capital and royal residence.

The original capital at White Wall, founded at the beginning of the 1st Dynasty, was probably gradually replaced in importance by the more populated suburbs further to the south, approximately to the east of Teti's pyramid. Djed-isut, the name of this part of the city, derived from the name of Teti's pyramid and its pyramid town. The royal palaces of Djedkara and Pepy I (and possibly also that of Unas) may, however, have already been transferred further south, away from the squalor, noise, and smell of a crowded city, to places in the valley east of the present South Saqqara and separated from Djed-isut by a lake. This would, at least, explain the choice of South Saqqara as the site for the pyramids of Djedkara and Pepy I.

In a development that paralleled that near the pyramid of Teti, the adjacent settlement took its name Mennefer (Greek Memphis) from the name of Pepy I's pyramid and its pyramid town. Later, in the second millennium, this became physically linked with the settlements around the temple of the god Ptah further to the east, and the city in its entirety began to be known as Mennefer. So, to some extent, the site of the royal residence may have changed at the end of the 5th or early in the 6th Dynasty and this may explain the division in the Turin Canon, later reflected in Manetho's account (Pepy I's father Teti was included in the new line of rulers). But here we are entering a realm of speculation and only future fieldwork in the Memphite region will show how much of it is justified.

Teti may have been followed by King Userkara (2323–2321 BC), although his existence can be disputed. Some confusion may be due to the fact that Pepy I (Horus Merytawy, 2321–2287 BC), the son of Teti and Queen Iput, was called Nefersahor in the first part of his reign. This was his 'prenomen' or 'throne name', received at his coronation, preceded by the title *nesu-bit* ('he of the sedge and bee') and enclosed in an oval cartouche. Later he changed it to Meryra. The 'nomen' or 'birth name', Pepy (the number that conventionally follows is ours, and was never used by the ancient Egyptians), predated his accession to the throne; it was introduced by the title *sa Ra* ('son of the god Ra') and was also written in a cartouche.

Egypt's internal situation now began to change. The king's position remained theoretically unaffected, but there can be no doubt that difficulties appeared. This impression can be only partly explained by the increase in the volume and quality of information that allows us a deeper insight into Egyptian society, beyond the monolithically monumental and largely formal façade of the earlier periods. The king's person was no longer untouchable: a biographical text of Weni, a high

court official, mentions an unsuccessful plot against Pepy I inspired by one of his queens late in his reign. Her name is not given, but marriage politics were known: in his declining years, the king married two sisters, both called Ankhnes-meryra ('King Meryra [Pepy I] lives for her'). Their father Khui was an influential official at Abydos. These were dramatic events, but the growth of power and influence of local administrators (especially in Upper Egypt, further away from the capital) and the corresponding weakening of the royal authority may have had less dramatic, but potentially much more serious, consequences. A new office of 'overseer of Upper Egypt' was created late in the 5th Dynasty.

The kings of the 6th Dynasty built extensively, constructing shrines of local gods all over Egypt, but these fell victim to later rebuilding or have not yet been excavated. Upper Egyptian temples, such as those of Khenti-amentiu at Abydos, Min at Koptos, Hathor at Dendera, Horus at Hierakonpolis, and Satet at Elephantine, were especially favoured. Donations made to these temples and exemptions from taxes and compulsory service granted to them multiplied.

The pyramid temples of the late 5th and 6th Dynasties include scenes that appear so convincing that one might be tempted to take them at face value. So, for example, a scene showing the submission of Libyan chiefs during the reign of Pepy II is a close copy of such a representation in the temples of Sahura, Nyuserra, and Pepy I (and, some 1,500 years later, it was repeated in the temple of King Taharqa at Kawa, in Sudan). These scenes were standard expressions of the achievements of the ideal king and as such bore little resemblance to reality. Their inclusion in the temples guaranteed their continuity. The same explanation may be given to the scenes of ships returning from an expedition to Asia and a raid on the nomads of Palestine, depicted in the causeway of Unas. However, other sources show that similar events did take place. The already mentioned Weni describes repeated large-scale military actions against the Aamu of the Syro-Palestinian region. In spite of the way they were presented, they were preventative or punitive raids rather than defensive campaigns.

The exploitation of mineral resources in the deserts outside Egypt continued. Turquoise and copper continued to be mined at Wadi Maghara in the Sinai (Djedkara, Pepy I and II), Egyptian alabaster at Hatnub (Teti, Merenra, Pepy I and II), and greywacke and siltstone in the Wadi Hammamat (Pepy I, Merenra) in the Eastern Desert, gneiss in the quarries north-west of Abu Simbel (Djedkara). Expeditions were sent to Punt by Djedkara, and commercial and diplomatic contacts

were maintained with Byblos (by Djedkara, Unas, Teti, Pepy I and II, and Merenra) and also with Ebla (Pepy I).

Nubia became particularly important during the later 6th Dynasty and attempts were made to improve navigation in the first-cataract region in the time of Merenra. The area now began to receive an influx of new settlers (the so-called Nubian C Group) from further south, between the 3rd and 4th cataracts, with the centre at Kerma. There were occasional clashes with these people as Egypt tried to prevent a potential threat to its economic interests and its security. Caravan expeditions across the Nubian territory (the lands of Wawat, Irtjet, Satju, and Iam) were organized by administrators of the southernmost Egyptian nome at Elephantine, such as Harkhuf, Pepynakht Heqaib, and Sabni. African luxury goods that reached Egypt this way included incense, hard wood (ebony), animal skins, and ivory, but also dancing dwarfs and exotic animals. The employment of Nubians, especially in border police units and as mercenaries in military expeditions, dates from this period onwards.

The Western Desert was criss-crossed by caravan routes. One of them left the Nile in the area of Abydos for the Kharga Oasis and then proceeded southwards along the track now known as Darb el-Arbain (Arabic: 'forty-day route') to the Selima Oasis. Another departed from Kharga westwards, to the Dakhla Oasis, where an important settlement thrived at Ayn Asil, near modern Balat, especially during the reign of Pepy II.

The Decline of the Old Kingdom

Pepy I was succeeded by two of his sons, first by Merenra (fully Merenra-nemtyemsaf, Horus Ankh-khau, 2287–2278 BC), and then by Pepy II (Horus Netjerkhau, 2278–2184 BC). Both of them came to the throne very young and both built their pyramids at South Saqqara. Pepy II's reign of some ninety-four years (he inherited the throne at the age of 6) was the longest in ancient Egypt, but its second half probably was rather ineffective, as the forces that had been insidiously eroding the theoretical foundations of the Egyptian state became apparent. The ensuing crisis was inevitable, because its seeds were contained in the system itself. It was, in the first instance, ideological, because the king whose economic power had been greatly weakened could no longer perform the role assigned to him by the doctrine of Egyptian kingship. The consequences of this for the whole of Egyptian society were serious; the *ex officio* system of remuneration no longer

functioned satisfactorily and the fiscal system was probably on the verge of collapse.

Some offices became, in effect, hereditary and were kept in the same family for several generations. In Middle and Upper Egypt, rock-cut tombs at sites such as Sedment, Dishasha, Kom el-Ahmar Sawaris, Sheikh Said, Meir, Deir el-Gebrawi, Akhmim (el-Hawawish), el-Hagarsa, el-Qasr wa 'l-Saiyad, Elkab, and Aswan (Qubbet el-Hawa) testify to the aspirations of the local administrators, now would-be semi-independent local rulers. We know less about the corresponding cemeteries in the Delta, although sites such as Heliopolis and Mendes prove that they existed. The proximity of the capital may have made any moves towards increased autonomy more difficult, but the main reason for the lack of evidence is local geography and geology. Old Kingdom levels are close to or below the current water table and this makes excavations very difficult. We know much more about the local administrators of Dakhla Oasis who lived in the settlement of Ayn Asil and were buried in large *mastaba*-tombs in the local cemetery (Qilat el-Dabba).

Centralized government all but ceased to exist, and the advantages of a unified state were lost. The situation was further aggravated by climatic factors, especially a series of low Niles and a decline in precipitation that affected areas adjacent to the Nile Valley and produced pressure on Egypt's border areas by nomadic inhabitants. The fact that many potential royal successors were waiting in the wings after Pepy II's exceptionally long reign probably contributed to the chaotic situation that followed.

Pepy II was succeeded by Merenra II (Nemtyemsaf), Queen Nitigret (2184–2181 BC), and some seventeen or more ephemeral kings who represent Manetho's 7th and 8th Dynasties. His dynastic separations are, again, hard to explain except as accidental divisions in the lists. Most of these rulers are little more than names for us, but several of them are known from the protective decrees issued for the temple of Min at Koptos. Qakara Iby is the only one whose small pyramid (side 31.5 sq. m.) has been found at South Saqqara. So it was mainly the Memphite residence and the theoretical claim to the whole of Egypt that linked these kinglets with the giant kings of the earlier Old Kingdom. The Turin Canon's grand total of 955 years that separated Menes, at the beginning of the 1st Dynasty, from the last of these ephemeral rulers, concludes the line of Memphite kings and the period described by us as the Old Kingdom.