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The First Intermediate Period (c.2160–2055 BC)

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Egyptologists traditionally distinguish between the major periods of pharaonic history on the basis of the political state of the country. ‘Kingdoms’—defined as times of political unity and strong, centralized government—alternate with ‘intermediate periods’, which are in contrast characterized by the rivalries of local rulers in their claims for power. In the case of the First Intermediate Period, the long line of kings who had ruled the country from Memphis ended with the last pharaohs of the 8th Dynasty. After the 8th Dynasty power was held by a succession of rulers originating from Herakleopolis Magna, which was located in northern Middle Egypt, near the entrance to the Faiyum. These kings appear as both the 9th and 10th Dynasties in Manetho’s history, having been mistakenly subdivided in the course of the transmission of the original king-list (see Chapter 1 for a discussion of Manetho’s *Aegyptiaca*).

The shift of the royal residence from Memphis to Herakleopolis was evidently regarded by the ancient Egyptians as a major break. This is suggested by the fact that the compilers of the 19th-Dynasty Turin Canon inserted a grand total for the earlier part of Egyptian history after the list of 8th-Dynasty rulers. In addition, the king-list in the temple of Seti I at Abydos gives no royal names for the period between the 8th Dynasty and the beginning of the Middle Kingdom.

In fact, the Herakleopolitans never wielded control over southern Upper Egypt. Here, in the course of prolonged struggles between local magnates, a family of Theban nomarchs established itself as the

leading force, assumed the titles of royalty, and duly appeared in the annals of pharaonic kingship as the 11th Dynasty. From this moment onwards, two competing states confronted each other within the territory of Egypt, until, terminating an era of intermittent war, the Theban king Nebhepetra Mentuhotep II managed to defeat his Herakleopolitan opponent and reunite the country under Theban control, thus inaugurating the Middle Kingdom. This chapter therefore deals with the period between the end of the 8th Dynasty and the reign of Nebhepetra Mentuhotep II.

Chronological Problems

We are comparatively well informed concerning the second part of the First Intermediate Period—the phase of competition between Herakleopolitans and Thebans, which lasted for some 90 to 110 years. However, the earlier part of the period—the phase of Herakleopolitan rule before the advent of the 11th Dynasty—is rather less clear. There is a dearth of information of immediate chronological value because of the loss of most of the names of the Herakleopolitans and of all information concerning the lengths of their reigns in the Turin Canon, and because of the unsatisfactory state of archaeological research in northern Middle Egypt and the Delta, the heartlands of the Herakleopolitan kingdom. Because of the scarcity of data directly relating to the Herakleopolitans, it was even at one stage proposed that there must have been no period during which Herakleopolitans were (at least nominally) the sole rulers, and that they must have been entirely coeval with the 11th Dynasty. This is impossible, however, since we know of prominent individuals and important political events that can be placed only in the period between the 8th and 11th Dynasties.

Detailed studies of the succession of holders of important administrative and priestly posts in several towns of Upper Egypt, as well as studies of developments in the archaeological material, strongly suggest that this interval between the 8th and 11th Dynasties occupied a fairly long span of time, probably amounting to some three or four generations. In addition, the figure that Manetho reports as the length of his 10th Dynasty can be interpreted to support an estimate of nearly two centuries for the whole of the First Intermediate Period, an assessment that would also be in perfect agreement with the prosopographical and archaeological evidence.

The Nature of the First Intermediate Period

The First Intermediate Period, however, was not just a time of disorder in terms of the succession to the throne of Egypt; it was also a period of crisis and of new developments, both of which deeply affected the whole of Egyptian society and culture. This point can be appreciated as soon as we turn to the evidence of the monuments. The Old Kingdom mortuary complexes of the kings and the highest officials in the cemeteries of the capital, Memphis, play a prominent part in shaping our ideas of the Egyptian state. This series of spectacular buildings came to a halt after the reign of Pepy II, and they were revived only by Mentuhotep II with his mortuary temple at Deir el-Bahri in western Thebes.

To match this state of affairs, the upper chronological limit of the First Intermediate Period is sometimes raised to include the three decades during which the last kings of the Memphite line after Pepy II still held power. While taking liberties with the scheme whereby Egyptian history is divided into dynasties, this approach is not wholly unjustified. In fact, large-scale building may be understood as good evidence not only for the nature of the core institutions of the state but also for the fact that they were still actually functioning. The glaring gap in the monumental record during the First Intermediate Period therefore suggests that the social system had become fragmented, both in its political organization and in its cultural patterns.

It is equally apparent, however, that the First Intermediate Period archaeological and epigraphic data indicate the existence of a thriving culture among the poorer levels of society, as well as vigorous social development in the provincial towns of Upper Egypt. Rather than being an outright collapse of Egyptian society and culture as a whole, the First Intermediate Period was characterized by an important, though temporary, shift in its centres of activity and dynamism.

To understand both the crisis of the pharaonic state and the processes that ultimately led to the re-establishment of a unified political organization on a new basis, it is crucial to investigate the ways in which political institutions were rooted in society. Much of Egyptian history tends to concentrate on the royal residence, the kings, and 'court culture', but in writing the history of the First Intermediate Period it is necessary to focus instead on provincial towns and on the people themselves, who make up the most basic elements of society.

The Capital and the Provinces

The pharaonic state originally emerged as a centralized system. From the earliest times, its key institutions—the king and his court—were firmly installed in the capital. The social élite was also concentrated there, as well as the administrative expertise and the control of the traditions of high culture. In addition, the installations of state religion, and the cult of the king and his divine ancestors, were located in the immediate vicinity of the capital. The administration of the country was controlled by royal emissaries, who were put in charge of extensive sections of the Nile Valley. Although these administrators were dealing with the provinces, they still retained their attachment to the royal residence and continued to regard themselves as members of the élite society of the capital. Until well into the 5th Dynasty, nothing of the cultural achievements that attest to the grandeur of the Old Kingdom was to be seen outside the Memphite region. There was a vast chasm of social and cultural inequality between the country and its rulers.

However, a profound change in the system began to appear in the 5th Dynasty and was completely in place by the end of the 6th. From this period onwards, provincial administrators were appointed for single nomes and took up permanent residence in their districts. As in other branches of the administration, members of the same family frequently succeeded each other in office. Although this political move was probably intended to enhance the efficiency of the provincial administration, it was to have far-reaching and unforeseen consequences. In the first place, it meant a change in the socio-economic patterns that lay at the heart of the system. Originally, economic resources were concentrated at the royal residence and redistributed to the beneficiaries by the central administration. Now, however, the nobles residing in the provinces were able to gain direct access to the products of the country. The opposition between the centre and the provinces began to act as a differentiating factor within the formerly homogeneous élite group of officials.

The provincial aristocracy was eager to ensure that its way of life was on a par with the style of the royal court. This is evident in the decorated monumental tombs that began to appear in the cemeteries of the regional centres throughout the country. Iconographic patterns, textual models, religious and ritualistic knowledge flowed from the stock of court culture to the periphery. In addition, the king himself provided specialist craftsmen, ritualists trained at the residence, and

costly goods to maintain and strengthen the bonds of loyalty between the provincial aristocrats and the court. These tombs, however, are only the tip of the iceberg; in fact, the various provincial élites and their staff acted as separate centres within the political organization, sustaining specialist professionals and keeping a growing amount of local production for use within the provinces themselves (rather than allowing it to be exploited by the royal court), thus leading to a change in the social and economic patterns of the provinces. Rural Egypt became economically richer and culturally more complex.

The Provincial Milieu

The transformation of the culture and economy of the provinces affected the whole of society. This process can be followed in profound changes in the archaeological record, which were rooted in the 6th Dynasty, and which reached their climax in the earlier half of the First Intermediate Period. Again we have to turn to the cemeteries for essential data—partly because of the unfortunate lack of excavated settlements of this period, but mainly because of the inherent significance of the remains of funerary culture.

If we compare the situation in the earlier Old Kingdom with that in the late Old Kingdom and the First Intermediate Period, a change in the quantity of graves becomes immediately obvious. For the later period, many more cemeteries are known, and, whenever a particular region has been explored systematically, there is a marked increase in the number of tombs. To explain this phenomenon, two factors must be taken into account. First, the increase in tombs clearly attests to demographic growth during the Old Kingdom, and probably the most influential factors for change were rooted in the local settings themselves, where population growth was probably accompanied and accentuated by the development of more intensive and more efficient uses of the available agrarian resources. Secondly, during the late Old Kingdom and the First Intermediate Period, ordinary tombs became considerably larger and burials began to be provided with much better grave goods. Not only have such tombs been more easily identified and dated (because of their greater size and more varied contents), but they have also attracted more excavators. In fact, provincial cemeteries of the first part of the Old Kingdom had a reputation, among earlier archaeologists, for not repaying the labour of excavation.

Like the appearance of decorated monumental tombs in Upper Egypt, the increase in numbers of graves in the provincial cemeteries

therefore reflects, to an important degree, a change in the social pattern of consumption. This phenomenon seems particularly obvious in the funerary record, but it was not restricted to this sphere. In fact, the most valuable objects that become most abundant and widely represented in the graves of the early First Intermediate Period—cosmetic stone vessels, ornaments and amulets of gemstones, and even gold—were everyday items of daily life, rather than being specially made for funerary use. It seems clear, therefore, that the provinces enjoyed favourable economic conditions during the late Old Kingdom and the First Intermediate Period.

The distribution of the cemeteries can also provide some indications of settlement patterns. The landscape was dotted with villages, while the sites of the nome capitals are marked not only by the groups of rock tombs or monumental *mastaba*-tombs belonging to the provincial aristocracy, but also by very extensive cemeteries of ordinary townspeople. The tombs of the urban population do not differ, in principle, from those of the villagers; however, they are often larger and better equipped. An urbanized structure, therefore, dominated the provincial settlement pattern not only politically and socially but also demographically and economically.

Changes in Styles and Shapes as Signs of Cultural and Social Development

The period that followed the close of the Old Kingdom brought about fundamental changes in material culture. In fact, during the First Intermediate Period, almost all artefacts took on a different appearance. We can review a few of the most significant aspects of this process.

From an archaeologist's point of view, pottery is clearly the most important type of artefact. Since the Early Dynastic Period and throughout the Old Kingdom, the repertoire of containers had been dominated, morphologically, by ovoid shapes: the point of maximum extension almost always lay slightly above the middle of the vessel. During the First Intermediate Period, this style was quickly abandoned. Now, baglike or even droplike sagging shapes were made. It is not difficult to identify the driving force behind this process. Clearly, the aim was to adapt vessel shapes in order to take advantage of the capabilities of the potter's wheel. In the case of ovoid containers, a large part of the outer surface had to be scraped into shape manually after throwing. In the case of bag-shaped vessels, the amount of work

necessary could be reduced considerably. It seems significant, however, that this process took place only some 200 years after the first introduction of the potter's wheel to Egyptian workshops during the 5th Dynasty. It was apparently only with the emergence of the First Intermediate Period that people were prepared to dispose of traditional models and give preference to more efficient modes of production.

Furthermore, a whole range of new object classes became popular in provincial burials during the First Intermediate Period. In the Old Kingdom, the grave goods of poorer burials had been chosen entirely from among the types of objects used in daily life, but in the First Intermediate Period objects began to be made exclusively for funerary use. Crudely made wooden figures of offering bearers, boats, even whole workshop scenes, are good instances of this trend. Another example is the appearance and increasing use of coloured masks made from gypsum and linen (cartonnage) to cover the heads of the mummified bodies. It also became increasingly common to use simple slab stelae as a means of marking the offering place in the superstructure of small *mastaba*-tombs or in the chapels of simple rock tombs.

The appearance of these objects indicates that both the demand and the means available in the provincial towns were sufficient to support an area of craftsmanship specializing in 'non-functional' products. Even more important, however, is the fact that the prototypes of these types of object have their origins in Old Kingdom élite culture. The model funerary figures of people engaged in fundamental tasks can be traced back directly to the repertoire of scenes from daily life depicted in Old Kingdom *mastaba*-tomb decoration. It appears that by the First Intermediate Period those factors that had previously inhibited cultural communication between different social strata now ceased to operate.

Passing on the traditions of élite culture to a wider circle of users went hand in hand with a marked loss of artistic quality. Not infrequently even iconographic patterns were misunderstood and formulaic inscriptions misconstrued. While the provincial art of the First Intermediate Period often exhibits an astonishing degree of originality and creativity (as will become plain later in this chapter), there is no way of denying that many pieces are simply ugly and incompetently made. This aspect, in particular, has caught the attention of historians and was taken as a sign of overall cultural decline during the First Intermediate Period. However obvious the latter interpretation may seem, to assume that this was simply a period of cultural decay would

be to overlook two important processes: first, the assimilation of cultural models developed in Old Kingdom court culture on a nationwide basis, and, secondly, the emergence of mass consumption.

Religious Ideas

Some of the changes in material culture are indicative of developments in religious beliefs and ritual practices, as in the case of the introduction of mummy masks. However, the most important body of evidence for belief systems in provincial society during the First Intermediate Period and the Middle Kingdom is the vast corpus of Coffin Texts, which were magical and liturgical spells inscribed principally onto the sides of wooden coffins. While it is obvious that the bulk of the evidence for these texts dates to the Middle Kingdom, there are a few instances that show that they had already emerged during the First Intermediate Period. The textual origins of the Coffin Texts are still a matter of much debate, in terms of both date and geographical origin. Clearly, the corpus of royal Pyramid Texts of the Old Kingdom, which were sometimes inscribed onto the coffins along with the Coffin Texts, provided important models, but the Coffin Texts themselves included crucial new material and fresh concepts.

There are only a few surviving examples of Coffin Texts from the First Intermediate Period, and ownership of inscribed coffins always remained restricted to the uppermost level of provincial society. Sometimes, however, it seems possible to connect ideas explicitly featured in the Coffin Texts with aspects of the archaeological record. Only then does the great antiquity and popularity of some of these concepts become apparent. This observation lends support to the notion that it was the provincial setting of the First Intermediate Period that played a significant role in the origins of the Coffin Texts and contributed to its conceptual content.

One series of Coffin Text spells was designed to 'assemble a man's family in the realm of the dead'. The range of persons envisaged is extensive; the texts mention not only close relatives but also servants, followers, and friends. The same desire makes itself felt in the development of tomb types as early as the 6th Dynasty. Egyptian tombs were originally built to house only one burial, but by the late Old Kingdom extensive multi-chambered *mastaba*-tombs were sometimes constructed, providing space for a whole family or even an extended family in the sense defined above. The architecture of the tombs provides evidence for ranking within these groups, in that some shafts are deeper

and some chambers larger than others, thus providing for more sumptuous burials. In fact, wherever the burials themselves are preserved, both aspects of this new situation—the size of the family groups involved and the inequality between persons within these groups—are particularly prominent, since chambers were often used for successive multiple burials on a regular basis.

The burial customs of the First Intermediate Period therefore emphasize the crucial importance of interpersonal relations on a primary level of social organization. This strain of religious thought closely reflects the role that extended families played as the basic units of social organization. The funerary spells in question emphasize the authority wielded by the head of the family over its members, but also stress the fact that he was able to shelter them from outside demands. Thus the family, as a unit of solidarity and collective responsibility, was acting as an interface between the higher levels of social and political organization. Thanks to this role, the extended family also appears as a recognized institution in juridical texts of the 6th to 8th Dynasties.

Regional Style and Identity

One of the most intriguing aspects of First Intermediate Period archaeology is the stylistic variation between different regions. While the differences between the pottery styles of northern and southern Egypt are certainly clear-cut, matters are less straightforward with regard to differences between pottery in different regions within Upper Egypt or regional variations in terms of other types of artefacts. In fact, some types of objects appear to have been more affected by regional variation than others, and it seems that Egyptian material culture in general was not broken up into a series of unconnected local variants.

There is one aspect of regional variation, however, that seems to be of particular significance. Throughout the Old Kingdom, the architecture of *mastaba*-tombs in Upper Egypt followed uniform patterns and a continuous course of development. But during the 6th Dynasty and the First Intermediate Period, distinctive local traditions of tomb construction arose. Examples of such local architectural styles include the Theban *saff*-tombs (discussed below) and the *mastaba*-tombs with niched façades and long, sloping access corridors leading to subterranean chambers, which have been found at Dendera.

These local types are so different from the principal architectural styles of earlier periods that the change can hardly be explained simply

in terms of the development of local workshop traditions. Instead, it seems likely that these architectural innovations were deliberately introduced by the local élites in order to express their own regional identities.

Society and Government

Even this short survey of the archaeological material provides ample evidence that far-reaching change occurred in the provinces during the late Old Kingdom and the First Intermediate Period. In the present state of research, the meanings of many of the archaeological phenomena discussed (and the mechanisms that produced them) are still poorly understood. Even our present knowledge, however, strongly suggests that internal forces of change and powerful external influences (particularly the impact of Old Kingdom provincial politics) conspired to produce greater cultural, economic, and social complexity throughout the country.

These developments inevitably affected the political system: tensions between the centre and the provinces now gained greater importance, and the provincial nobility in particular—occupying a crucial position between the court and the local groups—won new options for independent action, and, at the same time, had to mediate between competing interests. This situation raises the question of the ways in which the organization and ideology of government were adapted to the social and cultural conditions in the country at large. During the Old Kingdom, provincial districts were usually (though not always) run by a two-tiered administration. ‘Overseers of priests’ of the local cults were important because of the role played by their temples as nodes in the network of economic administration, but the leading office was that of ‘great overlord of the nome’ (often translated as ‘nomarch’).

It is important to realize, however, that the end of the Old Kingdom was not brought about by the increasing power of the great families of nomarchs. In fact, new lines of local magnates appeared during the First Intermediate Period. It is, therefore, likely that the Old Kingdom aristocracy—despite the degree to which they contributed, as a social group, to the process of change in the political structure of the country—nevertheless remained dependent on their links with the Crown. By tracing these new developments we can gain insights into the relationships between social conditions and political developments during the First Intermediate Period.

The Case of Ankhtifi: Crisis, Care, and Power

Ankhtifi, a nomarch of the 3rd and 2nd Upper Egyptian nomes during the earlier part of the Herakleopolitan period, embodies the new type of local ruler that emerged during the First Intermediate Period. His autobiographical text, inscribed on the pillars of his rock tomb near el-Mo'alla (some 30 km. south of Thebes), is one of the most spectacular examples of its genre to survive from ancient Egypt. It provides the ideal guide to the great issues of the time, and compellingly evokes the political atmosphere of southern Upper Egypt during the First Intermediate Period.

As 'great overlord of the nomes of Edfu and Hierakonpolis' and 'overseer of priests', Ankhtifi simultaneously held key positions in both the religious and secular wings of the Old Kingdom provincial administration. In fact, this combination of offices was typical for the largely independent local rulers during the First Intermediate Period. The two key events in Ankhtifi's political career were his intervention in order to pacify and reorganize the nome of Edfu, and his military expedition against the Theban nome, where his opponents, a coalition of the Theban and Koptite nomes, actually refused to give battle. All this was essentially small-scale politics, and, reading between the lines, he was probably not even particularly successful. It is notable, for instance, that there are no known successors to Ankhtifi in his role as semi-independent ruler of the southernmost nomes. Nevertheless, his inscription proclaims his glory without a trace of false modesty:

His Excellency, the overseer of priests, overseer of desert-countries, overseer of mercenaries, great overlord of the nomes of Edfu and Hierakonpolis, Ankhtifi, the brave, he says: 'I was the beginning and the end (i.e. the climax) of mankind, since nobody like myself existed before nor will he exist; nobody like myself was ever born nor will he be born. I surpassed the feats of the ancestors, and coming generations will not be able to equal me in any of my feats within this million of years.

I gave bread to the hungry and clothing to the naked; I anointed those who had no cosmetic oil; I gave sandals to the barefooted; I gave a wife to him who had no wife. I took care of the towns of Hefat [i.e. el-Mo'alla] and Hor-mer in every [situation of crisis, when] the sky was clouded and the earth [was parched (?) and when everybody died] of hunger on this sandbank of Apophis. The south came with its people and the north with its children; they brought finest oil in exchange for the barley which was given to them. My barley went upstream until it reached Lower Nubia and downstream until it reached the Abydene nome. All of Upper Egypt was dying of hunger and people were eating their children, but I did not allow anybody to die of hunger in this nome . . . I cared for the house of Elephantine and for the town of Iat-negen in these years after Hefat and Hor-mer had been satisfied. . . . I was like a (sheltering) mountain for Hefat and like a cool shadow for Hor-mer.' Ankhtifi said:

'The whole country has become like locusts going upstream and downstream (in search of food); but never did I allow anybody in need to go from this nome to another one. I am the hero without equal.'

Economic crisis is one of the great issues in the texts of the time. Local magnates were accustomed to boasting that they managed to feed their own towns while the rest of the country was starving. These accounts have tended to make a considerable impression on modern readers, with the result that famines and economic crisis are often regarded as an essential hallmark of the period. It has even been argued that the dire consequences of repeated failures of the Nile flood, caused by climatic change, were responsible for the end of the Old Kingdom. There can be no doubt that these texts indeed relate to fact. This becomes obvious when references to famine occur in less grandiose contexts. An employee of a Koptite 'overseer of priests', for instance, relates: 'I stood in the doorway of his excellency the overseer of priests Djefy handing out grain to (the inhabitants of) this entire town to support it in the painful years of famine.'

It remains to be carefully considered, however, to what extent this situation was really specific to the First Intermediate Period. In fact, independent evidence confirming climatic change during the First Intermediate Period is lacking. Instead, the available data seem to suggest that the 'Neolithic Wet Phase' had already ended during the Old Kingdom, bringing drier climatic conditions in the adjacent desert areas in particular, as well as encouraging a general process of adaptation to lower levels of annual Nile flooding. These environmental changes showed no signs of affecting the development of pharaonic civilization at that date, thus calling into question any supposed connections with the First Intermediate Period. Recent archaeological observations from Elephantine even seem to indicate that Egypt was experiencing flood levels slightly above average during the First Intermediate Period.

Considering the long-term regularities and variations of the flood of the Nile, it seems clear that the spectre of famine due to Nile failure in individual years must have haunted the Egyptians to greater or lesser degrees throughout all periods of Egyptian history. To understand the prominence of this issue in the texts of the First Intermediate Period, it is therefore necessary to place it in a wider literary context.

The introductory phrase that forms the basis for Ankhtifi's account is a very traditional one. It is actually one of the stock phrases of the autobiographical texts of Old Kingdom officials, asserting their moral integrity. During the First Intermediate Period, the principle of caring

for the weak was greatly elaborated. At this time the great men were prepared to step in whenever and wherever need might arise in society, through economic problems, political crises, or individual misfortunes. The provincial rulers were not merely sheltering and supporting a few people (as a father might shelter and support the members of his family) but taking responsibility for the whole of society, whether the population of their home town or that of the nome or nomes they ruled. The message is clear: people would be helpless without their rulers. Left on their own, they would simply not be able to face the hazards of life. It goes without saying that this beneficent role of the ruler was indissociable from his right to obeisance and his authority—thus Ankhtifi points out, ‘on whomsoever I laid my hand—no harm could approach him, because my reasoning was so expert and my plans were so excellent. But every ignorant person, every wretch who opposed me—I retaliated against him for his deeds.’

In the First Intermediate Period, crises had evidently become socially significant as contexts in which personal power and social dependence could be legitimized, and this observation probably helps a good deal in explaining why the issue of famine and sustenance was so important to local magnates at that time.

Competition and Armed Conflict

During the Old Kingdom, the local administrators were obliged to organize the military service of the people under their jurisdiction and to lead such troops on aggressive and peaceful missions into the regions adjoining the Nile Valley. As early as the 6th Dynasty, foreign mercenaries—particularly Nubians—were already being recruited into the Egyptian army. During the First Intermediate Period, the use of local troops and the military experience of the local governors therefore emerged as decisive forces in their struggle for ascendancy. Thus Ankhtifi declares:

I was one who found the solution when it was lacking, thanks to my vigorous plans; one with commanding words and untroubled mind on the day when the nomes allied together (to wage war). I am the hero without equal; one who spoke freely while people were silent on the day when fear was spread and Upper Egypt did not dare to speak . . . As long as this army of Hefat is calm, the whole land is calm; but if one steps on (its) tail like (that of) a crocodile, then the north and south of this whole land are trembling (with fear). . . . I sailed downstream with my strong and trustworthy troops and moored on the west bank of the Theban nome . . . and my trustworthy troops searched for battle throughout the west of the Theban nome, but nobody dared to come out through fear of them. Then I sailed downstream again

and moored on the east bank of the Theban nome . . . and his [probably Ankhtifi's opponent's] walls were besieged since he had locked the gates through fear of these strong and trustworthy troops. They became a search party looking for battle throughout the west and the east of the Theban nome, but nobody dared to come out through fear of them.

It was not really new for an official to claim authority over more than one nome. At the end of the 5th Dynasty, for example, the kings had established the office of 'overseer of Upper Egypt' to supervise the administrators of the individual Upper Egyptian nomes. During the First Intermediate Period, there are also documented instances of officials who were responsible for a larger territory, such as Abihu, who governed the nomes of Abydos, Diospolis Parva, and Dendera in the early Herakleopolitan period. Thus there was nothing unusual about Ankhtifi's double nomarchy or even his claim to military supremacy as far south as Elephantine.

The narrative of Ankhtifi's wars, however, makes it plain that, by this time, the king was not being mentioned even nominally as an authority who could control the distribution of power between local rulers. It is important to realize that this situation implies a radical change in mentality. In the closed political system of the Old Kingdom, the king had been the sole source of legitimate authority. All actions of the officials relied on his command, and he judged and rewarded their merits. When the power of kingship faded, however, a more open situation emerged. Now, local rulers could act in accordance with their own aims. They had to rely on their own power bases; they had to defend their positions in competition with others; and they also gained a new awareness of their own achievements, which is such a prominent feature of Ankhtifi's inscriptions.

Gods, Politics, and the Rhetoric of Power

In the inscriptions on the walls of Ankhtifi's tomb, the king is mentioned only once in a short label appended to one of the wall paintings: 'May Horus grant a (good) Nile flood to his son Neferkara.' It is significant that in this instance an appeal is being made to the king in his sacred role as a mediator between human society and the forces of nature. His political role, however, has evidently been taken over by other authorities:

The god Horus fetched me to the nome of Edfu for life, prosperity and health to re-establish it . . . In fact, Horus wished to re-establish it, and therefore he fetched me to re-establish it. I found the domain of (the administrator) Khuu like a swampy estate

neglected by its keeper, in a condition of civil strife and under the lead of a wretch. Now I caused a man to embrace (even) those who had killed his father or brother in order to re-establish the nome of Edfu.

In Ankhtifi's texts, it is not the king but Horus, the god of Edfu, who appears as the supreme authority guiding political action. This concept is not unique in First Intermediate Period inscriptions. Even the reunification of Egypt under Mentuhotep II (2055–2004 BC) was described in similar terms as a result of intervention by Montu, the great god of the Theban nome: 'A good beginning came about when Montu gave both lands to King Nebhepetra (Mentuhotep II)' (on the Abydos stele of an overseer of the treasury, Meru in the time of Mentuhotep II).

This ideology rested on solid foundations, given that local rulers usually acted as 'overseers of priests', which secured them a privileged role in the cult of the gods. Ankhtifi himself is depicted in a scene in his tomb supervising one of the great festivals of his local god Hemen, and the earliest mention of the temple of Amun of Karnak derives from a stele of a Theban overseer of priests who claims to have taken care of it in years of famine.

From earliest times, provincial temples were both administrative centres and foci of the personal loyalty of the local population, and it seems likely that the priesthoods attached to these temples formed the core group of an early provincial élite. In a way, provincial cults may be understood as symbolic representations of collective identity. Therefore, during the First Intermediate Period, god and town often appear side by side in phrases referring to social embeddedness. People say, 'I was one beloved by his town and praised by his god', and curses directed against transgressors threaten that 'his local god shall despise him and his townspeople (or sometimes "his family group") shall despise him'. By integrating their personal authority with that wielded by the local cults, provincial magnates therefore managed to link their power with one of the moral foundations of local society.

The intriguing subject matter of Ankhtifi's inscription should, however, not be allowed to eclipse its merits as literature. It is a composition of unusual brilliance, abounding in original and striking expressions. Similar qualities may be found in the painted decoration of his tomb and indeed generally in the art of Upper Egypt during the First Intermediate Period. The Upper Egyptian painters of this time no longer conformed to Old Kingdom court conventions. Their style is angular, even bizarre at times, and boldly expressive. Having freed themselves from outdated models, they created a whole range of new scenes: files

of soldiers and hunters, mercenaries engaged in battle, and religious festivals. In addition, they introduced new pictures of everyday occupations, such as spinning and weaving, and updated age-old scenes to tie in with the latest cultural and technological developments. Far from being a period of cultural decline, these turbulent years witnessed an upsurge of outstanding creativity, adapting and developing the existing media of literary and pictorial expression to correspond to a new range of social experiences.

This process of change also indicates that the élite of the First Intermediate Period felt the need to communicate new social developments; when government could no longer rely on the simple imposition of power, its foundations had to be made explicit. Ankhtifi's text may, therefore, be read as a speech concerning the necessity of government and the benefits of strong rule. It is also notable how closely these ideals—to which Ankhtifi so persuasively appeals—link up with the underpinnings of local social organization and provincial traditions.

The 'Theban Ascendancy' and the Necropolis of el-Tarif

During the Old Kingdom, Thebes, the capital of the 4th nome of Upper Egypt, had been a third-rate provincial town. However, during the early Herakleopolitan period, a series of overseers of priests in charge of the local affairs is known from funerary stelae recovered from the extensive cemetery of el-Tarif, on the west bank immediately opposite Karnak temple. This series of officials was succeeded by a nomarch Intef, who combined (as Ankhtifi had done) the post of 'great overlord of the Theban nome' with that of 'overseer of priests'. In addition, however, he claimed the titles of 'the king's confidant at the narrow gateway of the south [i.e. Elephantine]' and 'great overlord of Upper Egypt'. Since an inscription referring to this Intef was found in the cemetery of Dendera (the capital of the 6th nome of Upper Egypt), it seems fair to assume that his authority was recognized far beyond the confines of his native province.

This nomarch Intef is in all probability identical with a certain 'Intef the Great, born of Iku', who was named in contemporary inscriptions and to whom even the early Middle Kingdom ruler Senusret I (1956–1911 BC) dedicated a statue in the temple of Karnak. Furthermore, this man is described as 'count Intef', the ancestor of the Theban 11th Dynasty, in the king-list inscribed on the walls of Thutmose III's 'chapel of royal ancestors' in Karnak. Only his immediate successor, Mentuhotep I, however, was designated as a king in later

tradition, although the Horus name assigned to him, namely Tepy-a (literally 'the ancestor'), clearly betrays this as posthumous fiction. Contemporary epigraphic sources are lacking both for Mentuhotep I and for his son, Sehertawy Intef I (2125–2112 BC), but the latter's tomb is still the most prominent landmark in the necropolis of el-Tarif, serving as the sole surviving monument to the power and the grandeur of the earliest Theban kings.

In the necropolis of el-Tarif, a special type of rock tomb developed during the First Intermediate Period, apparently as an adaptation to the local topography. For the smaller tombs of private individuals, a broad court was sunk into the strata of gravel and marl of the low desert terrace. In the rear face of this court, a portico with a row of heavy, square pillars formed the façade of the tomb, and this row of pillars gave rise to the modern designation of the architectural type as a *saff*-tomb (*saff* being Arabic for 'row'). A short, narrow corridor in the centre of the façade led to the tomb chapel, which also contained the burial shaft leading down to the tomb.

King Intef I chose to build for himself a *saff*-tomb of gigantic dimensions. The court of the Saff Dawaba, as it is called today, was sunk into the ground as a huge rectangle, 300 m. long and 54 m. wide; 400,000 cu. m. of gravel and soft rock were excavated from it and piled up as two long, low heaps along the sides of the court. The front part of the court (where some form of entrance chapel would have been built) is unfortunately lost, but the rear part of the tomb, with its broad façade comprising a double row of rock-cut pillars and three chapels (one for the king himself and two probably for his wives), is still relatively well preserved. Since the surfaces of the walls have entirely flaked off, it is not known whether they were originally painted. Nevertheless, the Saff Dawaba appears to have been an impressive piece of architecture that reveals some of the fundamentals of the newly constituted kingship. Above all, there is not the slightest attempt to emulate Old Kingdom royal funerary architecture. Rather, the Theban kings created an explicitly Theban type of royal tomb from the stock of local tradition. Furthermore, unlike many rulers of the Old Kingdom, they did not strive for exclusivity of location. The royal tombs continued to be situated in the main cemetery of Thebes, directly opposite the town and its temples across the river. Here, the burial place of the king was surrounded not just by the tombs of a narrow circle of courtiers but by the cemetery of the local population. In addition, smaller tomb chapels along the sides of the court of the royal tomb provided space for the burials of some of his followers. The message conveyed by this

architecture, therefore, was focused not only on the exalted position of the king, but also on the fact that these rulers were rooted in the Theban setting and in local society.

The immediate successors of Intef I (Wahankh Intef II and Nakht-Nebtepnefer Intef III) continued to build for themselves very similar *saff*-tombs in the necropolis of el-Tarif, parallel to the Saff Dawaba. When Mentuhotep II moved to the new site of Deir el-Bahri, it was perhaps only because the suitable building ground for monumental architecture at el-Tarif had been used up by his time.

King Wahankh Intef II (2112–2063 BC)

While Mentuhotep I and Intef I, the first two kings of the 17th Dynasty, reigned for only fifteen years, the fifty-year reign of Intef I's brother and successor, Wahankh Intef II, stands out as the most decisive phase in the development of the new monarchy. A large quantity of archaeological, epigraphic, and artistic evidence has survived from his reign, thus facilitating crucial insights into the nature of Theban kingship.

Intef II claimed the traditional dual kingship (the *nesu-bit*) as well as the title 'son of Ra', which referred to the dogma of divine descent. He did not, however, assume the complete royal protocol with its five 'Great Names', the so-called royal fivefold titulary (see Chapter 1 for a discussion of the five royal names). In fact, he added only the 'Horus name' Wahankh ('enduring of life') to his 'birth name', Intef, and had no 'throne name' (which would traditionally have incorporated the name of the sun-god Ra). Unfortunately, only a few representations of the king have been preserved, so it remains impossible to decide whether he used the whole array of royal crowns and other insignia, although the present balance of evidence suggests that this is unlikely. The early Theban kings were evidently well aware of the limited character of their rule.

True to his social origins among the provincial magnates, Intef II created a biographical stele that stood in the entrance chapel to his *saff*-tomb in el-Tarif. This monument, which bears a depiction of the king accompanied by his favourite dogs, sums up in retrospect the accomplishments of his reign; and the statements made in the text are amply confirmed by the inscriptions of his followers.

As mentioned above, there is good reason to believe that the last non-royal Theban nomarch already held sway over a large part of southern Upper Egypt. Intef II, however, launched the decisive northward push. He captured the nome of Abydos, which, since the days of

the Old Kingdom, had been the most important administrative centre in Upper Egypt, and he carried his attack even further into the territory of the 10th nome of Upper Egypt. This constituted a policy of open hostility against the Herakleopolitan kings, and for several decades war was to be waged intermittently in the stretch of land between Abydos and Asyut.

The King's Men

We know some of the men who served under Intef II. The Theban military officer Djary, for example, who fought the Herakleopolitan army in the Abydene nome and who pushed northwards into the 10th nome; Hetepy from Elkab, who managed the administration of the three southernmost nomes for the king; and Intef's treasurer Tjetjy, whose magnificent stele is now in the collection of the British Museum. Although the biographical inscriptions of these men were primarily intended to praise their owners' achievements, there cannot be the slightest doubt concerning the man to whom ultimate authority was due:

So says Hetepy: I was one beloved of my lord and praised by the lord of this land; and his majesty truly made this servant [i.e. Hetepy] happy. In fact, his majesty said: 'There is no one who [...] of (my) good command, but Hetepy!', and this servant did it exceedingly well, and his majesty praised this servant on account of it. And his nobles said: 'May this face praise thee!'.

It is no doubt extremely significant that there were no longer 'nomarchs' in the territory controlled by the Theban rulers, and none of the officials who carried out important missions for these kings was given the chance to establish himself as a local ruler mediating between the interests of his dominion and the king's demands. The newly founded state was organized not as a loosely knit network of semi-independent magnates, as the Old Kingdom had become towards its end, but as a powerful system relying on strong bonds of personal loyalty and on tight control.

Monuments and Art

Apart from his military feats, Intef II emphasizes in his biographical inscription that he had built many temples to the gods, and, in fact, the earliest surviving fragment of royal construction at Karnak temple is a column of Wahankh Intef II. At Elephantine, excavations in the temple

of the goddess Satet have revealed an unbroken series of building stages reaching back to the Early Dynastic Period. While the rulers of the Old Kingdom dedicated only a few votive offerings to Satet on Elephantine, Intef II was the first king to erect chapels for both Satet and Khnum, and to commemorate his activity in inscriptions on their door frames. Each of his successors during the 11th Dynasty followed this example.

The sequence of events that has been revealed so clearly in the excavations at Elephantine was also true for many other temple sites. In fact, apart from a few specific exceptions, royal building activity in the provincial temples of Upper Egypt is attested only from the 11th Dynasty onwards. Intef II, therefore, may be said to have inaugurated a new policy of royal presence and activity in the sanctuaries throughout the country—a policy that was to be continued on an even larger scale by Senusret I and many later kings.

The private and royal monuments from the time of Intef II also include splendid examples of Theban 11th-Dynasty art. Some of the lesser monuments, such as the stelae of Djary, still exhibit the bold artistic style of the First Intermediate Period in Upper Egypt, but at the same time the royal workshops were beginning to produce beautifully balanced works characterized by thick, rounded modelling, and often deriving a special aesthetic effect from the contrast between large, plain surfaces and areas filled with finely carved detail such as elaborately pleated kilts or intricately patterned hairstyles. In these works, there is a clearly visible desire for the creation of a fitting medium to convey the aspirations of the new Dynasty.

By concentrating on the developments in southern Upper Egypt, it is possible to trace the emergence of a new political structure that was to lead, in unbroken sequence, to the formation of the state of the Middle Kingdom. This process, which was to have an enormous effect on Egypt's future, should probably be regarded as the most important phenomenon in the history of the First Intermediate Period. We should not forget, however, that the Theban kingdom occupied only a small, remote, and relatively unimportant part of Egypt as a whole. The periods of war and conflict that make for such startling reading in biographical narrative were therefore no doubt only localized and short-lived episodes. At most places, for most of the time and for most of the people, the First Intermediate Period probably would have been a rather less thrilling experience.

Most of the country, during the First Intermediate Period, was in the hands of the Herakleopolitan successors to the ancient Memphite monarchy. To reach a balanced assessment of the period it is, therefore,

crucial to concentrate on the situation in the Herakleopolitan realm just as much as that of the south.

The Herakleopolitan Kingdom

We know very little about the eighteen or nineteen kings who made up Manetho's Herakleopolitan Dynasty, occupying the throne of Egypt for a period of perhaps 185 years. Even their names remain largely unknown, and, with only one or two exceptions, it is impossible to assign the few named kings to their correct places within the dynastic sequence. In addition, none of the lengths of their reigns is known. According to Manetho, the Herakleopolitan Dynasty was founded by a king called Khety, and this piece of information is confirmed by contemporary epigraphic evidence that refers to the northern kingdom as the 'house of Khety'. We remain totally ignorant, however, either of the social origins of Khety or the circumstances of his rise to the throne.

Contemporary sources unequivocally corroborate Manetho's assertion of a connection between this dynasty and the town of Herakleopolis Magna. Most probably the kings actually resided at Herakleopolis, although the fact that Merykara (c.2025 BC), the final or penultimate Herakleopolitan ruler, was buried in a pyramid complex in the ancient royal necropolis of Saqqara is a clear indication that the Herakleopolitan kings felt themselves to be within the tradition of the Memphite kingship. The fact that the throne name of Neferkara Pepy II—the last great ruler of the Old Kingdom—was assumed by at least one of the Herakleopolitan kings (like several of the rulers of the 8th Dynasty) obviously points in the same direction.

None of the Herakleopolitan kings left any monuments, or at least none has yet been found, although this may partly be due to the fact that the archaeological exploration of the site of Herakleopolis Magna itself (modern Ihnasya el-Medina) has only been under way since 1966. The fact that none of the Herakleopolitan pyramids has been hitherto securely identified in the necropolis of Saqqara may be regarded as evidence that these were rather inconspicuous buildings, perhaps similar to the small pyramid of the 8th Dynasty King Qakara Iby. Clearly the Herakleopolitans did not succeed in establishing a powerful centralized system along the lines of the state of the Old Kingdom, even in the heartlands of their own dominion.

Most of the contemporary references to the Herakleopolitan Dynasty derive from the monuments of private individuals, mainly comprising

biographical inscriptions, from southern Middle Egypt and Upper Egypt, and they tend to centre on the Herakleopolitan–Theban war, an issue to which we will return later. The Herakleopolitan era also formed the historical setting for two of the most important literary and philosophical texts to have survived from ancient Egypt, the *Teachings for King Merykara* and the *Tale of the Eloquent Peasant*. Nowadays, there is widespread consensus that these ‘wisdom texts’ were actually composed during the Middle Kingdom, although the precise circumstances of their origins and the vicissitudes of their textual transmission remain the subject of controversy. The utmost caution is therefore advisable in any attempt to use them as historical sources. The *Teachings for King Merykara*, for instance, incorporate a background narrative in which the addressee’s royal father is engaged in warding off Asiatic infiltration into the eastern Delta. Viewing the overall situation, such a scenario does not sound unlikely, but there is not yet any independent evidence that Asiatic immigration was a problem during the First Intermediate Period (although it is certainly attested for the later Middle Kingdom).

The Herakleopolitan Era in Social and Cultural History

Considering the lack of data concerning the Dynastic history of the Herakleopolitan rulers, it seems all the more important to investigate whether the Herakleopolitan kingdom can be regarded as a distinctive social and cultural entity. Turning to the archaeological evidence, we should focus attention on the core areas of the Herakleopolitan kingdom: the Memphite and Faiyum regions. From an archaeological point of view, southern Middle Egypt was effectively an Upper Egyptian region.

In the north, we face a twofold problem. The available sources of evidence do not form a rich and coherent historical framework like the data from Upper Egypt; it is, therefore, exceedingly difficult to establish a sound archaeological sequence. Furthermore, there are no key groups of material that can be firmly dated in dynastic terms. It, therefore, often remains doubtful as to which monuments are to be assigned to the Herakleopolitan period proper, and which, in fact, derive only from the time after the reunification of the country and the early Middle Kingdom.

In many respects, the development of the archaeological material in the north follows the same course as in Upper Egypt. For instance, wooden models of servants and workshops, cartonnage masks, and

extensive family tombs all appear in both areas, and burial customs are in general largely the same. For some classes of artefacts, such as stone vessels and button seal amulets, the north and the south evidently drew on the same models. Judging from the archaeological material, the communities making up Herakleopolitan society seem to have undergone similar patterns of social and cultural development to the rest of the country.

Important differences, however, must not be overlooked. The development of the shapes of pottery vessels, for example, follows an entirely different course in the north. Here, the age-old ovoid pattern was not abandoned as it was in the south. Rather, a series of very special types of slender ovoid jars, often with pointed bases and quite peculiar cylindrical or funnel-shaped necks, emerged. The morphological patterns developed in the north during the First Intermediate Period evidently adhered much more closely to Old Kingdom tradition.

Even in the Herakleopolitan kingdom, however, the élite culture in the style of the Old Kingdom aristocracy did not survive. The social profile of the occupants of the ancient court cemeteries in the Memphite region therefore changed fundamentally. To earlier Egyptologists, who used to rely for their standards of judgement entirely on comparison with Old Kingdom court culture, this seemed to indicate dramatic events. Set against a broader background, however, it is clear that we are simply witnessing the change from very extraordinary conditions to a phase of comparative normality, when the Memphite necropoleis became similar to the cemeteries of provincial towns. Certainly, when Memphis lost its dominant status at the end of the Old Kingdom, this must undoubtedly have entailed severe changes in the living conditions of its inhabitants. But the archaeological record from the Memphite cemeteries cannot be construed as evidence for a social revolution or a civil war after the demise of the Old Kingdom.

At several important sites—Saqqara, Heliopolis, and Herakleopolis Magna—small *mastaba*-tombs incorporating decorated offering chapels and false-door stelae are attested, thus allowing the style of Herakleopolitan art to be assessed. Old Kingdom tradition looms large. Ritual scenes and scenes of daily life, the arrangement of the decoration, and the style of carving closely follow Old Kingdom patterns—but everything is in miniature. Here, in the Memphite region and its surroundings, where the monuments of Egypt's glorious past were available for ready inspection and where its workshop traditions had been entrenched for centuries, the legacy of the Old Kingdom was not to be forgotten.

The full range of situations in which these traditions were exercised during the First Intermediate Period probably escapes us because of the state of archaeological research at the end of the twentieth century. Immediately after the reunification of the country, however, the 11th Dynasty King Nebhepetra Mentuhotep II was able to draw on the expertise of Memphite artists and stonemasons for the construction and the embellishment of his funerary temple at Deir el-Bahri. It is in his reign that we witness the sudden reappearance of a level of expertise that had not been attested since the pyramids of the Old Kingdom.

The Internal Organization of the Herakleopolitan Kingdom

During the early Herakleopolitan Period, southern Upper Egypt slipped out of royal control, but what happened to those parts of the country that remained under Herakleopolitan rule until its end? The relevant sources include the prosopographical records and biographical inscriptions from southern Middle Egypt. Among these, pride of place goes to the tombs of the overseers of priests at Asyut. During the latter part of the Herakleopolitan period, Asyut emerged as the most important military stronghold in Upper Egypt, remaining faithful to the Herakleopolitan kings in their struggle against the Theban rebels. The biographical inscriptions of three successive holders of office provide crucial information both on the course of political events and on current views on the ideology of rule.

Additional information can be derived from a group of graffiti that were inscribed on the walls of the travertine quarry at Hatnub by emissaries of a nomarch Neheri of the nome of el-Ashmunein, whose rock tomb is known at el-Bersha. A date for these texts immediately after the end of the Herakleopolitan Period seems most likely (although some would contest this). Certainly, however, their intellectual outlook is firmly rooted in Herakleopolitan tradition.

The topics addressed in these texts from Asyut and Hatnub are similar, in many respects, to those encountered in the texts from further south. Again, the local rulers' claims to have cared for their towns in critical situations feature prominently. The biographical inscription of the earliest overseer of priests at Asyut even provides a detailed description of the measures he took to improve the irrigation system in order to ensure sufficient harvests in bad years. Furthermore, the military prowess of the nomarchs is emphasized. Both their successes in struggles with a foreign enemy (the Theban ruler) and the

establishment of public security within their own nomes are stressed. Lastly, the local magnates' care for the temples of their towns is not forgotten: both construction work in the temples and the making of provisions for the needs of the associated cults are mentioned.

In stark contrast to the text of Ankhtifi, however, the maintenance of close connections with the king plays an important part in the texts of the Asyut magnates. They themselves claim descent from venerable aristocratic stock, and close personal ties seem to have linked them with the Herakleopolitan house of rulers. One of them, for example, mentions that, in his childhood, he received swimming lessons together with the royal children. In addition, the intervention of the Herakleopolitan army in Upper Egypt is mentioned. Herakleopolitan rule, therefore, was something very real to the local rulers of southern Middle Egypt.

Our sources for the internal structure of the Herakleopolitan kingdom remain extremely sketchy. Nevertheless, the available material seems to suggest that the Herakleopolitan monarchs may have relied on a class of provincial aristocrats who stayed loyal to the Crown, particularly in those cases where there were strong personal bonds (perhaps through kinship, marriage, or friendship). These aristocrats, however, would, at the same time, have regarded their own towns as crucially important to them, perhaps even making them the principal focuses of their loyalty. In this respect, the Herakleopolitan kingdom again seems to have inherited one of the characteristics of the Old Kingdom: it may also, therefore, have shared one of its structural weaknesses.

Kom Dara

In this context, an important, though rather enigmatic monument may be significant. In the cemetery of Dara, some 27 km. downstream from Asyut in Middle Egypt, a truly gigantic mud-brick *mastaba*-tomb, known as Kom Dara, occupies a commanding position. This building has not yet been properly investigated. In its present condition, an area of 138 × 144 m. (that is, 19,872 sq. m.) is delimited by massive outer walls that originally rose to a height of about 20 m. The remains of the mortuary chapel that must surely once have formed part of the complex have not yet been found. The interior, however, was reached by a sloping corridor entering the building in the middle of its north side, and leading down to a single subterranean burial chamber constructed from large limestone slabs.

The enormous size of this tomb, along with its square layout and the location of its burial chamber, are immediately reminiscent of a pyramid. Closer analysis of its construction, however, reveals beyond any doubt that the building was never planned as a pyramid. In fact, access to the burial chamber from the north is a fairly common feature in private tomb architecture of the late Old Kingdom, while the square layout of the superstructure is paralleled by lesser tombs in Dara cemetery itself. Kom Dara, therefore, may be understood as a monumental tomb that derived from a local prototype, very much in the way that the royal *saff*-tombs at Thebes developed from the simpler types of *saff*-tombs built for the funerary cults of the ordinary people.

On the basis of pottery, Kom Dara can be dated to the earlier half of the First Intermediate Period. Its owner remains unknown to us, and there is not yet any definite evidence to support the frequently repeated identification with an otherwise unattested King Khuy, whose name appears on a relief fragment found reused in another building at the site. The tomb itself, however, attests unequivocally to its owner's aspirations to a political role that far surpassed that of a mere nomarch, regardless of whether he actually dared to assume the titles of royalty.

There are no historical records that can tell us what was actually happening at this site, but the whole context makes it plain that the owner of the Kom Dara tomb did not in fact succeed in establishing an independent centre of power, as the Thebans did at a slightly later date. It is tempting, however, to speculate a little further. In the wide, fertile plains of Middle Egypt, every ambitious local dynast was bound to find himself immediately surrounded by a score of powerful competitors. The geographical situation itself, therefore, may have helped to stabilize the balance of power between a number of Middle Egyptian local rulers, which, in turn, could have been material in maintaining royal overlordship. In addition, it does not seem too far-fetched to assume that here, in one of the agriculturally most productive areas of the country, the Crown saw important interests at stake and, accordingly, felt rather less inclined to tolerate the political adventures of provincial rulers than in the remote stretches of the 'head of the south' (that is, the Theban region).

The Final War

Matters probably reached a head when Wahankh Intef II attacked the Thinite nome and pushed northwards, finding his advance eventually checked by the Asyut nomarchs. A record of at least one counter-attack

by the Herakleopolitans has survived in the form of a very fragmentary inscription in the tomb of Ity-yeb (the second in a sequence of overseers of priests at Asyut), who reports successful military operations against the 'southern nomes'. In addition, the narrative recounted in the *Teachings for Merykara* claims that King Merykara's father had recaptured Abydos. Whether these facts are to be connected with the 'rebellion of Thinis', recorded on a stele from Mentuhotep II's fourteenth regnal year, remains a matter of speculation.

It is clear, however, that this Herakleopolitan military success had no lasting effect on the outcome, since the tomb of Ity-yeb's son, Khety II, from the time of King Merykara, contains a report concerning further conflict with the Theban aggressors. No record has survived of the sequence of events in this final phase of the war, but there can hardly be any doubt that Asyut was taken by force. In any event, the ruling family of Asyut did not survive the Theban victory.

Information on Mentuhotep II's advances further northwards is lacking, but it seems unlikely that he had to fight every step of the way. Instead, it is probable that the network of Herakleopolitan rule over Middle Egypt collapsed after Asyut had been defeated, and local rulers might then have been eager to side with the winning party before it was too late, thus hoping to save themselves and their towns from 'the terror which was spread by the [Theban] king's house'.

We do not know the fate of the last Herakleopolitan king nor the details of the capture of the town of Herakleopolis, but recent excavations in the cemetery of Ihnasya el-Medina show that its funerary monuments were literally hacked to pieces at some point in the early Middle Kingdom. It seems tempting to construe this archaeological observation as evidence for the eventual sacking and pillaging of Egypt's northern capital.

The First Intermediate Period in Retrospect

Modern Egyptologists still largely present a negative image of the First Intermediate Period. It is characterized as a period of chaos, decline, misery, and social and political dissolution: a 'dark age' separating two epochs of glory and power. This picture, however, is based only partly on an evaluation of sources contemporary with the period. It largely reproduces—sometimes with surprising naivety—the literary theme developed in a group of Middle Kingdom literary texts. The so-called *Admonitions of an Egyptian Sage* and the *Prophecy of Neferti* form the core of this genre, but several other 'pessimistic' texts, such as the

Complaints of Khakheperraseneb and the *Dialogue between a Man Tired of Life and his 'ba'*, might also be added to this list. In this class of texts, a state of disorder is lamented and contrasted with the way in which things ought to be. Social order is turned upside down; the rich are poor, and the poor are rich; political unrest and insecurity prevails throughout the country; the administrative documents are torn to pieces; there are numerous different rulers in power at the same time; the country is invaded by foreigners; the moral basis of social life is destroyed; people neglect and hate each other; and the sacred scriptures are profaned. This state of general disturbance is not confined to the social world: it attains truly cosmic dimensions in that the river is sometimes said to be no longer flowing as it ought to do, and even the sun is found not to have retained its former brightness.

It should be noted that these texts do not actually claim to be set in the First Intermediate Period; nor do they mention any historical particulars. In the *Prophecy of Neferti*, the advent of Amenemhat I (1985–1956 BC) is foretold as bringing relief from a state of chaos which must be situated, chronologically, in the late 11th Dynasty and *not* in the First Intermediate Period. Careful scrutiny is, therefore, required if we are to determine whether these texts bear any relation to the history of the First Intermediate Period, and, even if they do, we need to investigate precisely *how* they relate to the actual historical events.

Texts deriving from the First Intermediate Period itself are entirely lacking in that very note of despair that is the hallmark of Middle Kingdom 'pessimistic' literature. They do talk about crisis, but crisis brilliantly overcome: vigour, self-confidence, and pride in one's own achievement characterize the mood of the time. Certainly there are a number of striking thematic similarities between First Intermediate Period biographies and the Middle Kingdom pessimistic texts (such as Nile failure, famine, social unrest, war, and a crisis affecting the foundations of the state), but these similarities prove, in the first place, *literary* connections between the two.

Another aspect of the textual evidence seems to be even more important. In First Intermediate Period inscriptions, tales of crisis served to legitimize the power of local rulers. In the same way, the greatly elaborated picture of a period of utter chaos in the later pessimistic literature provides the black background against which the tight politics of law and order implemented by Middle Kingdom kings can be justified and even made to appear beneficent. The foundations of the ruling ideology of Middle Kingdom monarchy, therefore, rest firmly on what we know of First Intermediate Period political thought.

These comparisons between Middle Kingdom 'pessimistic' literature and First Intermediate Period contemporary texts reveal just how deeply the experience of the First Intermediate Period affected the Middle Kingdom Egyptians' collective consciousness and their views on social and political relations. On the other hand, it would be extremely misguided to attempt to use Middle Kingdom literary texts as authentic sources for First Intermediate Period history. The view of the First Intermediate Period presented in this chapter has been entirely based on contemporary sources; this attempt to evaluate the surviving documentation in all its aspects makes it much more difficult to subscribe to the traditional negative view of the period. In contrast, one can only be struck by the dynamism and creativity of the period.

When Senusret I donated a statue of the 'count' Intef, the ancestor of the 11th Dynasty, to Karnak temple, he was acknowledging the origins of Middle Kingdom kingship in the struggles that local rulers fought for power and ascendancy during the First Intermediate Period. Apart from its political importance, the impact that the First Intermediate Period had on Egypt's cultural history cannot be denied. A whole range of new morphological types was developed in nearly every sphere of material culture, including such singularly successful new inventions as the scarab-shaped seal.

Above all, however, popular culture was given the opportunity to flourish at a time when the overpowering influence of court culture had faded, and when there was a great weakening of central government, which had previously (in the Old Kingdom) imposed heavy demands on provincial communities. In the First Intermediate Period, the local populations throughout the country enjoyed conspicuous, if modest, wealth. They also acquired various new means of cultural expression and communication, and were able to arrange their lives within the small-scale horizon of their immediate concerns.

7

The Middle Kingdom Renaissance (c.2055–1650 BC)

GAE CALLENDER

Unlike the First and Second Intermediate periods, the Middle Kingdom (2055–1650 BC) formed a political unity, the core of which comprised two political phases: the 11th Dynasty ruling from the Upper Egyptian city of Thebes, and the 12th Dynasty centred in the region of Lisht in the Faiyum. Earlier historians considered that the 11th and 12th Dynasties marked the full extent of the Middle Kingdom, but more recent scholarship shows clearly that at least the first half of the so-called 13th Dynasty (which apparently bears no resemblance to a proper political dynasty) belongs unequivocally to the Middle Kingdom. There was no shift of the location of the capital or royal residence, little diminution in the activities of the government, and no decline in the arts of the time—indeed, some of the finest works of Middle Kingdom art and literature date from the 13th Dynasty. There was, however, a decline in large-scale monumental building, a significant indication that the 13th Dynasty was neither as strong nor as inspired by the grandiose ideas that marked the reigns of the later 12th-Dynasty rulers. Doubtless, this phenomenon was due to the brevity of reigns for the majority of 13th-Dynasty kings, although the reasons for such changes in the political picture are as yet unknown.

The simplest way to gain some sense of the general flavour of Middle Kingdom history is to study the succession of kings and their achievements, since they set the tone for the political and cultural directions of the period. However, in pursuing this course, we are forced to confront one of the biggest problems in our understanding of