

A Short History of Egypt

Part II: The Middle Kingdom

and the Intermediate Periods

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Spring 2009

(This document last revised January 27, 2009)

1 The Collapse of the Old Kingdom

The last king of the Sixth Dynasty was Pepi II, who reigned for an astonishing ninety-four years—the longest known reign of any monarch in human history. Long reigns by absolute rulers have been known to make a smooth transfer of power to the successor difficult, and Pepi’s reign was perhaps no exception.

Furthermore, Cyril Aldred cites evidence that famine struck Egypt at this time; several years of low floods and the consequent low yield of Nile-mud agriculture would have caused the belief in the power of Pharaoh to be “discredited in a very short time.”¹

Apart from sheer lust for power, the regional rulers—viziers and *nomarchs*, rulers of the forty-two nomes—had “rational” motives for building their own military forces and consolidating their rule: invasions from Libya, Palestine, and Nubia, to say nothing of hungry Egyptians from other nomes looking for food. Under these conditions, to protect the people of their own regions, the governors would find it expedient to set themselves up as pharaohs and try to systematically expand their spheres of control.

2 The First Intermediate Period

Manetho describes the Seventh Dynasty as seventy kings who reigned for a total of seventy days. The Eighth Dynasty is better: twenty-seven kings who reigned for 146 years—still only about five and a half years each. These two dynasties, says Manetho, were kings based in Memphis, as were the Old Kingdom rulers. The Ninth and Tenth Dynasties have a total of thirty-eight kings over 594 years, ruling from Herakleopolis. And the Eleventh Dynasty was sixteen kings of Thebes, reigning a total of forty-three years before the Middle Kingdom was established.

As crazy as this sounds, modern Egyptology has revealed that it isn’t all that far-fetched. The Memphite rule of the Old Kingdom appears to have collapsed quickly following Pepi’s reign. The rivalries of the nomarchs came into play in the struggle for power, and the country was in chaos. After some time, Herakleopolis was indeed the capital for a new line of pharaohs, or at the very least, rulers powerful enough to sustain some claim to the title. These five dynasties are collectively known as the First Intermediate Period, and at any given time, more than one of them were in power simultaneously, as (for example) the Memphite Eighth and Herakleopolitan Ninth Dynasties overlapped.

It is not unreasonable to imagine that the high turnover in the Seventh and Eighth Dynasties was at least partially predicated by the inability of the kings to make the Nile flood by sheer personal power.

¹Aldred, Cyril. *The Egyptians*. Thames and Hudson, 1984, p. 120

The First Intermediate Period was dominated by the rule of the Herakleopolitan dynasties (Ninth and Tenth), and several innovations of their culture made their way into the Middle Kingdom. First, there was a “popularization” of funerary rites and equipment. Governors and wealthy men began to take wooden models of servants, soldiers, bakers, brewers, fishermen, and cattle into their tombs with them, thus ensuring that they would have these luxuries and assistants in the afterlife. Additionally, the liturgies and spells of the Pyramid Texts began to be painted on the inside of coffins. The coffins of this period are simple rectangular wooden boxes, which provided ample space for colorful and detailed illustrations of still more funerary goods and the recitation of the old spells—now for the benefit of the wealthy, not merely the royalty. Thus, we have the beginning of the second great phase of Egyptian funerary literature: the Coffin Texts.

Another contribution of Herakleopolitan culture to the future Middle Kingdom was also literary. An important text of this period has in modern times acquired the name *The Instruction Addressed to King Merikare*. Unfortunately, the confused records of the Herakleopolitan period do not tell us who Merikare’s father and predecessor—presumably the only person qualified to “instruct” him—actually was. However, this is the forerunner of many treatises on rulership which followed in the Middle Eastern and Classical worlds, and on into the Renaissance, such as Machiavelli’s *The Prince*.

The hothead is an inciter of citizens,
He creates factions among the young;
If you find that citizens adhere to him [...]
Denounce him before the councillors,
Suppress him, he is a rebel,
The talker is a troublemaker for the city.
Curb the multitude, suppress its heat. [...]
If you are skilled in speech, you will win,
The tongue is a king’s sword;
Speaking is stronger than all fighting,
The skillful is not overcome.²

3 The Dawn of the Middle Kingdom

Eventually, there arose in Thebes a family of nobles who called themselves pharaohs. They were able to hold the southernmost nomes of Egypt for decades, until finally, they were able to prevail over the Herakleopolitans. The first ruler of reunified Egypt was Nebhepetre Montuhotep II. He reigned for a long fifty-one years, during which was able to stabilize and pacify the country and begin its return to prosperity. His son Montuhotep III reigned peacefully for twelve years, and spent his reign engaged in trade and building projects.

Once again, a long reign appears to have been bad for Egypt, though not felt until a reign later: there is confusion following Montuhotep III’s reign. There seems to be a Montuhotep IV who reigns briefly and then is succeeded by his own vizier, who inaugurates the Twelfth Dynasty as Amenemhat I.

Amenemhat may have had difficulties consolidating his position and putting down the ambitions of the nomarchs, who would still have the memories of their ancestors’ independence in the First Intermediate Period. In the twentieth year of his reign, he promoted his son Senwosret to the position of co-ruler, perhaps to “defend” the old pharaoh with greater energy. Since his name contains the name of Amun, Amenemhat is believed to have been from Thebes. However, he moved his capital to the border region of the Two Lands, to a city called Itj-Tawy (“Seizing the Two Lands”). Then he built a pyramid for his tomb, a precedent for his dynasty, although the Twelfth Dynasty pyramids were composed mainly of mud-brick and today resemble crumbling hills of dirt more than the pyramids of the Old Kingdom. He also began the construction of fortified settlements in Nubia and the Sudan.

²Lichtheim, Miriam. *Ancient Egyptian Literature, Volume I: The Old and Middle Kingdoms*. University of California, 1975, p.99.

Trade began to flourish with Syria-Palestine; Egyptian objects bearing the names of Twelfth Dynasty pharaohs have been found at Gaza, Ras Shamra, Megiddo, and other sites in that region, and Syrian treasure has been found in a temple near Thebes.

4 *The Story of Sinuhe* and “Classical” Middle Egyptian

The most popular piece of storytelling from Ancient Egypt, so far as is known today, is *The Story of Sinuhe*. This story takes place at the end of the reign of Amenemhat I. Many copies and fragments thereof have been found. It contains more than a little hint of autobiography, though no traces of the protagonist’s real tomb or personal effects have been found.

The story is told entirely in the first person. Sinuhe, a personal attendant of Senwosret I’s wife Nefru, is accompanying the then-prince while the latter is conducting a campaign in Libya. A messenger arrives with the news that Amenemhat I has died. Senwosret departs for Egypt, but Sinuhe remains behind with the army. The next day, more messengers arrive for the other princes who were commanding the army, and word of a plot against the new king reaches Sinuhe’s ears. He is convinced he will not survive the turmoil, and he flees.

Eventually Sinuhe comes to Palestine and is received warmly by a ruler there, Amunenshi, who has Egyptians in his court (probably traders) who attest to Sinuhe’s character and skills. Amunenshi becomes fond of the Egyptian, and marries Sinuhe to his daughter. Sinuhe becomes an administrator for Amunenshi, governing wisely and caring for the people of his adopted home. He raises a family and sees his sons grow into fine young men.

But then he receives word that another tribe has come to make war. Conferring with Amunenshi, Sinuhe prepares himself, and defeats the rival leader in single combat. This makes Sinuhe even more wealthy and well-regarded by Amunenshi and his people, but he longs even more to return home to Egypt. He begins to wonder what will happen to his soul if his corpse is not buried in Egypt according to Egyptian rites:

“Whichever god decreed this flight, have mercy, bring me home! Surely you will let me see the place in which my heart dwells! What is more important than that my corpse be buried in the land in which I was born! Come to my aid! What if the happy event [of my death] should occur! May god pity me! May he act so as to make happy the end of one whom he had punished!”³

As if on cue, Senwosret, who is alive and well and survived the conspiracy against him, hears of Sinuhe’s accomplishments and sends a decree to him:

“The King of Upper and Lower Egypt Kheperkare, the Son of Re Senwosret, who lives forever . . . to the attendant Sinuhe: . . . This matter—it carried away your heart. It was not in my heart against you. This your heaven in the palace [that is, the Queen] lives and prospers to this day. . . . Come back to Egypt! . . . Think of the day of burial, the passing into reverendness.

“Your tomb-pillars, made of white stone, are among those of the royal children. You shall not die abroad! Not shall Asiatics inter you. You shall not be wrapped in the skin of a ram to serve as your coffin.⁴ Too long a roaming of the earth! Think of your corpse, come back!”⁵

Sinuhe spends one more day among Amunenshi’s people after writing a joyous letter of acceptance and gratitude, handing over his affairs and offices to his eldest son, and returns to Egypt, to the capital Itj-Tawy. When he is brought before the king—not by police, but by an honor guard and courtiers—his spirit fails him and he trembles in fear again. The queen is brought in and cannot believe at first that it is her old attendant, but the king assures her that it is so. Seeing Sinuhe

³Lichtheim, *op. cit.*, p. 228.

⁴This particular detail will come back to haunt us when we consider the mysterious “Unknown Man E” when we look at mummification, later in the course.

⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 229-230.

trembling, the queen and her attendants respond that no one should fear when they see the king, but should feel joyful and safe. The king responds “He shall not fear, he shall not dread! He shall be a Companion among the nobles . . . wait on him!”⁶

Sinuhe recounts happily how he was bathed, shaved, and anointed as befitted an Egyptian noble, not like a desert dweller, and how he lived happily in the palace precincts, getting three or four fine meals each day, in addition to numerous gifts from the royal family. Finally, he tells how the greatest craftsmen and artists in Egypt were assigned to prepare his tomb, and how his statue was plated with precious metal, all at the pharaoh’s orders, and the story has the happy ending that every great story demands: “I was in the favor of the king, until the day of landing came”⁷—that is, until the day he died.

The language of the Middle Kingdom, Middle Egyptian, became the “classical” language of the New Kingdom and Late Period. The formulations of the Coffin Texts and such texts as *Sinuhe* and *The Instructions of Merikare* were undoubtedly heard in spoken form by many people. Other stories from the Middle Kingdom are well known, such as the “Tales of Wonder”, in which the family of Khufu are the main characters, and they interact with magicians in a series of amusing stories which can only be described as ancient fairy tales. Yet another piece of Middle Kingdom literature that has come down to us is known as *The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant*, in which a peasant so impresses a magistrate with his appeal for justice, that when the magistrate reports it to the king, the king tells the magistrate to go back and make the peasant plead some more until he’s exhausted, just to enjoy his marvelous speech! This flowering of the language into an instrument of art, accessible to more people than ever before, is largely responsible for the respect in which later Egyptians held the Middle Kingdom’s tongue.

5 The zenith and fall of the Middle Kingdom

The remainder of the Twelfth Dynasty, except the last ruler, was a series of Senwosrets and Amenemhats, each advancing his son to the co-regency before his own death. None reigned less than about twenty years, and most reigned for about forty years, making this one of the most stable and prosperous periods of Egypt’s history. Perhaps the best-known today are Senwosret III and his son Amenemhat III, known from their very distinctive faces in statuary.

The combination of the statuary and the wisdom literature of the time—often pessimistic and cynical, in contrast with the romanticism of *Sinuhe* and the *Eloquent Peasant*—has led Egyptologists to see this period as a time in which the king was certainly well-respected, but seen in a much more human light: a demanding and difficult role, one which carried a tremendous burden for its occupant. Witness in *Sinuhe* how the king himself admits that one should not be afraid in his presence.

The last ruler of the Twelfth Dynasty was a woman, Sobeknefru, probably the sister of the last and fourth Amenemhat. She reigned for only about three years, possibly again because Amenemhat III reigned a long time (over fifty years), and the Thirteenth Dynasty begins. This period is again characterized by numerous short-lived pharaohs. The rule of the Thirteenth Dynasty was sustained, rather than undermined, by the bureaucracy and nobility built up by the Twelfth, and so instead of the catastrophic collapse, we have a slow decline.

However, as the Thirteenth Dynasty progressed, we have some kings showing up in the lists with names which sound more Syrio-Palestinian than Egyptian, until finally something happens during the reign of Dudimose: the country was infiltrated by people whom the Egyptians called *ḥkꜣ ḥꜣswt*, “foreign rulers”, a phrase which Manetho mutated into Greek as *Hyksos*.

6 The Second Intermediate Period

For a time it was unclear whether the Hyksos swept over Egypt like a horde of barbarians in a bad action movie, or whether they attained their power through cultural assimilation over time. The balance of the evidence favors the less dramatic version. Fleeing the famines which encompassed

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 232.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 233.

the Middle East, tribes of Palestinians had settled the Delta during the First Intermediate Period. Their leaders were called “foreign princes” or “foreign rulers” by the Egyptians, and were generally well-received, as they quickly obtained employment as menial and skilled laborers. Some worked as palace dancers and even temple doorkeepers, indicating that they received the trust of their hosts.

The importance of the “Hyksos” peoples increased during the decline of the Middle Kingdom until we begin to see them functioning as pharaohs in their own right. Eventually, some form of open conflict must have occurred, reflected in Manetho’s account of the event: “In [Dudimose’s] reign, for what cause I know not, a blast of God smote us . . . invaders of obscure race marched in confidence of victory against our land. By main force they easily seized it without striking a blow . . .”⁸

Various minor kings, not well-attested archaeologically, are labeled the Fourteenth Dynasty by Manetho; they are probably contemporaries of the Thirteenth Dynasty. The Fifteenth and Sixteenth Dynasties consist of Hyksos kings, who ruled a large portion of the country—Lower Egypt and the northern nomes of Upper Egypt—from the city of Avaris, in the Delta. Avaris was almost certainly settled by the Hyksos long before they became the rulers of Egypt, when they initially immigrated, but it became the capital during the Second Intermediate Period.

7 The Seventeenth Dynasty: The Liberation

During the Hyksos rule, actual power in Thebes and the rest of Upper Egypt was wielded by a line of Theban princes who maintained an uneasy peace with the Hyksos rulers by sending them tribute and paying them lip service. These princes formed what Manetho called the Seventeenth Dynasty.

The war began in earnest, it seems, during the reign of the Seventeenth Dynasty pharaoh Seqenenre Ta’o II. A story from the New Kingdom called *The Quarrel of Apophis and Seqenenre* says that Apophis, the Hyksos king, sent a letter to Ta’o telling him to get his noisy pet hippopotami to be quiet, as they were keeping Apophis awake at night. Avaris and Thebes being at opposite ends of the country, this was obviously needling, but some Egyptologists believe the “hippos” were a metaphor for Ta’o’s courtiers and nomarchs.

Whatever the backstory, hostilities were joined, and based upon Ta’o’s mummy and later Egyptian histories, we can see that things didn’t end so well for the Theban. The head of the mummy shows five distinct injuries caused by various weapons; the facial expression is a painful grimace; and the mummy’s hands are contorted as though attempting to fight back.

However, his sons Kamose and Ahmose continued the effort, and eventually, the Hyksos were driven out of Egypt all the way back to Syria, and Ahmose inaugurated the Eighteenth Dynasty and with it, the New Kingdom.

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⁸Aldred, *op. cit.*, p. 132.