

INTRODUCTION

THIS BOOK REVISITS A LONG-HELD BELIEF IN THE EGYPTOLOGICAL LITERATURE THAT A “middle class” arose in Egypt during the early second millennium BCE, an assumption that has never been systematically evaluated. Specifically, scholars have identified the chronological context of this social shift as lying within the Egyptian Middle Kingdom (later eleventh through the thirteenth dynasties, ca. 2040–1650 BCE). Within the discipline, the Middle Kingdom was therefore the first historical period for which Egyptologists developed hypotheses of social change.

The Middle Kingdom (2040–1650 BCE) was a pivotal period within the trajectory of Egyptian history: an era that saw the culmination of social, ideological, and political transformations initiated in the later Old Kingdom and First Intermediate Periods (ca. 2544–2040 BCE). The Middle Kingdom was viewed by the Egyptians themselves as a “classical” time, primarily in terms of sheer centralized power, and witnessed a literary efflorescence that was perhaps precipitated by factions within the political arena (Parkinson 1997, 2002). Textual evidence of all kinds dramatically increases for this period and represents more levels of the ancient society than previously documented; material remains from Middle Kingdom Egypt are both more numerous and more varied than those of preceding periods. It was with the Middle Kingdom that Egyptological scholars began to write social history, putting forward in particular the thesis that a middle class took shape and achieved prominence at this time.

Because of an inherent Egyptological bias toward textual and iconographic sources, however, most of the theories surrounding the social organization of the ancient Egyptians have been based on a limited data set. Archaeological data have tended to play a secondary role in many of these theories – with the exception of mortuary data for the highest elite. One of the most accessible parts of the ancient Egyptian archaeological record, elite monumental graves feature prominently in these discussions because of the perceived thickness of social information provided by their textual and pictorial decorations. Such a focus automatically has excluded nonelites – who did not own monumental inscribed and decorated graves – from the discussion.

Thus, the question of social change in the Middle Kingdom has never been systematically assessed from a multidimensional perspective, integrating archaeological, representational, and textual data and contemplating whole landscapes – cemetery and settlement alike – in evaluating ancient social systems. Crucial to such a perspective should be the study of cemetery landscapes of the period: the entire range of mortuary behavior instead of a simple focus on elite remains. Given documented ancient Egyptian attitudes toward cemeteries as loci for the recreation of ideal and real social orders and the close connection between these landscapes of death and the living landscapes to which they were adjacent, these data can and should play a central role in reconstructing social and political process.

This book explores the connection between society and death in the specific historical setting of Middle Kingdom Egypt, investigating the reality of an ancient Egyptian middle class and considering it as an example of differentiation and change in complex societies generally. Taking a multidimensional perspective toward archaeological, textual, and pictorial data, the book seeks also to bridge humanities and social scientific approaches in integrating the archaeology of individuals with the archaeology of communities and regions as an important method in the reconstruction of social and political process. With the archaeological consequences of a spike in access to previously restricted aspects and spaces of ritual and mortuary culture, the greater accessibility of settlements, and the sudden explosion of texts of all kinds written or commissioned by individuals from many more levels of society than in earlier periods (Parkinson 1991:17), the Middle Kingdom provides a fruitful ground for such research.

The Historical Setting and the Problem: Middle Kingdom, Middle Class

The Middle Kingdom (2040–1650 BCE) was a period of political and cultural unity following the political and cultural decentralization of the First Intermediate Period (ca. 2260–2040 BCE) (see Figure 1). It comprised the eleventh dynasty from the reunification of Upper and Lower Egypt under King Nebheptre Montuhotep II (2040–1991 BCE); the twelfth dynasty, “the most stable royal line ever to rule Egypt” (Quirke 1988:4) (1991–1783 BCE); and the thirteenth dynasty (1783–1650 BCE), less politically stable than the twelfth dynasty, but maintaining significant political authority throughout Egypt (Quirke 1988; Bourriau 1981; Quirke 1990; Parkinson 1991).

At the heart of this centralized period lay the twelfth dynasty, characterized by political continuity, with relatively few rulers ascending the throne over two centuries. One possible explanation for this stability was the practice of coregency by several kings of the dynasty (Murnane 1977; Jansen-Winkeln 1997; Wegner 1996a; but see Delia 1980 and Obsomer 1995 for dissenting opinions); one index of the degree of centralization and economic

<i>Predynastic Period</i>		<i>New Kingdom</i>	
Badarian	4800–4200 BCE	18th dynasty	1570–1293 BCE
Naqada I	4200–3700 BCE	19th dynasty	1293–1185 BCE
Naqada II	3700–3250 BCE	20th dynasty	1185–1070 BCE
Naqada III	3250–3100 BCE	<i>Third Intermediate Period</i>	
Dynasty 0		21st dynasty	1070–946 BCE
<i>Early Dynastic Period</i>		22nd dynasty	946–712 BCE
1st dynasty	3100–2900 BCE	23rd dynasty	828–ca. 665 BCE
2nd dynasty	2900–2750 BCE	24th dynasty	718–685 BCE
Old Kingdom		25th dynasty	767–656 BCE
3rd dynasty	2750–2680 BCE	<i>Saite Period</i>	
4th dynasty	2680–2544 BCE	26th dynasty	685–525 BCE
5th dynasty	2544–2407 BCE	<i>Late Period</i>	
6th dynasty	2407–2260 BCE	27th dynasty	525–404 BCE
First Intermediate Period		28th dynasty	404–399 BCE
7th, 8th, 9th dynasties	ca. 2260–2175 BCE	29th dynasty	399–380 BCE
10th dynasty	2175–2035 BCE	30th dynasty	380–343 BCE
11th dyn. (1st half)	2134–2040 BCE	<i>Persian Period</i>	
Middle Kingdom			343–332 BCE
11th dynasty (2nd half)	2040–1991 BCE	<i>Ptolemaic Period</i>	
12th dynasty	1991–1783 BCE		332–31 BCE
13th dynasty	1783–1650 BCE	<i>Roman Period</i>	
Second Intermediate Period			31 BCE–CE 395
14th dynasty	1720–1665 BCE	<i>Byzantine Period</i>	
15th dynasty (Hyksos)	1668–1560 BCE		CE 395–641
16th dynasty	1665–1565 BCE	<i>Muslim Conquest</i>	
17th dynasty	1668–1570 BCE		CE 641
<i>Internal Chronology of the Middle Kingdom</i>			
		11th dynasty (second part)	2040–1991 BCE
		12th dynasty	
		Amenemhat I	1991–1783 BCE
		Senwosret I	1971–1926 BCE
		Amenemhat II	1929–1892 BCE
		Senswosret II	1897–1878 BCE
		Senswosret III	1878–1841 BCE
		Amenemhat III	1844–1797 BCE
		Amenemhat IV	1799–1787 BCE
		Sobeknefru	1783–1650 BCE
		13th dynasty	1783–1650 BCE

1. Chronology of Ancient Egypt. Main chronology after J. Richards and T. Wilfong (1995:8); internal chronology of the Middle Kingdom after J. Bourriau (1988:5).

prosperity of this era was the scale and scope of building activity undertaken throughout the dynasty, in sharp contrast to the complete lack of royal monuments from the First Intermediate Period. Instead of returning to the Old Kingdom capital of Memphis, textual evidence indicates that Amenemhet I, the founder of the twelfth dynasty, established a new royal city at Itj-tawy [“(Amenemhet is the) Seizer of the Two Lands”](Helck 1980;

Parkinson 1991), believed to lie at the mouth of the Fayum, and kings focused much of their royal building activity in the vicinity of this city. For their mortuary monuments, Amenemhat I and his successors resurrected the pyramid as a prominent symbol dominating the landscape and communicating royal power, and constructed elaborate complexes at el-Lisht, el-Lahun, Hawara, Dahshur, and Abydos (see Chapter Five), nested in a supportive string of towns housing the populations that carried out and supported each royal mortuary cult (Figure 2).

Royal building programs at this time also emphasized the construction and embellishment of gods' temples the length of the Nile (most notably at Ezbet Rushdi, Heliopolis, Karnak, Medamud, and Tod), materializing an increasing stress on royal piety in the central ideology (Franke 1995). Archaeological and textual evidence for the government-organized quarrying expeditions connected to these building programs abounds (Goyon 1957; Kemp 1989; Franke 1995); the government also initiated extensive irrigation projects within Egypt and dedicated extensive resources to militarism on a scale not previously manifested in Egyptian history.

The twelfth dynasty saw the beginning of true imperial activity on the part of the Egyptian state, including a massive fortification program to the south, with thirteen forts attested archaeologically and/or textually in Nubia; there may also have been additional fortifications along the eastern edge of the Delta (Kemp 1983; O'Connor 1986; Franke 1999). There is evidence for a significant number of military sorties abroad and for Egypt's first standing army, with a concomitant wealth of inscriptional evidence for professional soldiers (Leprohon 1978; Baines 1987; Snape 1994; Quirke 1990). Simultaneously, ethnic diversity was increasing within the Egyptian population, perhaps in part related to the irreversible entry into a wider world precipitated by this militarism. The increasing migration of seminomadic peoples from both the Levant and Libya into Lower Egypt (Parkinson 1991:11; Bietak 1996a) now paralleled the continuing incorporation of Nubians into Egyptian society (Fischer 1961; Bourriau 1991b).

In contemplating this dynamic historical setting, several themes emerge relating to social change. One issue of long-standing interest has been the alleged suppression of the provincial nobility by Senwosret III in the later twelfth dynasty (ca. 1862–1844 BCE), accompanied by a global reorganization of the bureaucracy (Erman 1894 [1885–7]; Hall 1924; Hayes 1961; Bourriau 1988). Closely related is the traditional theory that a middle class arose during the Middle Kingdom, believed by some to be a result of this deliberate governmental leveling of elite factions. In the literature, this latter issue is also linked to a so-called democratization of the Osiris myth and a widening of access to the central mortuary religion and practices previously restricted to the king and elites.

Further issues are the implications of the very existence of a standing professional army, the practice of rotating garrisons in the Nubian forts, and the impact of both on the

Cambridge University Press

0521840333 - Society and Death in Ancient Egypt: Mortuary Landscapes of the Middle Kingdom

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2. Map of Egypt with key sites. K. Clahassey, after Grajetzki 2003, Figure 1.

organization of Egyptian society, especially with regard to opportunities for social and political mobility. Finally, since the late 1980s some scholars have characterized the period as one in which the central government espoused a “prescriptive” vision of society, with a rigid administration exercising more control than previously enforced over every aspect of the lives of the Egyptian population and a two-tiered organization of the population into elite and nonelite classes (Helck 1963; Kemp 1989; Quirke 1990; Parkinson 1991), an ideology expressed in buildings, royal monumental texts, literary tropes, and the existence of imperialism itself. Such an orientation could be expected to have significant consequences for the organization and operation of society.

The “Suppression” of the Provincial Nobility and the Reorganization of the Bureaucracy

To what degree do these theories hold up? In many instances the data used to argue them boil down to one category of evidence. For example, the disappearance of provincial elite decorated graves after the reign of Senwosret III has been put forward as the main evidence for an administrative reform by that king designed to curb the power of an elite faction – the provincial nobility – and simultaneously enhance the control and scope of the central bureaucracy (Delia 1980:164; Kemp 1983:111; Quirke 1990:5). During this process, Senwosret III had allegedly “shorn the provincial nobles of their traditional rights and privileges and reduced them to the status of political non-entities” (Hayes 1961:505–6), in an inevitable shift from feudalism to bureaucracy (Hall 1924:318). As recently as 1988, Bourriau stated that Senwosret III’s profound reorganization of the government “had the effect of reducing the power of the local families who controlled the provinces (nomes) into which Egypt was divided” (Bourriau 1988:39; see also Grajetzki 2001a).

This argument is weakened, however, by the late twelfth dynasty date of the largest of these provincial tombs at Qau el-Kebir (Quirke 1990:5) and the fact that the diminution in frequency of these tombs has never been demonstrated to be a result of royal policy (Delia 1980:167). Further, Kemp has pointed out that within one generation the size of royal tombs also declined, doubtless as a result of instability within the kingship (Kemp 1983:112). Previously, Helck had suggested that the dismantling of the provincial power structure began much earlier in the Middle Kingdom (Helck 1958:18–19), and the eventual disappearance of the large elite tombs was only a part of the process; while Franke saw the process less as a violent “suppression” than a gradual allowance of the office of nomarch (provincial governor) to fall into disuse (Franke 1991, 1995), a less abrupt elimination of potential political competitors through management of the office over time (cf. Brumfiel 1989).

Scholars have based the theory of a “profound reorganization” of the government and bureaucracy, also attributed to the reign of Senwosret III and seen to have taken place in conjunction with the suppression of the nobility (Bourriau 1988:53), on the sudden proliferation of bureaucratic titles occurring on private mortuary monuments and seals and seal impressions and in administrative documents. As is discussed, however, the seemingly sudden appearance of these titles on the former may simply reflect a relaxation in the religious decorum of such monuments, while their appearance in the latter may be related to the better survivability of such documents from this period forward. The Middle Kingdom was characterized by an explosion of all kinds of documentary data in comparison to the preceding periods of Egyptian history; among them a wealth of archival data recording the activities of a wide range of individuals. In other words, as with the “suppression” of the nobility, it is possible that these titles were part of a process of change begun much earlier than the Middle Kingdom and continuing into the twelfth and thirteenth dynasties (Delia 1980; Quirke 1990; Grajetzki 2001). Another possibility is that these titles in fact always existed but for either religious or archaeological reasons were not previously attested.

The Rise of the Middle Class and the Democratization of the Afterlife

. . . The suppression of the landed nobility was accompanied by the emergence of the Egyptian middle class, composed of craftsmen, tradesmen, small farmers and the like, the rise in whose fortunes and importance . . . [can be traced through] numerous private statuettes and in the countless stelae dedicated by these people at Abydos. (Hayes 1961:45)

And what of the theory regarding the rise of a middle class in the Middle Kingdom? The above quotation from the 1960s edition of the *Cambridge Ancient History* echoed earlier statements made by Erman (1894:101) and Hall (1924:318) and summarized an assumption thereafter perpetuated in the Egyptological literature, namely that a middle class in Egyptian society developed during the Middle Kingdom, hand in hand with a deliberate suppression of an elite faction by the central government. Later evaluations have been more cautious about this social shift: “[Evidence suggests] a slight change in the social structure with the rise of a limited ‘sub-elite’” (Parkinson 1991:11). But the notion persists, and the most important evidence used to support this assumption, whether consciously or not, seems to be the large group of Middle Kingdom stelae from the cemeteries and the votive (“cenotaph”) zone at the southern site of Abydos, adjacent to the Osiris temple complex there. A wide range of socioeconomic statuses could be (and obviously was) deduced from these mortuary and commemorative stelae based on their size and quality; further,

the existence and variety, or absence, of titles also contributes to the impression of extensive differentiation (Simpson 1974; O'Connor 1985).

That a middle class arose in Egypt during the Middle Kingdom seems therefore to have been posited on largely the same category of evidence cited for the “reorganization of the bureaucracy.” The appearance of new *textual* evidence in the archaeological record – lower level bureaucratic titles, on either mortuary or votive monuments or in administrative documents – suggested this social change to scholars, providing yet another example of the primacy of documentary evidence in the writing of Egyptian history. The textual evidence is undeniably intriguing and suggestive; but in contrast, another proposed line of evidence for this social shift – the archaeologically attested existence of extensive lower order cemeteries for the period – has not been foregrounded in traditional discussions of the problem.

Finally, the hypothesis of a democratization of the afterlife, with wider social access to the divine (Parkinson 1991:11) through elaborate burial and votive commemoration (Bourriau 1991a), has also been used as indirect evidence for the rise of the middle class, as it was believed to be related to that process (Hall 1924:323; Hayes 1971:59; Parkinson 1991; Franke 1998; Parkinson 2002). Hall saw the national devotion to Osiris at Abydos on the part of the Egyptian population as a deliberate ideological maneuver on the part of twelfth-dynasty kings to foster a feeling of common Upper Egyptian nationality (Hall 1924:323), implying that such community spirit was deemed necessary for the success of the state. Ultimately, and in very circular fashion, this hypothesis rests mostly on the same textual data used to substantiate the “rise of a middle class” (Franke 1998; Parkinson 2002).

The data used to support the proposed rise of the middle class are tantalizing but problematic. The appearance of a wider range of titles than previously attested on mortuary and votive monuments or of lower order mortuary monuments with no associated inscriptions is subject to the same criticism brought to bear on theories regarding the reorganization of the bureaucracy: that the “new” categories or classes of persons represented by these titles may always or previously have existed in Egyptian society but for a variety of reasons were recorded or preserved only as of the Middle Kingdom. The existence of significant lower order cemeteries for this period, noted earlier as additional support for the theory, was not in fact a phenomenon unique to the beginning of the second millennium BCE. Brunton documented such large provincial cemeteries already by the time of the First Intermediate Period, most notably at Qau and Badari (Brunton 1927), and recent work in the later Old Kingdom and First Intermediate Period cemeteries at Abydos has established that such cemeteries also existed here (Richards 2003a, Herbich and Richards in press). The “lower order” graves of those cemeteries displayed a remarkable range of size and wealth, again suggesting a comparable range of social differentiation existing prior to the Middle Kingdom. Finally, it has been demonstrated that the arrogation of royal symbols of status to private individuals (such as the right to become Osiris after death and the use of royal

symbols in the friezes of objects painted inside coffins [Willems 1988, 1996] – the democratization of the afterlife – had begun already at the end of the Old Kingdom, at which point a gradual transgression of decorum began (Baines 1989; Podemann Sørensen 1990:114,117; Finnestad 1990). All of this suggests that, although scholars began to notice textual evidence for a middle class only in the Middle Kingdom, the roots of its development – with corresponding implications for the differentiation and functioning of Egyptian society – lay further back in Egyptian history.

Ironically enough, a relatively recent competing vision of social relations in the Middle Kingdom has also relied primarily on textual data alongside a comparatively narrow interpretation of archaeological remains. The “prescriptive” notion of society, first detailed by Kemp in 1989 and now often cited in discussions of the Middle Kingdom period (Quirke 1990, 1991b; Parkinson 1991, 1997, 2002), relies on intensely detailed bureaucratic texts of the period and evidence from tightly planned settlements executed by the central government, primary examples being the mortuary town at el-Lahun (Petrie 1891; Kemp 1989) and fortress towns in Nubia (Emery 1979; Kemp 1989). This prescriptive model posited the enforcement of a two-tiered vision of society throughout the Egyptian Nile Valley, through an Egypt-wide manipulation of a royally “built” environment, and through the development and deployment of a complex bureaucracy. In such a tightly controlled setting, one could not expect the effective operation of any group approaching the status of a middle class.

Integrating Mortuary Data

Conspicuous by its absence from both traditional notions of Middle Kingdom society and the more recent “prescriptive” models, the full complement of Egyptian mortuary data provide an important window into assessing changing relationships between ancient Egyptian social and political groups. A key example of the importance of such a broad view is the site of Abydos itself, the source of the very group of stelae used to hypothesize the rise of a middle class and the location of one of the government-established towns of the type featured so prominently in the “prescriptive view.” A comprehensive consideration of all data available for the Middle Kingdom mortuary landscape there, including the results of recent fieldwork, suggests a situation contrary to what would be expected in a “prescriptive” state, with private access to goods, services and space being much more widely distributed than the total control such a state would allow. These data, combined with information from other mortuary sites and integrated with evidence from settlements, texts, and representational materials, help to build an understanding of the Egyptian middle class, its relationship to the broader society, and its connection to politics and ideology in the Middle Kingdom.

In this book, I take a multidimensional approach to the state-level society of second millennium BCE Egypt, especially that of the Middle Kingdom (2040–1650 BCE), drawing primarily on analysis of the archaeological remains of mortuary behavior but with reference also to contemporary settlement, textual, and iconographic data. From this interdisciplinary perspective, can a middle class or group, so often referred to in the Egyptological literature (e.g., Hall 1923; Hayes 1961), really be substantiated for this period, and, if so, how does it fit into a broader pattern of social and economic differentiation for the Middle Kingdom? What role did it play in the broader social and political developments of early second millennium Egypt?

As a prelude to addressing these questions, Chapter One considers social systems in more general and theoretical terms and defines key concepts used throughout the book. Chapter Two presents in more detail the textual and representational data that have been traditionally emphasized in considering the question of society in the Middle Kingdom, while Chapter Three reviews the archaeological evidence from nonmortuary landscapes, including settlement and temple contexts. In Chapters Four and Five, I move to an in-depth consideration of Egyptian cemetery landscapes, beginning with a general discussion of scholarly bias and social approaches in the Egyptian Nile Valley and continuing with a survey of the totality of mortuary practice during the Middle Kingdom. In Chapters Six and Seven, I focus on three case studies: the extensive Middle Kingdom cemeteries at Haraga and Riqqa in the north and at Abydos in the south. Finally, in the book's conclusion, I integrate the results from these mortuary studies with data discussed in the first part of the book to achieve a richer and more dynamic view of Middle Kingdom society than any one avenue of evidence allows. In this way I can also consider the nature of social and political process in Egypt over time and its implications for the study of ancient society more generally.