Introduction

It was like the nature of a dream, like a Delta (man) seeing himself in Elephantine.[1]

In southern Egypt, 500 miles from Cairo, the Nile River courses through the islands of the First Cataract, flanking the northernmost island of Elephantine before returning to a single, smooth current flowing northward to the Mediterranean Sea (Figures 1, 2). The high desert escarpment running along the west bank rises to a peak where the reunified river bends toward the north. This peak, today called Qubbet el-Hawa, is home to rock-cut tombs built by the elite citizens of the ancient town on Elephantine Island (Figure 3, Plates I, II). The elite tomb owners residing in this unique environment at the boundary of the Egyptian Nile valley founded the cemetery during the late Old Kingdom (c. 2300–2150 BCE), a period of sociopolitical change characterized by the expansion of provincial elite cemeteries that transformed the landscape of Egypt.

For much of the Old Kingdom, the standard for an elite burial meant having a tomb in one of the preeminent cemetery sites at Giza and Saqqara, where massive royal pyramids transformed the open desert into a sacred landscape of the afterlife. The statement of predominance made by these pyramids and their surrounding elite cemeteries near the ancient capital at Memphis has long shaped our approach to the study of Egypt in the Old Kingdom. This emphatic expression of cultural and political unity has encouraged scholars to construct a linear narrative focused on the king and the central government, from the origins of unification through phases of the administration's evolution and the eventual disintegration of central control. Material from provincial sites is drawn into this project, bringing additional data to help flesh out the narrative. Titles from

1

provincial tombs bolster studies of the structure and development of the Egyptian administration, and lengthier texts, like autobiographies, provide insight into the country's interests and activities over the course of the Old Kingdom.[2] With feet firmly planted in Memphite sand, scholars have viewed provincial material culture, in particular the art of the provincial elite, mainly as variably successful reproductions of Memphite models. Formal similarities are favored, while differences are rationalized so as not to disturb the smooth curve of the central narrative arc.

This linear history provides an essential framework for the study of all aspects of Egyptian society and culture, but it also limits our ability to seek meaning in the differences found in provincial material culture. A smaller number of studies concerning individual provincial sites illustrate the informative potential in examining provincial material in its original context.[3] These studies have elicited indications of a much richer diversity of local experiences and forms of material culture than are typically visible in the broader histories. This study focuses on a group of twelve elite tombs created during the late Old Kingdom in the cemetery at Qubbet el-Hawa in Aswan, examining their text and image programs and architectural space. This analysis of the tombs in their original context seeks to demonstrate that their unique character is the meaningful product of a living community that created and used the tombs, and in so doing to identify additional narrative and cultural threads within the complex fabric of Egyptian society in the Old Kingdom.

Data and Context

The interest of Western scholars first turned to Qubbet el-Hawa in the late nineteenth century.[4] In 1883, with an awareness of the long-standing importance of Aswan/Syene as a border town, the presumption that an important cemetery must be nearby led the local British commander Francis Grenfell to the cliff, which, though heavily sanded over, still showed visible signs of an ancient presence. Grenfell recruited the renowned Egyptologist E. A. Wallis Budge to bring his expertise to their first discoveries, and the process of uncovering, examining, and recording the tombs began. A number of other interested parties contributed to this process, including Ernesto Schiaparelli, who discovered the tomb of Harkhuf, and Lady William Cecil, who uncovered, among others, the double tomb of Mekhu and his son, Sabni. In the early twentieth century,

most local archaeology was devoted to the townsite on Elephantine, beginning with German, French, and Italian teams. Following World War II, Egyptian teams led by Labib Habachi excavated the Sanctuary of Heqaib in the townsite, and following this work, Habachi briefly turned his attention to Qubbet el-Hawa. From 1946 to 1951, Habachi focused on tombs 35, 35d, and 35e, in search of the Heqaib who was later deified and honored by the sanctuary. Issues surrounding this work and the identity of these tomb owners are discussed in **Appendix A**.

More systematic excavations of the entire site, including a return to many of the previously found (and in some cases, previously lost) tombs were begun in 1957 under the auspices of the Bonner Ägyptologisches Institut, led by Elmar Edel.[5] These excavations continued until 1981. Throughout his many years of work at Qubbet el-Hawa Edel wrote numerous articles, but ultimately he focused primarily on the corpus of offering pottery recovered from the cemetery. As Edel discovered, the tomb owners at Qubbet el-Hawa performed a unique practice, inscribing their offering vessels to identify both the food being offered and the individual responsible for the offering.[6] Discovery of this local practice substantiates the search for other localized sociocultural traditions, in particular at Elephantine. This tradition's emphasis on the identity of the elite tomb owners and their connection to and support of each other affords an instructive parallel to the unique programs in their tombs.

Edel passed away before completing the collation and analysis of the many years of work at the site; however, his materials were left in the capable hands of Karl-Joachim Seyfried and Gerd Vieler. Their final publication of the remaining materials came out in 2008, making available all collected data regarding the architecture, images, and texts, and finds from the entire excavated cemetery.[7] This exceedingly thorough work comprises three volumes, as well as eighty-eight plates of drawings and fifty-five plans and sections. Along with the full publication of the collected data, the editors focus heavily on analyzing the architecture of the monuments, including dimensions, structural concerns, and building processes; with regard to these issues, their work should be considered the authoritative analysis. Any detailed analysis of the images is of less concern to their work; it is one goal of this publication to contribute a more thorough discussion of these aspects.

Following the conclusion of Edel's excavations, a number of small projects were undertaken at the site, including the discovery of a

mud-brick *mastaba* at the base of the hill by Mohi el-Din, as well as the clearing of several smaller tombs by members of the Supreme Council of Antiquities, led by Osama Fahmi Mahmoud el-Amin.[8] An Italian team worked briefly at Qubbet el-Hawa surveying for additional tombs in the early 2000s. In addition, a collection of finds from Edel's excavations currently housed in the Ägyptische Museum der Universität Bonn are undergoing renewed investigation by Dr. Martin Fitzenreiter and his staff.

In 2008, a team from the Universidad de Jaén, led by Alejandro Jiménez Serrano, began work at Qubbet el-Hawa.[9] They have undertaken both conservation and excavation projects, focusing most recently on the large Middle Kingdom tomb QH33. This complex excavation has already yielded significant information about the reuse of the cemetery site into the New Kingdom, Third Intermediate, and Late Periods, as they approach the phase of initial use in the reign of Senwosret III. Dr. Mari Paz Saéz and members of the Jaén team have also conducted an extensive study of the mountain's geologic structure, which will allow the team to stabilize tombs potentially at risk and preserve the site into the future. Their continued work is sure to uncover vital information about Qubbet el-Hawa, and about provincial sites and communities more broadly.

Over the years, isolated elements from the tombs at Qubbet el-Hawa, mainly texts, have been analyzed in some detail, either individually or as part of a general study of provincial material.[10] The autobiographies of several tomb owners, most notably that of Harkhuf, have drawn particular interest for their illumination of Egyptian relations with the neighboring Nubians, as well as for details of the Egyptian administration of expeditions.[11] The reliefs carved into the tombs have received significantly less attention, but in a similar manner only isolated pieces of relief, or in a few cases larger parts of single programs, are mentioned.[12]

These analyses inevitably separate the selected text or image from other materials at Qubbet el-Hawa in order to consider it within the whole of Egyptian history and culture. Egyptian artifacts often stand against such a wide backdrop, as many have been removed from their original context of creation or use. In the case of the Qubbet el-Hawa programs, as with most provincial elite tombs, these artifacts remain in situ; therefore, the images and texts of the programs can be recontextualized – removed from isolation and connected to each other

and their architectural context as well as to their environmental setting in a specific landscape and location in the country.

The physical context of the tombs and their programs plays an important role in investigating their many layers of meaning. The placement of images and texts within the tombs impacts their visibility, their prominence, and their relationship to elements of the tomb's architecture and to other images and texts. The tombs exist in a real space, and in their shape, size, and construction they engage their surrounding environment – the desert cliffs, the river, the sunlight, and the island of Elephantine itself. The cemetery visually impacts the environment as an important part of the local landscape inhabited by the tomb owners who built them.

The attention to context also underlies the analysis of the material. Although the whole of Egyptian Old Kingdom material culture provides a comparative basis for interpreting these tombs, the cemetery itself is the primary context in which the tombs and all their constituent elements are analyzed. Relationships among the images, texts, and architecture of the tombs in this cemetery provide fundamental data for an analysis of their meaning as products of material culture. Similarities and connections among the tombs are highlighted, particularly as their shared qualities contrast with the standards of other Old Kingdom elite tombs. Within this narrower framework, variations among the Qubbet el-Hawa tombs provide nuance to the broader picture of the cemetery. Each individual tomb provides a secondary context for examining the images and texts. Relationships within a program have a special status, distinct from the relationships among images and texts throughout the cemetery, which provide another source of contextually based data.

The physical context of the material examined herein thus establishes the limitations of the available data to be studied, the setting for the examination of the material, and the basis for its analysis. This emphasis rests upon the presumption that contexts of the material are meaningful. The recognition and interpretation of context lies at the heart of modern standard archaeological work, both in process and interpretation. Establishing a context for material culture is the work of the interpreter, and thus unavoidably subjective, yet the investigation of meaning in material culture involves the search for patterns of similarity and difference, which requires the setting of boundaries. Contexts are not static; boundaries can be reasonably shifted like lenses on a camera, expanding,

contracting, and changing focal points to gain different views of the material. Examining material culture in multiple, altered contexts can lead to nuanced and varied forms of understanding.

In the case of ancient Egyptian tombs, because we understand each tomb to be an integrated monument with a particular function and connected to an individual, we see all the components, from architecture to text and image programs, working together toward a shared goal that is both functional and expressive. The importance of the monument to the tomb owner includes its successful expression of his identity, and thus we presume his guiding hand behind its final form. In the context of the cemetery, a basis for meaningful connections exists in the shared circumstances of tomb building, for example the environment of the cemetery (the use of high desert cliffs, thus rock-cut tombs, the quality of the stone) and available technology (including number and skill of local workers.)

The tomb owners' shared association with the town on Elephantine and membership in its community would have provided a basis for interwoven experiences that can be linked to the form of the tombs. In the case of Qubbet el-Hawa, the survival of the townsite provides an especially rare form of context for understanding the monuments. Elephantine is one of very few townsites throughout Egypt that has been extensively excavated, and one of an even smaller group that provides settlement information from the Old Kingdom period. Following sporadic work at the site through the first half of the twentieth century, the site has been under systematic excavation by a joint German and Swiss team since 1969.[13] The highly skilled, in-depth work conducted by numerous teams over the years – currently led by Stephan Seidlmayer of the German Archaeological Institute – has provided invaluable insight into life in an Egyptian provincial town, uncovering information about the structure and organization of the townsite, local administrative and religious activities, and the transformation of the site over time, including through the various phases of the Old Kingdom under investigation here. This work provides a window onto the lived experiences of the elite officials who built their tombs at Qubbet el-Hawa, and onto those of the larger community of which they were an important part. At the core of the emphasis on context as meaningful is recognition of the people behind the creation of the monuments and of their actions as a source of meaning. The role played by the people, in this case the tomb owners,

artisans, and a wider community of supporters, on the form of the tombs and their programs constitutes a central concern of this study.

Agency and Material Culture

Centering the people who created the tombs at Qubbet el-Hawa concurs with my interpretive approach to the material, which is informed to a great extent by agency theory. Agency-based methodologies appear in both art historical and archaeological scholarship; however, in the past decade or so, agency has been a more specific focus of theoretical discussion in archaeology. Despite this attention, the complexity of the concept renders a universally accepted definition elusive.[14] In a volume of essays published in 2000, editors Marcia-Anne Dobres and John E. Robb endeavored to pull together two decades of archaeological work on agency in order to begin theorizing the concept with greater rigor.[15] Their overview includes a brief discussion of two sociologists, Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu, whose work provided the springboard for most current agency theory.[16]

Though Giddens's theory of structuration and Bourdieu's theory of practice differ to some degree, the two scholars shared a view of the potential of people to determine, and change, the world they lived in. Bourdieu's key concept of habitus emphasizes the unconscious, routine aspects of daily life that structure institutions, while Giddens's slightly broader theory focuses on the duality of agency and structure, in which structure refers to the diffuse and long-standing traditions that provide a framework for a society, while agency refers to the creative force of the people constituting the society that can both continue and sometimes transform these elements of structure.

A key element of agency theory and an essential aspect of this study is the recognition of agents as knowledgeable. H. Martin Wobst's summary of Giddens's theory brings this out well: "Humans are envisioned as entering contexts informed by experience and by their knowledge of history and social structure; they are taken to have a sense of what is or is not habitual, appropriate, opportune, painful, or rewarding in those contexts, and their actions are assumed to be informed by this sense."[17] As this quotation touches on, most initial agency theory equated "agent" with "individual," in part because the disciplinary shift from prioritizing institutions (processual) to recognizing the individuals who comprised

them (post-processual) contributed to archaeology's embrace of agency theories. This search for "individuals" has brought its own problems; for example, how the concept of the individual exists cross-culturally, the nature of individual agency, and the importance of the agency of larger groups – communities. Elizabeth DeMarrais investigates "group dynamics," and her interests lie outside the more traditional concern with power struggles in the realm of "shared, numinous experience," both in ritual and more secular daily activities.[18] She discusses resources available to social groups, and states: "These resources . . . can also be drawn upon by the group to materialize a shared presence in the world. . . . Likewise, collective agency and organizational capacities can be managed communally with significant implications for socio-political change."[19]

This analysis of Qubbet el-Hawa prioritizes the role of agency, both of individuals and of the local community at Elephantine. Often, studies of Egyptian culture, in particular Old Kingdom provincial culture, focus on aspects of structure; religious concepts, the ideology of the society, and the power of the king are seen as determining much of what occurs, including the production of material culture, and the Egyptians themselves are viewed as having little sense of varying possibilities and little option for engaging them. Yet even in a society like that of Old Kingdom Egypt, which was characterized by a dominant, consistent, and enduring worldview, the Egyptian people were aware of the world they lived in and understood their monuments to be meaningful. Religious traditions, work, and visual and spoken language were learned and engaged by active, informed agents whose acquired knowledge and meaningful actions carried these Egyptian traditions forward in time.

From this perspective, a provincial cemetery such as Qubbet el-Hawa is not simply evidence of the endurance of Egyptian ideas about death or of general changes in the government of the Old Kingdom. The tombs attest to a group of people living in Elephantine who identified and functioned as part of the elite, who understood the purpose of the tomb monument and recognized its value, and who brought a tradition previously associated with the capital out into new territory. The local elite's comprehension of the value of the tradition is evident in the significant investment of resources required for these elaborate rock-cut tombs. As participators in this tradition, the elite owners relied on the tombs to function successfully for ritual and social purposes alike. This group of tomb owners and artisans created these tombs and these programs to achieve

important functional and expressive goals. An agency methodology is especially productive when examining the visual culture of the provincial tombs, which will be discussed next.

Agency theories are continually evolving as scholars confront new questions they elicit, or consider key aspects in greater depth. For example, Giddens's theory insists upon the interdependent relationship of agency and structure: structure provides the "field of possibilities"[20] within which agency acts, and the actions of the agents form, perpetuate, and transform structure. In an article published in 2005, Rosemary A. Joyce and Jeanne Lopiparo push this view further. They argue against seeing agency and structure as separate, theorizing instead a "structured agency," in which structure only comes into being over a long view, the result of continuous agency at work.[21] In the same 2005 volume of the *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory*, Dobres and Robb clarify the role of material culture in any agency-based analysis: "Thus, from an agency perspective, the relationship between material culture and people is complicated, context specific, and dialectical."[22]

Recognition of the dialectical relationship between people and material culture, and between agency and structure, is especially important when addressing a body of material culture created over a span of time, such as the tombs comprising the cemetery at Qubbet el-Hawa. Because each tomb exists due to the actions of thinking agents (tomb owners and artisans) who are aware of and respond to the structural conditions of their environment, the point in time of the creation of the tomb or program has relevance to its interpretation. Structural changes occur even in a relatively stable society such as ancient Egypt, which is apparent from a diachronic view of the Old Kingdom. While the smaller degrees of transformation may be mostly hidden from our view, the material culture created during the Old Kingdom gives concrete form to the reality of constant change. Each object of material culture, especially a large, complex monument such as a tomb, once created and existing in the Egyptian world transforms that world. A (new) tomb takes form based upon not only religious ideas or class ideology, but also on the form of existing tombs. Thus, each tomb becomes part of the "field of possibilities," the environment in which later tombs are built, as an active contributor to the structural conditions that the tomb owners and artisans who come after will see, interpret, and learn from. The agents and the field are continuously enmeshed.

Even when we can no longer see modifications of rituals, evolution of religious ideas, the ebb and flow of trends, we know that the consistent building of new elite tombs continued to change the conditions in which tomb building occurred. At a cemetery such as Qubbet el-Hawa, for example, the first tomb took shape under highly different circumstances than a tomb built 100 years later in the same cemetery. The first tomb owner broke from a long-established, ideologically supported tradition, while the tomb owner 100 years later was taking part in an established practice, one that emerged in response to the transforming actions of the previous generations of tomb builders. Aspects of the structure in which the tomb owners created tombs had been altered, therefore the monuments they created might have embodied different shades of meaning. This aspect of an agency approach especially affects the interpretation of the tomb programs in how they both share similarities and differ to small degrees.

Any agency methodology engaging visual culture, particularly outside the Western canon, owes a degree of debt to the work of Alfred Gell, especially his book *Art and Agency*.[23] Gell's desire to break away from what he perceived as a limiting hierarchy of art led him to develop his argument for the "social agency" of objects. He focused on modes of reception, showing how artworks are active participants in social process through their affective properties. This perspective coincides with the broader conversation of agency theory that highlights the reflexive relationship between people and material culture; however, Gell's resistance to the importance of cultural context, rejection of aesthetics, and rather outdated view of style have proven problematic for many scholars. Irene Winter engages Gell's theories in a discussion of ancient Near Eastern art, arguing for a more nuanced view of object agency that requires attention to the cultural context: "For anthropology no less than art history, a larger set of dimensions within which agency is imputed to artworks seems called for: dimensions that consider not only 'social relations in the vicinity of objects,' but also underlying authority structures, systems of belief, notions of history, and systems of value – symbolic, material, and aesthetic."[24]

This analysis of the tombs at Qubbet el-Hawa equally values a "larger set of dimensions"; the affective properties of the material culture at this site are essential to this discussion; however, they cannot be disentangled from the network of contexts – physical, historic, cultural, communal,