PART I

Orientation

CHAPTER 1

STUDYING THE PYRAMID AGE

Anyone who investigates an artefact from ancient Egypt will soon discover a human dimension; the fingerprint of a potter impressed on a bowl or a correction made by an accountant on a sheet of papyrus. It is exciting to discover that people who lived millennia ago seem to have been like 'us'. Yet the funerary beliefs of the ancient Egyptians, the gigantic pyramids of Giza, and the god-like pharaohs remain enigmatic, and it is the recognition that people imagined the world differently in the past that fascinates most people today. This book explores the gulf between pots and pyramids, between shared human experience, and what sets Egypt apart from other societies.

I would describe this book as an archaeology of people. It differs from an archaeology of objects, ideas, or social structures insofar as it places people at the centre of the analysis. My interest is less in the pyramids of the pyramid age – or in questions of royal succession, construction technology, or the sophistication of courtly culture – but rather in what happened in the shadow of the pyramids; what happened behind the scenes of monuments. A significant part of the book thus deals with the archaeological record of sites located in the provincial hinterland of Egypt and with associated research literature.

PERSPECTIVE OF THE BOOK

The pyramid age of Egypt represents the first cycle of centralised political authority in northeast Africa from around 2700 to 1700 BC. By this time, the climate in the region had changed from semi-arid to hyper-arid similar to how it is today. Agriculture had become the predominant mode of subsistence for communities living along the Nile River. Defined hierarchies and a territorial state had emerged, and a distinctive visual style had developed for elite display. The hieroglyphic script and its cursive derivate, hieratic, were being used to write long passages of text. This is where the book picks up the historical

narrative, when the foundations of what we call the Egyptian civilisation had already been laid. It explores not so much why a centralised polity formed, but how it operated, and how people organised their lives within it. My overall perspective derives from discussions in archaeology, for while I also use written and pictorial evidence, the diversity and ubiquity of material culture in the lives of human beings provides a solid foundation for the type of anthropological enquiry envisaged in this book. Very often it is the only type of evidence available for people beyond the restricted world of monuments and texts.

Egyptologists divide the pyramid age into the Old and Middle Kingdoms – both characterised by unified rule over Egypt – and the First Intermediate Period that separates these two eras but exhibits greater political fragmentation. Traditional narratives are centred on the monumental record: the Old Kingdom appears as a period of unrivalled blossoming for kingship and the state; the First Intermediate Period as a time of chaos and decline; and the Middle Kingdom as an age of classical sculpture and of literary texts copied in later periods.

It may appear logical to separate out the three individual periods, but there are also good reasons for treating them as a unit, as this book does. Kings were buried in pyramids throughout the Old and Middle Kingdoms, unlike their successors in the New Kingdom, and for this reason the term 'pyramid age' is a good definition for its chronological scope.[1] Moreover, pyramids embody an historical relatedness between the Old and Middle Kingdoms: the kings of the early Middle Kingdom actively sought to continue the royal traditions of the Old Kingdom, including the building of pyramids, and the royal court of the Old Kingdom was presented in courtly literature of the Middle Kingdom as a narrative setting for negotiating norms and values. Material culture in provincial Egypt changed from the Old to the Middle Kingdoms, but these developments occurred as an ongoing process rather than an abrupt discontinuity.

In 1983, Barry Kemp published a seminal outline of social structures, institutional change, and interregional interactions from the Old Kingdom through the Second Intermediate Period.[2] In a later article, he described the period from the late Old Kingdom to the Middle Kingdom as a 'nomarchy', literally meaning the rule of the nomarchs.[3] These nomarchs were local governors who ruled the Egyptian provinces alongside the central royal administration for about 500 years, beginning in the late Old Kingdom and continuing into the Middle Kingdom, and forming a bridge between the two periods.[4] In his *Ancient Egypt: Anatomy of a Civilization*, which is now over thirty years old but remains the most advanced archaeological synthesis of ancient Egypt, Kemp extended his interpretation of the pyramid age to include the archaeology of settlements and religious traditions in local communities.[5] The anthropological agenda of *Anatomy* provides a foundation for this book, especially for the chapters dealing with settlements, urbanism, temple cults, and the state.

For his monumental study *Understanding Early Civilizations*, Bruce Trigger compared the pyramid age of Egypt with six other early complex societies.[6] He viewed the Old and Middle Kingdoms as sufficiently coherent to be regarded as a twin to Mesopotamia in the third and early second millennia BC. The agenda of the book is rooted in social evolutionary thought. Unlike other twentieth-century comparative archaeologists, Trigger argued that early centralised polities can take the form either of a city-state or (for Egypt) a territorial state, and that the former doesn't have to precede the latter.[7] This distinction had consequences for Trigger's models of other aspects of social organisation, most clearly early urbanism. Trigger paid limited attention to diversity and diachronic change within individual societies, but his comparative treatment of early complex societies is an admirable achievement. It remains a source of inspiration for setting ancient Egypt in perspective and has influenced the historical approaches still prevalent in Egyptology.

In *The Mind of Egypt*, Jan Assmann focused on how realities were imagined, constructed, and remembered in ancient Egypt rather than how Egypt 'really' was, based on the interplay of texts, elite art, and monuments emerging in the Old Kingdom.[8] Assmann termed this 'the monumental discourse' and saw it as a foundation for the cultural memory of Egypt in modern times.[9] The book is perhaps the clearest outline of a history of ideas in ancient Egypt, synthesising a vast amount of evidence with theoretically informed models. Assmann was predominantly concerned with the hieroglyphic world of elites, but his views have been instrumental in shaping the passages in this book that deal with the intellectual history of ancient Egypt.

John Baines has explored the subtleties of culture among the core elite from a comparative perspective.[10] He argues that knowledge – and the ways it was shown or hidden – was an important currency at court, borrowing the term 'decorum' from art history to describe the regime of values that govern behaviour and the rules of display.[11] Many of the essays collected and updated for his *Written and Visual Culture in Ancient Egypt* are structured around evidence from the pyramid age and are used for the discussions in various chapters of this book.

In a set of books and articles published during the 1990s and 2000s, Stephan Seidlmayer put forward synthetic models for the interpretation of funerary culture, settlement archaeology, provincial communities, and the social history of Egypt during the pyramid age.[12] His thoughts have shaped several parts of this book. Harco Willems has published widely on the cultural disposition and administrative role of nomarchs,[13] and Detlef Franke has made important contributions to the social history of the Middle Kingdom, using literary texts, biographical inscriptions, and prosopographical evidence from the stelae of mid-ranking officials.[14] Originally departing from a study of provincial administration in the Old Kingdom, Juan Carlos Moreno García has become a leading social historian and theorist in Egyptology whose ideas are especially relevant to the chapter on the state (Chapter 10).[15] The works of the social

archaeologists Mark Lehner, Stuart Tyson Smith, and Janet Richards have laid a productive foundation for social modelling including models of ethnicity and local life in the pyramid age.[16]

An anthropologically based inquiry into the past can help to uncover the practicalities of life, for example what people ate and drank, how they managed their physical well-being, which professions they had, and how they died. An early example of such a work is Adolf Erman's *Ägypten und ägyptisches Leben im Altertum*; another the series *Civilità degli Egizi*.[17] These and similar books are depictions of the wealthy based on literary and administrative texts and on images from tomb walls, with little recognition of the perspectives of commoners, but times are changing. The increased use of scientific methods in Egyptian archaeology, for example, has extended the analysis of the lives of commoners into the material world, allowing research to progress from descriptive accounts to synthetic treatments of the evidence with emphasis placed on social diversity and change through time.[18] A key question for this book is thus how to model the discrepancies and exchanges between central milieux – those associated with the royal court – and local communities across the land.

CONTEXTS OF EGYPTOLOGY

Egyptology combines a range of methods and approaches, which ultimately aim to understand ancient Egyptian society and culture. The bulk of Egyptological research is focused on the territory of the modern Arab Republic of Egypt in the period between 3300 and 30 BC, but the chronological and geographical borders are permeable and are regularly crossed. The millennium debates held on the occasion of the International Congress of Egyptology in AD 2000 defined archaeology, philology, art, and history as the major fields of the subject.[19] Philology is often seen as the central concern of Egyptology, a view that gives preference to ancient Egyptian elite culture, and so some university departments, especially in the United States and the United Kingdom, distinguish between Egyptology – the branch associated with philology, art, and history – and Egyptian archaeology. However, all of these fields remain strongly linked in Egyptological research and teaching, unlike other disciplines of the ancient Near East or classical antiquity.

Egyptology developed in the expansionist era of European history in the nineteenth century. The Napoleonic expedition to Egypt from AD 1798 to 1801 was a combined military and scientific mission, the aim of which was to gain control over Egypt – which offered access to trade routes across the Indian Ocean – and to acquire knowledge of a country that Bonaparte hoped to rule. This expedition set Egyptology on a colonial foundation that unfolded in the following decades. François Champollion's decipherment in 1822 of the Rosetta Stone, which was discovered by French soldiers in the coastal city of

Rosetta (modern el-Rashid) and later handed over to the British Army, is traditionally seen as the beginning of Egyptology as a discipline. Egyptian philology made rapid progress in the nineteenth century, and the Berlin-based *Altägyptisches Wörterbuch* project, which started in 1897 and continues (under a different title) in the present day, systemised research into the different phases of the ancient Egyptian language.

Systematic procedures for the recording of objects took much longer to develop. Early efforts were haphazard, and the nineteenth century is characterised by the large-scale removal of objects and monuments from Egypt. Towards the end of that century, W. M. Flinders Petrie compiled handbooks for archaeological fieldwork and called for the recording of all types of objects found on a site, not just monuments, and is famed in archaeology for his use of seriation to determine relative dating.[20] The developing Egyptian Antiquity Service (Service d'Antiquités), dominated until 1952 by French Egyptologists, was created to oversee all archaeological fieldwork in the country. The number of objects allowed to leave Egypt was gradually restricted over the years, and since 1983 all excavated objects are required by law to remain in the country.[21] Yet irrespective of legislation surrounding archaeological fieldwork, the fascination with ancient Egyptian artefacts remains strong, and the illegal antiquities market still flourishes. Archaeological sites may have been assigned guardians from the later part of the nineteenth century, but looting is ongoing, fuelled by international demand for authentic objects. The complex history of Egyptology means that this book must draw on material with varying degrees of context and provenance, but preference is given to sites and evidence documented with care, predominantly from excavations conducted in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The volume of research literature published on the history of Egyptology has increased exponentially over the past twenty years. International and national developments are today more clearly distinguished and have recently included histories of Egyptology in Egypt itself.[22] Some accounts present the development of Egyptology as a series of spectacular discoveries and monumental undertakings – the decipherment of Rosetta Stone, the discovery of the bust of Nefertiti, the opening of the tomb of Tutankhamun, the transfer of the temple of Abu Simbel, explorations of passages in the Khufu pyramid – and these both reflect the public's interest in Egyptology and highlight politically laden moments of their time.[23]

The most critical perspectives on Egyptology were originally voiced outside the subject. According to one historian of the Middle East, Donald Reid, Egyptology developed as a colonial enterprise because Egyptians interested in Egyptology were long excluded from equal access to leading positions in the Antiquities Service and even from schools teaching hieroglyphs.[24] Public museums – an invention of the European Enlightenment – were opened in Cairo in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,

dedicated to the 'four civilizations' of Egypt: Pharaonic (opened AD 1863), Islamic (1884), Greco-Roman (1892), and Coptic (1908).[25] Three of these were headed by foreigners, and only one – the Coptic Museum – by an Egyptian Copt. An Arabic and Islamic Studies specialist trained in comparative literature, Elliot Colla, has discussed colonial narratives by which the Egyptian past was appropriated in Britain.[26] He has also argued that archaeology was tied up with nation-building in Egypt, particularly Pharaonism, an elite nationalistic anti-pan-Arab movement of the 1920s and 1930s that drew on the pharaonic past to claim Egyptian independence after the discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun. Whereas the history of Egyptology is commonly seen as beginning with the decipherment of hieroglyphs, Okasha El Daly has shown that Middle Eastern scholars were interested in ancient Egypt throughout the medieval period. He calls the time between the Arab conquest of Egypt and the European 'rediscovery' of ancient Egypt the 'missing millennium', omitted from common accounts of the history of the discipline.[27]

Critiques of colonial practices, Eurocentrism, and the lack of theoretical self-reflection are growing in Egyptology.[28] David Jeffreys, one of the few critics actively conducting archaeological fieldwork in Egypt, has highlighted the imbalance of power relationships on excavations.[29] Stephen Quirke has made visible from archival material the 'hidden hands' of Egyptians who carried out most of the manual work and were often the first to discover and interpret objects prior to foreign archaeologists documenting them.[30] If Egyptology in the past was dominated by scholars from European and North American countries, rising powers such as China and Brazil are now setting their archaeological sights on Egypt.[31] Specialists in museum and heritage studies have recently raised questions about how to deal with objects in the present, beyond using them as witnesses of the past.[32] Contexts of Egyptology are therefore constantly shifting, and Egyptological research is shifting with them.

Three points ought to be stressed. First, histories of Egyptology generally cover only the early phases of Egyptology and usually end somewhere after the Second World War or the founding of the modern Arab Republic of Egypt. This chronological barrier seems to result partly from archival policies, which restrict the use of documents other than those pertaining to people who died several decades ago. This is a limiting factor when the political landscape changes rapidly – both within Egypt and internationally – and when the shifting politics of higher education systems impact on the funding of fieldwork. Within Egypt, for example, training in Egyptology has been extended significantly through archaeological field schools and new university programmes, so looking only at earlier developments in Egyptology cannot adequately explain the context of Egyptology today.

Second, histories of Egyptology tend to focus on social contexts, such as the biographies of individuals, institutional arrangements, and political developments, while the intellectual biography of the subject is considerably less clear.

Trigger's *History of Archaeological Thought* features Egyptology only in a truncated form, as an example of historical archaeology. There was some overlap between Egyptology and social anthropology in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including in discussions of diffusionism and comparative and ethnographic research, but over the course of the twentieth century Egyptologists began to concentrate more on the adequate documentation of evidence.[33] Recording techniques and source-critique in Egyptology have become more and more rigorous, but the flip side of such specialisation was, as Baines put it, the closure of the discipline to wider intellectual trends in the social and cultural sciences.[34]

Third, histories of Egyptology very rightly reveal changing conditions of knowledge production through time. What they do not do is recommend where to go in the future. Over thirty years ago, Assmann remarked that the progression of Egyptology from a philological subject to a cultural science (*Kulturwissenschaft*) would require a stronger grounding in cultural theory.[35] One could enthusiastically reply that much has happened since then at the level of self-reflection, but equally – and more pessimistically – that these discussions have not penetrated the subject very deeply. In their recent account of the present and future of Egyptology, Ian Shaw and Elizabeth Bloxam have stressed the importance of interdisciplinary research, highlighting the benefit of engagements between Egyptology, the natural sciences, post-colonialism, and heritage studies.[36] Egyptological research should involve considerable engagement with theory and with wider debates in the social and cultural sciences.

My motivation for writing this book was fuelled by these thoughts. During the research and writing process, my interest gradually shifted to understanding why themes are discussed in the way they are in Egyptology and to how discussions within the subject might address broader agendas in the study of the ancient world. As a result, I have defined one major objective of this book as how to identify and compare existing models of interpretation in Egyptology in order to explore how they might be advanced critically.

THEORY AND INTERPRETATION

My perspective is informed by a set of interrelated theoretical strands in social archaeology, cultural history, and social anthropology. I understand 'theory' as providing a broader interpretive context, different from models, hypotheses, and methods geared tightly towards specific data. Theoretical reflection has been a constant sideline of reasoning in Egyptology, without affecting the core of the subject.[37] To paraphrase Moreno García, the documentation of unpublished evidence enjoys a greater reputation than novel theoretical approaches and interpretation.[38] Rather few syntheses of ancient Egypt that might stimulate theoretical discussions have been produced. In the terminology of Thomas Kuhn, a theoretician of the natural sciences, Egyptology could be described as

scientifically rigorous in terms of documentation, analysis, and source-critique, but pre-paradigmatic at an interpretive level, as it lacks explicit discourse about its theoretical foundations.[39] Exceptions aside, references to paradigms that have shaped debates in other social and cultural sciences – functionalism, structuralism, and agency in social anthropology; quantitative history, the linguistic turn, and the new cultural history in the historical sciences; and processualism and post-processualism in archaeology – are sparse in Egyptological research literature.[40]

Key arguments of this book revolve around agendas of the French *École des annales*, practice theory, discussions of representation, of materiality, and comparative archaeology. The comparative aspect is reflected in the structure of the book, and most chapters take up themes discussed in cross-cultural research.[41] The chapters in the section 'Living Together' explore the concerns of existence in the living world, or what is commonly assumed to primarily belong to this realm such as human responses to the natural environment, urbanism, and interregional exchange. The section 'Ritual Performance' reviews ritual practices and their interpretation in various social contexts and converges in a discussion of kingship – the centre of formalised ritual in Egypt. The final section, 'Organising People', discusses institutions imposed upon people by the state and the social organisation within (and beyond) the ideologies underpinning these institutions. Inevitably, the practical, ritual, and ideological matters associated with lived experience strongly overlap, and so the borders between sections and chapters are permeable. Cross-references are made frequently.

In each section, some chapters present themes synchronically, whereas others trace their developments through time. A common effect of diachronic modelling is an inbuilt bias towards institutional change, over-valuing systemic processes and downplaying conflicting world views within a society. Similarly, cross-cultural comparisons of early complex societies are predominantly concerned with the elite, as from a bird's-eye view monuments stand out more clearly than the less orderly remains of common life. Monumental evidence is quantitatively easier to handle than the mass of small bits and pieces that make up the local fabric of a society, so to avoid taking these corollaries simply as given I distinguish between central and local milieux, structural dispositions and individual agency, and macro- and micro-history.

An important theme throughout the book is social practice. At a basic level, practice theory calls for an analysis of what people 'did', but it transcends the description of action. When pioneered in the 1970s and 1980s, it was meant to explore why people act the way they do and to what extent they are conditioned by something referred to as social structure. Pierre Bourdieu, a leading early theoretician of practice, developed his ideas in response to French structuralism, which had its origins in linguistics.[42] The linguist Ferdinand de Saussure distinguished between language (*langue*) as an abstract system of rules and practised speech (*parole*). The distinction was adopted in social

anthropology, most prominently by Claude Lévi-Strauss, to describe cultural systems or structures, as opposed to actual behaviour. Structuralists were predominantly interested in the reconstruction of the systemic properties of a society or a language, but Bourdieu emphasised what people actually did and introduced the concept of *habitus*, which describes the cultural disposition of individuals. *Habitus* refines the simple opposition of rules and their enactment in behaviour by paying greater attention to understanding the variety of individual responses to rules and social order. Around the same time, Anthony Giddens proposed that structures determine the actions of individuals as much as their behaviour contributes to the change of structures, calling this mutual process 'double structuration'.[43] Giddens saw individuals as knowledgeable actors who pursue their aims strategically rather than as passive fulfillers of existing rules.

The relevance of these enquiries has been variously addressed in the context of ancient Egypt.[44] A simple search for social structures, for example, in a study of ancient Egyptian administration, becomes rather meaningless if one does not consider how structures developed from practices or how individuals manipulated structures for their own benefit. Equally, describing actions without consideration of the societal 'rules' constraining and enabling such actions in specific contexts is rather dull. One difficulty here is that ideas, as well as values and norms, need not be made explicit but affect individual behaviour nevertheless. In linguistic terms, children learn to speak fluently by imitation and peer observation long before they are taught codified rules of grammar in school. Analyses of social practice therefore involve looking at implicit knowledge and the strategies by which people appropriate symbols to lend meaning to their lives.[45]

Discussions of practice theory and agency are well established in archaeology and continue to thrive.[46] In Egyptology, the search for structures, order, and patterns has received far greater attention than the question of how the ancient Egyptians interacted with societal rules. The recognition of action is therefore a recurrent concern throughout this book, which paves the way towards wider discussions. In several chapters, I address the discrepancy between ancient Egyptian ideas and behaviours distilled from texts and imagery, and those that are visible in the archaeological record. Very often, those seen in the former do not have an equivalent in the latter.[47] Debates about structure and agency are not simply about comparing texts with archaeology, but explanations of incompatibility are fertile ground for discussions of questions related to these debates.

Egyptologists do not only deal directly with structures, systems, or norms but only deal with the artefacts, buildings, or images, or the words that represent them.[48] These representations are usually interpreted on the assumption that they were made intentionally to express a specific idea, often a religious or social idea. Following this logic, the task of an Egyptologist would be to retrieve