

INTRODUCTION

PHARAONIC EGYPT IS OFTEN VIEWED AS HAVING BEEN MONOLITHIC and unchanging. Ancient Egyptian civilization was certainly long-lasting, and throughout its 3,000 years the basic tenets of its culture endured. There was development and change, however, as kings faced evolving situations, both natural and manmade, and responded to political and economic pressures in order to keep their hold on power. From the time of the very first dynasty, however, the ideology of royal power in Egypt “contained certain key concepts that all successive pharaohs strove to maintain intact” (Valbelle 2002, 97).

Crucial to every king’s reign was his legitimacy, which was founded on his relationship to the two most important deities in the ancient Egyptian pantheon for the institution of divine kingship, Osiris and the sun god Ra, as well as Ra’s female companion, the goddess Hathor. From the very beginnings of ancient Egyptian kingship, the king was the falcon god Horus, son of Osiris. The king’s first and oldest name was his Horus name. By the time of the Fourth Dynasty of the Old Kingdom, the king also takes a “Son of the Sun-god” name. Also beginning with the Old Kingdom, clearly by the Fifth Dynasty if not earlier, is the theme of the divinity of the king as the child of Ra and Hathor (Troy 1986, 55).

The king expressed his legitimacy and relationship to deities by building and supporting religious institutions, among which was the king’s own burial complex, as the deceased king lived in his pyramid complex as a god (Stadelmann 1985, 214). All of these royal constructions were decorated with

scenes of the king and the gods, depicting the king offering to the gods and the gods responding by offering him eternal life and protection, as well as handing over to him the symbols of royal rule.

The king needed a loyal and trustworthy administration to carry out his control over the country. In the beginning, all the important administrative offices were held by male relatives of the king, especially his sons, although this stops in the mid-Fifth Dynasty when high offices such as that of the vizier are filled by nonroyal men. From then on, the king's relationship to his elite officials was of prime importance, as he needed them to support his power, just as his power maintained theirs. At times, however, elite power slipped into entitlement, and this posed a problem that the king had to deal with.

Perhaps most crucial of all to the king's reign was the perpetuation of his family line with a son to follow him on the throne, and so the females and children of the king's family must have played an essential and also, at times, possibly political role. The king of ancient Egypt was not monogamous, and throughout pharaonic history kings married any number of women. Familial endogamy and exogamy are both found in ancient Egyptian royal family marriages. Keeping marriage within the royal family was a centrist approach and protected the family's hold on the throne. On the other hand, cementing alliances with powerful nonroyal families through marriage extended the reach of royal power through loyal officials. At times, evidenced clearly in the Fourth Dynasty of the Old Kingdom, and in the Twelfth Dynasty of the Middle Kingdom, the king married his own sister. This may have been to keep power concentrated in the family, as well as to display the king's divinity, for in the Heliopolitan creation myth divine brothers and sisters married. There is often not enough evidence about royal marriages, however, to be able to ascertain if the king shared a blood relationship with his wife.

Kingship based on divine backing remained a rather static institution, but kings did innovate in the way in which they stated their legitimacy and power. The mythology that backed the position of the king was unchanging, but developing political and social contexts brought about changes in how a king projected and fulfilled his divinely chosen role. Monumental building projects, depictions of the king with the gods, royal statuary, administrative positions, documents such as decrees, as well as the place of the king's family members in his reign, all fit into the larger strategy that shaped the king's individualized statement of his rule. This book hopes to add to the understanding of the manifestations of kingship, power, and legitimacy in the period that was the foundation block of pharaonic history, the Old Kingdom, and its re-formation in the

beginning of the Middle Kingdom that follows. Chapter 1 presents the background material for understanding ancient Egyptian history and civilization. To properly understand kingship and its power in ancient Egypt demands an understanding of how its civilization, ruled by a divine king, came about in the first place.