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The Village Economy in Pharaonic Egypt

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The Model

THERE HAS ALWAYS BEEN the impression that somehow a bureaucratically efficient golden age sprang fully developed from prehistoric Nile farming communities, the myth of the Pyramid Age as archetype. Two particular themes have influenced thinking in unfortunate ways. One is the 'hydraulic hypothesis': that Egypt was an irrigation society, where government grew from patterns of communal water control. The second is that of 'eternal Egypt': a benevolent Oriental Despotism in which change was superficial, until pharaonic society collapsed, leaving a pale reflection, run less efficiently and usually by foreigners.[1] Yet Pharaonic Egypt was not really an ideal monolithic society — *sui generis* — with a socio-cultural unity based on the efficiency of centralised bureaucratic norms.[2] To describe it in that way places too much reliance on native ideology and an élite bias in the contemporary record. It is impossible that bureaucracy and government were more efficient in early antiquity than in the hellenistic,[3] or even the colonial period. The tendency towards utopian descriptions of Pharaonic

[1] Cf. the rejection by Cuno (1992), xv and 207 of the cliché of Egypt as a sleeping giant 'awakened' in the nineteenth century.

[2] For the opposite emphasis cf. Kemp (1989). Likewise those working with the overwhelming mass of documentation for Sumerian taxation and land administration tend to take a highly optimistic view of the efficiency and bureaucratic organisation of the countryside, as most recently Liverani (1996)—a view that is in many respects a better reflection of the organisation of documentary formats than of farming reality. As in Egypt, the Sumerian documentation consistently overrepresents institutional and bureaucratic patterns.

[3] See Cockle (1984) for the contrast between the dubious reference value of central archives and the power of documentation as a tool for administration at a local level.

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Egypt does indeed go back as far as Herodotus and Diodorus, two classical historians writing in Greek, while the use of models in history is often more revealing of the intellectual climate in which they are written than the period or society written about.[4] There is, admittedly, insufficient data to reconstruct rural Egypt, or Pharaonic society as a whole, without reference, explicit or implicit, to questions that have been posed more clearly and on fuller data for later periods. Nevertheless, one must look in detail for continuities or discontinuities in the history of Egypt, and not for a grand vision of Egypt's place in world history.

Pharaonic Egypt was not in a straightforward sense an artificial irrigation society. For somebody who has never seen it, the inundation is difficult to comprehend in any depth. For somebody who knows an Egypt of perennial canal systems and a Ministry of Irrigation, it is not easy to imagine the country without. Yet the perennial canal is a modern development, that itself caused major ecological problems in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[5] There is no evidence for efficient water-raising devices in the Pharaonic period. The *saqia* (water-wheel) and the Archimedean screw are not attested until well into the Ptolemaic period.[6] The *shaduf*, attested from the New Kingdom in gardens, is not efficient. The main issue in pre-Ptolemaic water control was the extent to which natural flooding was subject to local intervention — the conversion of natural recession agriculture into a formalised system of basin irrigation — by dyking and channel maintenance to regularise the natural flow of the inundation through its seasonal water-courses across the floodplain, and by the use of ponds as reservoirs.[7] The history of controlled basin flooding is virtually undocumented. However, rare references to supply and control of water in the First Intermediate Period and Middle Kingdom[8] probably refer to locally controlled basins that held water on the land, with the local big man ensuring that water reached his people's fields, in some cases with the implication that further downstream people were not receiving sufficient water during low Niles. Merer of Edfu, referring in the First Intermediate Period to a time of famine, claimed:

> I sealed (*ḫtm*) their fields and all their mounds (*j3t*) in town (*njwt*) and countryside (*sḫt*), and I did not let their water inundate for another, as does an effective citizen (*nḏs jqr*) that his family may swim.[9]

[4] Mitchell (1988) explores issues related to the ordering of knowledge in comprehending the 'different' society of early modern Egypt. As historiographic issues these are equally relevant to antiquity and to the Pharaonic period. For methodological issues in studying state formation in Egypt see Guksch (1991).

[5] See, e.g., Willcocks (1899), ch. VIII.

[6] For the *saqia* see Venit (1989); Bonneau (1970); Willcocks (1899), 106, 370–5, 476–7. It was not widely used in the fields before the 3rd century.

[7] Butzer (1976). For a survey of the issues and relevant literature, Eyre (1994).

[8] Surveyed by Schenkel (1978); Endesfelder (1979); Luft (1994); and cf. Eyre (1994), 78–80.

[9] Černý (1961), 5–9, lines 10–11; translation also Lichtheim (1973), 87–8.

There can be no doubt that the landscape and the ecology of farming changed between the Early Dynastic Period and the Thirtieth Dynasty. Egypt was not merely a static countryside, invented in late prehistory, upon which political history was played out. For instance, the Old Kingdom was a period of considerable rural development through internal colonisation, with a deliberate policy of creating new rural communities in areas where agriculture was undeveloped or underdeveloped. Populated at least in some cases by groups of prisoners-of-war or groups of immigrant origin, these settlements characteristically provided a revenue base, as estates, for the provision of the king and the royal administration, or for the official classes. Despite fluctuations, there seems to have been a general trend of growth, mediated in part by immigration, through to the New Kingdom and Late Period.

The physical condition of the early Egyptian countryside[10] remains far from clear, but it was both much wilder and much less populated than that of modern Egypt. How much wilder it may have been than that of Hellenistic or Islamic Egypt, or the landscape recorded by the French expedition, is more difficult to say. What is clear, however, is that we are most likely to make sense of the Egyptian countryside by an empirical comparative approach, until quite major advances are made in the application of physical survey techniques to the history of the Nile Valley.[11]

The Village: Development and Structure

Egypt was probably always a village society.[12] The evidence available to flesh out the picture for the Pharaonic period is severely limited in both quantity and range. The basic scenario of the Egyptian countryside is one of extremely compact villages—typically but not necessarily walled—occupying islands of higher land in the floodplain.[13] The ecology of the Nile Valley leaves little option. Settlement must cluster in sites above the flood, along with all agricultural buildings and storage facilities. The picture is not really based on archaeology, but very largely on the nineteenth-century countryside[14] projected backwards. However, schematic depictions of settlements as a crenellated circuit wall in Early Dynastic sources, and the form of the hieroglyph for 'town' (), at least imply that the basic picture is correct.[15] Based on a survey of the archaeologi-

[10] Butzer (1976). See also Bietak (1975) for the Delta; Roquet (1985) for the margins and semi-arid plateaux surrounding the Nile Valley.

[11] For current advances cf. van den Brink (1992).

[12] See Théodoridès (1983); Kemp (1989), 156–8, 306–14; Hopkins (1987), with clear warnings pp. 3–5 against treating the village as a single model.

[13] Bietak (1979).

[14] E.g., *DE*: *Etat Moderne* I, pl. 5, 74–81.

[15] Atzler (1972).

cal record, Kemp[16] has argued that the Early Dynastic Period and the Old Kingdom were characterised in Upper Egypt by changes in occupation patterns, from tiny villages and habitation sites on the desert margin to a network of compact agricultural 'towns'. Even more tentatively, he suggests[17] that the transfer of population to newly developed compact towns on the floodplain might be associated with increasing development of agriculture, related to development in the control of basin flooding. Unsubstantiated, and unsubstantiable, this suggestion would nevertheless fit with the implication of the textual record, that the Old Kingdom was a period of internal colonisation, when rural development characterised by the extensive establishment of 'new towns' must imply an agricultural development. More recently Seidlmayer has argued that there was a strong political agenda — firm military occupation and control, as the background to economic expansion for the benefit of the centre — in the development of provincial towns and estates in the Early Dynastic Period and the early Old Kingdom.[18]

Such settlements, whether termed 'town' or 'village', may have a considerable population, and dependent hamlets, but their horizons are limited. While there may be significant differences of wealth between richer and poorer farmers, their essential interests and attitudes are identical, focused on agricultural production within a locally self-sufficient economy. There is no real social stratification but only variations of status within a common cultural and social milieu. Conversely a 'city' is not defined simply by size, wealth, and dependence on a 'hinterland' to supply staples, but by a socio-political and socio-economic stratification, and the presence of a substantial 'metropolitan' population with values distinct from those of the farmer. In practice it is not possible to put figures on the population of agricultural settlements. Neither the archaeological[19] nor the documentary record[20] provides a sound basis of evidence, and any estimate must depend on projections back from later periods. A certain ranking of settlement types must be assumed. Beginning with the late Old Kingdom the best criteria for at least limited metropolitan status are the existence of local administrative functionaries, especially an office of 'mayor' (*ḥ3ty-ʿ*),[21] or the presence of a local

[16] Kemp (1977), esp. 198; cf. Kemp (1989), 138–41.

[17] Quoting Brunton and Caton-Thompson (1928), 48. Butzer (1976), 13–15, 19–20 envisaged low levels of population, but without significant shift in settlement sites.

[18] Seidlmayer (1996), (1996a). He provides a very thorough survey and analysis of the relevant data, archaeological and textual, and of the historical development it documents. His focus is, however, very strongly on the role of the centre as against the periphery.

[19] Estimates would only be possible for the late 18th Dynasty capital of Amarna, for the pyramid town of Kahun in the late 12th Dynasty, and for the Theban west bank (including Deir el-Medina) in the Ramesside period, all desert sites, and none primarily agricultural.

[20] Posener-Krieger (1975), 215 notes about 300 names in the Old Kingdom Gebelein registers, but is not clear how these lists relate to the total village populations.

[21] O'Connor (1972); Butzer (1976), 59–80, 100–5, and cf. Rathbone (1990), esp. 122.

cemetery. There is little hope of investigating economic criteria such as the presence of a market or communal threshing-floor and granaries.

The problem remains the extent to which comparisons can be drawn with urban development in the ancient Near East.[22] Crucial to the development of 'cities' in Sumeria was their role as trading centres, and also the development of local social stratification. The political organisation of Middle Kingdom Egypt into nomes, each with its capital, seems to fit a pattern of 'city' organisation. The regime of the Twelfth Dynasty appears, superficially, to focus on the co-option and absorption of locally based magnates into a central court following the fragmentation of the First Intermediate Period. The larger centres, as foci of political power, occur at relatively regular travelling distances from each other, each with their 'agricultural hinterland',[23] and with a local government in which the court surrounding a local 'official' mirrored that of the central regime. Nevertheless it is an apparent curiosity of Egyptian history that the city-state as a political entity is best seen as late as the Third Intermediate Period, although parallel political fragmentation and independent local regimes are evident at all periods when the central regime was weak. The question arises, whether the regime of the Old Kingdom derives from the unification of a country made up of local statelets, or whether the pattern of nomes does not rather derive from an economic development of the provinces and an administrative development of their governments in the late Old Kingdom, powered by intervention from the centre. This is a genuine issue for the study of Egyptian development.[24]

The background to this problem lies in the little that we know of the government of the early Old Kingdom. Neither official titularies nor the pattern of élite cemeteries indicate that provincial bureaucracy was important before the late Fifth Dynasty. In contrast, there is regular reference to the 'Following of Horus', assumed to be a royal progression through the country, and to the biennial 'Counting of Cattle', a national taxation survey. The nature and administration of the taxation system, and the degree of bureaucratic penetration of the countryside, remain obscure.[25] Questions of detail can hardly be touched on the basis of direct evidence. Who is actually resident in a village? What is the local political structure? Is the owner/lord directly involved? To what extent is there a distinction between urban absentee landowners and village tenants? Was revenue raised as a fixed sum or as a share of the crop, as individual rent, or tax, or communal assessment? Where was it collected, by whom, and when?

The élite perception of the countryside was that of a division into villages

[22] Müller-Wollermann (1991).

[23] O'Connor (1972); Butzer (1976), 59–80, 100–5.

[24] For the issues involved, see Kanawati with McFarlane (1992); Müller-Wollermann (1986); Eyre (1994a).

[25] Andrássy (1994).

(*njwt*) and manors (*ḥwt*), terms typically equated with *balad* and *'izba*. In the mid-Sixth Dynasty, Weni tells how he recruited a national army:

> There were nobles (*ḥ3ty-'*), royal seal-bearers, sole companions who were great-estate chiefs (*ḥwt-'3ty*), [local] chiefs (*ḥry-tp*) and town-rulers (*ḥq3 ḥwt*) of Upper and Lower Egypt, companions, overseers of foreigners, chief priests of Upper and Lower Egypt, and chiefs of *gs-pr* at the head of the troops of Upper and Lower Egypt, from the manors (*ḥwt*) and towns (*njwt*) they governed (*ḥq3*), and from the Nubians of those foreign lands.[26]

The command structure is an overlay of court officials, but otherwise a territorially based levy of units made up from village or manor, commanded by their local head man—whether secular or priest—and with 'foreign' units, perhaps identifiable immigrant communities.[27] The military context is one where village identity is revealed strongly. In the Middle Kingdom the 'title' *'nḫ n njwt*, 'living-one of the town' carries in practice the meaning of 'soldier'[28]—the soldier (*3ṯw '3 n njwt*) Sobekkhu, whose career was based on posts in the royal bodyguard,[29] boasts that during a Nubian campaign he killed an enemy 'at the side of my town' (*r-gs njwt=j*). In the Eighteenth Dynasty Ahmose son of Abana stresses that he, like the rest of the military, was rewarded for service by plots of land in his town.[30] Formulaic autobiography of the Old Kingdom starts: 'I have come from my town; I have descended from my province'.[31] It stresses how the individual was loved and praised by his town and his district,[32] and that he desired the favour of 'his town god' (*nṯr=f njwty*). The inscription of a Khety from Siut curses the vandals: 'His local god shall repudiate him. His townspeople shall repudiate him'.[33] The verb *bwj*, 'repudiate' is related to the word *bwt*, used to refer to the taboo of the local god.

The village provides vital social identity. In native texts the most striking stress on narrow village attitudes—the necessity of good social standing within the village community, combined with a hostility to outsiders—come from a late date. The demotic instructions of Onkhsheshonqy warn against letting your son marry a woman from another town,[34] and Papyrus Insinger stresses the local

[26] *Urk* I, 102, 3–8.

[27] Dashur Decree, *Urk* I, 209–13; Goedicke (1967), 55–77.

[28] Also *3ṯw n njwt*: Berlev (1971).

[29] *Aeg. Les.* 82–3; Baines (1987).

[30] *Urk* IV, 6, 7–9; 15.

[31] For references see Janssen (1946), 83–4, s.v. *h3i*.

[32] Janssen (1946), 62–6, s.v. *mri*. Cf. the New Kingdom formula of praise, in the mouth of mourners, that the dead was *qb n njwt=f gr n dmj=f* (var. *mhmt=f*), 'cool-one of his town, silent-one for his town' (var. 'clan(?)'), Barthelmess (1992), 64–6.

[33] Siut Tomb IV, Edel (1984), figs 15, 80; for the positive clichés see lines 62, 70, 72, 85, 87. The text lays unusual stress on the hereditary nobility of Khety.

[34] Notably 15,15, but note also 11, 16; 18, 3; 21, 24–5; 27, 13; translation in Lichtheim (1980), 159–84.

basis of social position.[35] Papyrus Rylands IX, of the Saite period, illustrates the hatred of local priests for an outsider and his family.[36] The literary Tale of Woe, of the end of the New Kingdom, describes the miseries of a man violently expelled from his town and forced to wander the country as a stranger.[37] These attitudes cannot have been new but their explicit formulation and expression may be a result of the need to reassert the stability of traditional social structures.

The one 'village' community that can be studied in detail, both physically and sociologically, is Deir el-Medina, in its desert wadi west of Thebes. In the early Twentieth Dynasty this was a compact village of terraced houses, with a fierce local identity in a largely stable and apparently endogamous community. There was considerable trade within the community in craft goods made locally (particularly tomb equipment), but also in supra-subsistence consumables, and external trade is also recorded, at the local river-bank market. Also important in the record are the local processes of settlement of disputes and legal witness, led by the headmen. Many special factors are at play in Deir el-Medina — it was a village of specialists, sited in the desert rather than on the floodplain — but there is no reason to imagine that the village had an atypical sociology.[38] The extremely (and unnecessarily) compact layout of this village is also likely to reflect rural norms. However, it is unfortunate and ironic for the topic under consideration here that the very limited involvement of the villagers in agriculture, at any level,[39] means that the site cannot serve as a primary model for the countryside.

Control of the Countryside

The central themes to be worked out are those of dislocation between the farmer — the villager — and the élite ruling class, and the identity of this villager as a member of his own community, distinct and separated from the rest of the world. The scribal class express their attitude, that the peasant works and the scribe profits. It is also important to stress the expeditionary nature of Egyptian governmental activity, with administration defined — if not always performed — as a mission dispatched from the capital. The role of the élite was focused entirely on association with the royal residence. There is no doubt that the archaeological record of the Old Kingdom distorts, but the possession of a decorated tomb at Memphis marks membership of an 'élite' and, primarily, closeness to the king. Royal favour is explicitly a response to successful performance

[35] The 22nd Instruction, esp. lines 28, 4–24; translation in Lichtheim (1980), 184–217.
[36] Griffith (1909); for the most recent discussion see Chauveau (1996).
[37] Caminos (1977).
[38] Ventura (1986) provides the most extensive attempt to assert such a uniqueness, without success; cf. the review by Eyre (1992a). For the settlement of disputes see below, pp. 44–5.
[39] Eyre (1984), 202–3; McDowell 1992.

on specific commissions (*wpt*), while the Old Kingdom title most important in defining central authority over affairs in the provinces is that of Overseer of Commissions (*mr wpt*).[40] Nevertheless, it is necessary to beware of both ancient and modern attitudes to the peasantry that dismiss the *fellah* as simply passive stock on the land, to be exploited and avoided.[41]

Old Kingdom tombs regularly show processions of offering-bearers, labelled as the personifications of villages and manors, presumably the estates controlled by the official during his lifetime.[42] Typically their names are those of new foundations, compounded with that of the reigning king or sometimes the tomb-owner himself. The expedition leader Harkhuf, returning from Nubia, was told in a letter from Pepi II:

> Decrees have been brought to the ruler[s] (*ḥq3*) of new towns (*njwt m3t*) and to companion[s], overseer[s] of priests, to command that supplies be provided from what is under the charge of each, from every produce centre (*pr šn'*) and every temple (*ḥwt-nṯr*). Exemptions are not made.[43]

The picture is similar to that from the text of Weni quoted above: a countryside of villages with local headmen, some of which were temple estates, while others were under secular control.

The term *ḥq3* is sometimes used of men of high rank, but normally refers simply to a local headman.[44] The registration of rural produce is shown in a number of tombs. Those responsible are brought forcibly into the presence of recording scribes, and defaulters are flogged. These men are *ḥq3–ḥwt*. The 'produce centres' mentioned in the passage from Harkhuf were departments for collecting and processing agricultural staples — at least, that is the activity shown in Old Kingdom tomb scenes under that rubric.[45] Such a centre was not exactly a storage facility, nor a revenue-collecting department, nor 'kitchens', but somehow a mixture of the three. The biennial 'cattle count', actually a counting of all animals, is comprehensible as a progress for levy on the pastoral sector of the rural economy.[46]

A group of lists and registers of the Old Kingdom from Gebelein[47] gives a limited picture of the rural community. The archive contains conscription lists for public works, naming men and women from different settlements, as well

[40] For problems of reading and root meaning of *wpt* cf. Eyre (1994a), 117.
[41] Cf. Brown (1990) for the contrast between perception and reality.
[42] Jacquet-Gordon (1962).
[43] *Urk* I, 131, 4–7.
[44] Piacentini (1989), (1994).
[45] Eyre (1987), 29–30; Franke (1983), 169–70, 174–6; Andrássy (1993).
[46] See Gilbert (1988), esp. 71–3 = Winlock (1955), 19–22 for illustration.
[47] Posener-Krieger (1975) and cf. (1979), esp. 328–31. The papyri, which still await full publication, seem to date to the late 5th or 6th Dynasty.

as grain and date accounts, but most interesting is a cloth register listing personnel from two villages (*njwt*) belonging to an estate (*pr ḏt*). This register includes a variety of artisans or specialists: scribes and clerks, bakers, brewers, boatmen and boat-builders, masons, metal-workers, herdsmen, a measurer and a sealer of grain, a number of huntsmen, and two men categorised as *ḥrj-š* (Bedouin): a list closely comparable to the activities of the estates (*pr-ḏt*) shown on tomb walls. It is of course impossible to tell the extent to which these functions represent individual enterprise in a village, or direct service to the 'estate', or communal estate service to its personnel and inhabitants.[48]

Most of the persons listed in these texts can be taken as peasantry. Many are classed as *ḥm nsw*, 'king's slave', a term that seems to categorise agricultural workers on an estate rather than define them as persons directly connected to the king.[49] Elsewhere a term *nswtyw*, 'king's-people', occurs.[50] Metjen records that he bought land *ḫr* (literally 'under') many of these *nswtyw*, a statement that does not clarify whether this was a private purchase, or whether, perhaps more likely, he acquired lands with these persons as farmers.[51] The normal term for dependent agricultural workers and people attached to an estate or endowment is *mrt*.[52] In private inscriptions the twin themes of royal favour/gift and of personal acquisition by purchase go hand in hand. The issue of personal property is complicated in Egypt by the ideology that rank and wealth derived only from the king. Lordship, ownership, and administrative responsibility are blurred, but one need not assume a single consistent model, either from village to village, or within a single village, for all landholdings. There is room for considerable variety within the farming community, however much that community may appear from outside or above to be an amorphous mass.[53]

The best evidence for rural organisation in the Old Kingdom comes from a mixture of the pictures in tombs and rare references in inscriptions. The Sixth-Dynasty official Nekhebu tells how he acted as manager for his brother, who rose to the post of Overseer of Works (a post that Nekhebu himself later held).

[48] Cf. the similarly varied personnel in the Third Intermediate Period endowment decree of the Great Chief of the Meshwesh, see Blackman (1941); Menu (1979); Eyre (1987a), 208–9; (1994b), 125–6.

[49] The issue is whether the term implies a direct subordination to the king, without intermediary lord: a status comparable to persons defined as *nḏs*, literally 'little-man' in the Middle Kingdom, or *nmḥw*, literally 'orphan' in the New Kingdom. Cf. Cuno (1992), 5 for envy of the status of 'Pasha's Peasants' without intermediaries in 19th-century Egypt.

[50] Müller-Wollermann (1987), 263–7 has argued for a reading *swtyw*, 'colonists'. Superficially there appears to be comparison with the βασιλικὴ γῆ of the Ptolemaic period (cf. Manning, below, 98, discussing the antiquity of the distinction between royal and temple land), but there are no data on which to base such comparison.

[51] *Urk* I, 2, 8; 4, 8; Goedecken (1976), 202–11, 294–5; Menu (1985), 259–61.

[52] Bakir (1952), 22–9.

[53] For documentation of this discussion see Eyre (1987), 34–5 and (1994b), 119–23.

He claims 'I used to rule (*ḥq3*) the village (*njwt*) for him.' When his brother's property increased with rises in rank, Nekhebu

> accounted things for him in his estate (*pr-ḏt*) for the period of twenty years. Never did I beat any man there so that it happened he fell under my fingers. Never did I enslave (*b3k=j*) any people there: as to all people with whom I used to negotiate (*ḏ3js*) there, it was I who used to content [perhaps = 'pay': *ṯḥtp*] them. Never did I go to sleep angry with any people. It was I who used to give clothing, bread, and beer to every naked man and every hungry man there. I was loved by everybody.[54]

In pictures, the tomb-owner is depicted 'seeing' the activities necessary to his provision, while the accounts are read to him by his subordinates. The full repertoire includes the production of grain, gardening, herding, fishing, fowling and poultry production, and various forms of craft production, of which the core activities of grain and meat production take precedence. The layout of the tomb walls implies that field cultivation and the pasturing of flocks were separated. The herdsmen live a mobile life, carrying their belongings in bags across their backs, fording the marshes with their cattle, living off the land by killing, cooking, and eating wild animals — wild men living in wild country (scrub and marsh) that surrounds the settled farmland.[55]

The text known as the Duties of the Vizier idealises state organisation at the beginning of the New Kingdom.[56] The vizier, resident at the palace and the centre of court ceremonial, was also the centre of a web of 'messengers' who transmitted his authority and ensured his control of the economic (that is, agricultural and mineral) resources of the country:

> It is he who sends (*sbb*) all envoys of the King's House to the mayors (*ḥ3ty.w-ʿ*), and the village headmen (*ḥq3.w-ḥw.wt*). (R21)

and:

> It is he who sends to fell trees, according to what is said in the King's House. It is he who sends the district councillors (*qnbty.w nw w*) to do the water-channels(?) [_ _ _ _ _ _ _ _] in the entire land. It is he who sends the mayors (*ḥ3ty.w-ʿ*) and village-headmen (*ḥq3.w-ḥw.wt*) to cultivate and to harvest. (R24–25)

The claim is that of central decision-making over rural activities — exploitation of the 'forest', probably the release of water on to the field basins, and supervision of the ploughing and of the harvest:

[54] *Urk* I, 215–19; Dunham (1938), Cairo text, lines 4–7.

[55] The confines of the Nile Valley mean that one cannot envisage within Egypt the scale of 'tribal' pastoralism typical of Mesopotamia or Syria, but extensive herding of animals within the floodplain stands outside the arable-based village society.

[56] Van den Boorn (1988).

> It is he who sends the expedition (*mš'*) [of] scribes of 'the mat', to carry out the plan (*sšm*) of the Lord. There is a register (*sš*) of the nome in his office for what is heard about all fields. It is he who makes the borders of each nome, [all] countryside (*sḫt*). (R26–27)

The vizier's authority is stressed, his personal hearing of all cases to do with land-tenure, and his supervision of those responsible for local oversight, survey and registration (cf. R17–20).

The title 'mayor' (*ḥ3ty-'*) began as a high-ranking title in the Old Kingdom; in the Middle Kingdom it is frequently associated with the role of nomarch, although remaining in many contexts a ranking title. In the New Kingdom it is characteristic for 'mayor' of an urban centre.[57] The title 'chief of a settlement' (*ḥq3-ḥw.t*) is probably to be understood by the Middle Kingdom as the head of a lesser local settlement—a village headman—and not specifically associated with the term *ḥwt* for an endowment or foundation. In the Story of the Eloquent Peasant[58] the hero is detained at court; it is to his local *ḥq3–ḥw.t* that orders are sent to feed his wife and family, while the High Steward is criticised for his failure to impose order: 'See, you are [like] a village (*njwt*) without its headman (*ḥq3-ḥw.t=s*).'[59]

By the New Kingdom, perhaps even earlier, these terms seem to refer to official appointments, but sociologically the role of village headman has to be approached in a more flexible way.[60] In Ottoman Egypt[61] or Palestine[62] village headmen were not appointees so much as the recognised local leaders, and in practice the heads of the most important local families. It was a development of the nineteenth-century Egyptian monarchy that the role of *umda* (village headman) became an official appointment, made from among the local notables by the central government to serve as an official.[63] At Deir el-Medina the local foremen and scribe(s) held a dominant position in the village, but we do not find one of them alone acting as authoritative headman. Rather they acted more or less in concert as a group, leading the local 'council' (*qnbt*). The membership of this body fluctuated considerably from case to case, but in matters of communal importance the entire adult male population of the village were present. Individual dominance in the group, by one of the foremen or scribes, seems to have been a matter of personal influence rather than structure. On this comparison, the 'district councillors' mentioned in the Duties of the Vizier are more likely to be *ad hoc* groups of local notables than holders of bureaucratic office—

[57] O'Connor (1972), esp. 684–8 on this as a criterion for the importance of a town.
[58] Peas. B1, 112–16 = old B1, 81–5.
[59] Peas. B1, 220–1 = old B1, 189–90.
[60] Cf. Eyre (1994b), 127.
[61] Cuno (1992), ch. 5.
[62] Singer (1994), 32–45 and cf. Faroghi (1992).
[63] Cuno (1992), ch. 9.

village headmen as a group, representing the community to the outside world and being held responsible for it.

In the New Kingdom, the *ḥ3ty-ʿ* and *ḥq3-ḥw.t* were the channel for the collection of state revenues, the intermediary between the state and the productive countryside. The Duties of the Vizier idealises the vizier's oversight of local government. In practice this was exercised through occasional visits, and by envoys — the tax assessor and collector — who dealt with local notables.[64] In the New Kingdom local fiscal responsibility was characteristically delegated to *rwḏw*, 'agents', a term used in private contexts to mean legal or economic representative. The *rwḏw* as state agents, supervising grain dues, were simply resident notables — mostly local functionaries but also simply farmers — and their activities can best be understood by comparison with local systems of tax-farming or the assignment of liturgies documented from later periods.[65] They act as rural middlemen. For actual collection of this grain, the local threshing-floor with its associated storage facility provided the primary point of contact with the farmer,[66] and fleets of boats then collected the grain due at the local quaysides, under the authority of local mayors.[67]

The Role of the Village

The role of the village as a unit for taxation and conscription is clear enough in general, but it is more difficult to address the issue of communal responsibility. Legal and business disputes were characteristically settled at a local level, by the local 'council' (*qnbt*) involving the leading men of the community, acting through public negotiation and mediation. The most detailed evidence comes from Deir el-Medina, but there is no reason to doubt that the procedures there were typical.[68] Generally there was outside involvement only if state interests were infringed or the dispute involved members of different communities. It is not possible for the Pharaonic period to demonstrate the communal responsibility of the village for public order in its territory, although the doctrine of communal responsibility for protection of the person and property of the travelling

[64] Cf. the comment of Hopkins (1987), 98 on local control of irrigation: 'The state pretends to regulate everything and in fact regulates nothing.'

[65] Eyre (1994b), 127. The term *rwḏw* is also characteristically used of the leading men at Deir el-Medina, acting as representatives and headmen of the community.

[66] Turin Taxation Papyrus (*RAD* 35–44), see Gardiner (1941), 22–37; *P. Louvre* 3171 (Spiegelberg (1896), pl. 18) and see Gardiner (1941), 56–8; *P. Sallier* IV, vs. 10, 1–5 (*LEM* 94–96), see Gardiner (1941), 62–64; cf. also Gardiner (1941), 20 and *P. Lansing* 7, 11 (*LEM* 105, 11–14). Note also James (1962), pl. 5, 5–6 (Hekanakhte Letter II, 5–6). For the much better attested role of the threshing-floor in the Graeco-Roman period, see e.g. Rowlandson (1996), 188–9, 219, 225–6.

[67] Cf. *P. Amiens* (*RAD* 1–13) + BM 10061 (Janssen (1995)), see Gardiner (1941), 37–56.

[68] McDowell 1990; Eyre 1993.

merchant can be traced in the international law of the period, and one would expect to find similar practice in Egypt.

The problem is the same in relation to communal fiscal responsibility. Both Roman and Ottoman tax regimes tended towards systems of communal assessment, delegating responsibility to local magnates or middlemen. In practice, in the period under consideration here, focus was on a regular target revenue rather than accurate assessment of individual plots. The survey task necessary for a full annual assessment[69] was simply beyond the capacity of the state. Irregular surveys, moderated by relatively crude systems to allow for a poor Nile,[70] and attempts to enforce assessments on individuals for the lands of entire communities characterised the short cuts taken by the central administration. This distancing of government tended to promote land-administering classes—feudal-style grants, or middlemen who were often based in a town. At a lower level it increased village solidarity and emphasised the practical role of the leading men in the village as representatives or as those responsible for delivery.

It is a constant theme, throughout Egyptian history, that land registers are inaccurate and out of date.[71] Such information is a source of power, and attempts by the central government to produce accurate land registers and census data signal a desire to intervene at a local level, a desire characteristically resisted in Egyptian villages. The balance between government attempts to control the taxation of land in detail and government willingness to resign that control to local middlemen is a recurring theme,[72] diagnostic of the relative strength or weakness of the central regime. Preservation of rent and taxation data from the Pharaonic period is limited and erratic. Institutionally managed lands are doubtless overrepresented, to the virtual exclusion of other sectors. Nevertheless, later comparisons make it clear that questions of the level of penetration into local affairs by the central government, the efficiency of survey, the balance between individual and communal responsibility for revenues, and the role of middlemen are directly relevant for the Pharaonic period.

Although a fluctuating balance between regional and central authorities is a characteristic cycle of Pharaonic history, there has been a general tendency to underestimate local variation, and assume a monolithic economic system. For instance, the scenes in tombs, reinforced by data on the payment of wages in

[69] For the principles of such an assessment see Frantz-Murphy (1986) and ch. 11, below. For the extremely limited Pharaonic data see Berger (1934); Smither (1941); Graefe (1973); Kraus (1987).

[70] Cf. Bonneau (1994) and Kehoe (1995), 246–9 with *P. Valençay* I, vs. 5 = Gardiner (1951) on rent relief on unflooded or waterlogged land.

[71] Cf. Rowlandson (1996), 59, 86, 99, 111 with Eyre (1994b), 131–2. Compare also Hopkins (1987), 56–64; Richards (1993) and Saad, below, ch. 18 on the confusions caused by lack of clarity in modern registers, and the blurring of distinctions between ownership and tenancy.

[72] Cf. Cuno (1992), esp. 5, 17, 26, 198–202 with Richards (1993), 99 and Moursi (1993), 150.

kind, have helped to create the rather bogus abstraction of describing Egypt as a 'redistribution' economy.[73] I would prefer to argue that this is a misconception, or rather oversimplification, derived from assumptions about relationships between the élite and their immediate personal estates, and between the state and its non-agricultural work-forces. Tomb scenes simply show that the highest élite did not work the land themselves, but drew on the produce of others. They provide no evidence of the nature of peasant landholdings. There is, indeed, an élite ideal that the individual should receive food from the lord's table, made explicit in offerings to the dead, which are *ḥtp dj nsw* 'a *ḥtp* which the king gives'. Possession of a tomb and offering-endowment is defined as a royal favour.[74] The income of a priest is defined as a share of the offerings, which may be as closely defined as any wage.[75] But the political and the economic realities are slightly more complex than the ideology that the state is simply a household. Even in the earliest inscriptions of the Fourth and Fifth Dynasties the tomb-owner is likely to stress that the tomb was funded by his own resources, in direct contradiction to the theme of royal provision.[76]

Throughout the Pharaonic period, and indeed throughout antiquity, land seems to have been available for development; the use of personal and royal names in village and hamlet place-names attests to successive waves of rural development (or redevelopment after periods of economic decline).[77] Land was valueless without people. In the First Intermediate Period powerful men stress their acquisition of people, coming from other districts for protection and food, a theme reminiscent of feudal crises in Europe. The necessity is the control of lands and people in combination. An élite perspective on development of the countryside as a source of income does not itself clarify the power structures by which such claims were enforced, nor the reality of relationship between the actual peasant, his land, and his production.

At first sight the economic structure of Old Kingdom Egypt appears to be that of a central court circle, funded by possession of provincial manors and villages, typically scattered in different parts of the country, rather than large, coherent, territorial power-bases. The government appears to be an élite overlay, largely distanced from a countryside that was left to the administration of elevated peasants acting as headmen in their own villages and districts. It is villages, not indi-

[73] Janssen (1975a), esp. 183–5; cf. Kemp (1989), Part II: The Provider State, especially Chapter 3: The Bureaucratic Mind.

[74] Note, e.g., *P. Westcar* 7, 20–3: 'I have come to summon you on service (*wpt*) of my father Khufu. You shall eat luxuries that the king gives; the provisions of those who are among his followers; and in good time he will conduct you to your fathers who are in the necropolis.' Cf. also Sinuhe B280–310.

[75] Cf. Eyre (1994b), 123–4.

[76] Eyre (1987), 21–5; Roth (1991).

[77] O'Connor (1972), 693–4; cf. also Müller-Wollermann (1991), 52.

vidual farmers, who bring the offerings to the Old Kingdom tomb. However, even the most superficial comparison with the organisation of great estates[78] gives due warning against the simple assumption that extensive lands would naturally be managed as consolidated holdings on a large scale. For the Old Kingdom one must look to the great estate of the great man, the land-controlling élite, and by the New Kingdom to temple administrations as models for rural administration, channelling agricultural produce into the state treasury and ensuring the land was manned and worked, overlapping with state administration rather than subordinate to it.

It is, indeed, questionable whether there is evidence at all for extensive farming in the Pharaonic period. There is very limited evidence from the New Kingdom which suggests that officials responsible for field-workers were expected to produce grain at a norm of 200 khar of grain on 20 arourae of land for each worker under their authority.[79] A rate of 10 khar per aroura seems excessive as rent for an independent tenant, even on the most productive land, but this is a poor basis for speculation about the labourer's income. Officials also worried about assessments on land they could not man, or that they would be held responsible for lands not actually under their control.[80] The use of compulsory or corvée labour for field-work is equally poorly attested.[81] While a significant proportion of the rural population will never have had either the resources or the enterprise to invest in fully independent tenancy, and have had to farm for subsistence, either in wages/rations or as a small residue of the crops on fields managed and financed by others, the financial detail of such management remains largely undocumented for the Pharaonic period.

Individual Landholdings

There are no data to illustrate the relationship between a specific village and the situation of its landholdings in the flood-basin(s). However, for tenure at a relatively low level there are fragmentary data from quite early periods. Documents recording the land endowments of private tombs in a waqf-like foundation are well attested by the Fifth Dynasty.[82] They were typically very small, essentially subsistence plots, to be passed undivided through the posterity of the tomb-owner as perpetual funding for the offering ritual. Temple endowment decrees of the same period face the issue of manning lands. A decree of Pepi I, to the benefit

[78] See esp. Rostovtzeff (1922); Rathbone (1991); Kehoe (1992).
[79] Eyre (1987a), 206–8.
[80] Cf. *P. Bol.* 1086 = Wolf (1930) and Wente (1990), 124–6; *P. Valençay* I = Gardiner (1951) and Wente (1990), 130–1. On the problem of 'flight' in the pharaonic period see Eyre (1996), 185–6.
[81] Eyre (1987), 18–20; (1987a), 207–8; (1994b), 110.
[82] Goedicke (1970).

of the much earlier pyramids of Snefru at Dashur, provides the best example.[83] It protects the *ḫnty-š*, people who held lands on the endowment in return for service. They are exempted from various forms of taxation and conscription. A person taken on to the foundation could not be removed, even by his previous lord. The lands of the foundation could not be farmed by outsiders. By the mid-Sixth Dynasty the function of *ḫnty-š* in pyramid temples was in many cases a sinecure of absentee officials, although the Dashur decree insists that *ḫnty-š* are to farm personally, and specifically that peasantry (*mrt*) belonging to the highest élite of officials and royal family are not to work the land. The *ḫnty-š* belonged to a village associated with the pyramids of Dashur.[84] The endowment contained grain lands, but also extensive orchard/garden lands and pasturage. The decree specifically protects the *ḫnty-š* and their lands against encroachment by 'settled Nubians'. It has to be assumed that there was friction between this established village and a more recent 'colonising' settlement adjoining its lands.[85]

The Dashur decree supports a specific community, which was tied in perpetuity to its lands, but which held those lands on favourable and secure tenure approaching private ownership. The *ḫnty-š* are clearly distinguished from *mrt*, the ordinary peasantry put on to work land for its owner's benefit. This defines at a very early date themes that run throughout Egyptian history: classes of holding that appear to fluctuate between private, communal or compulsory depending on the standpoint from which they are envisaged—peasant, local notable, tax collector, or official. The ideological standpoint is one of order and structure, but ideological status is of limited relevance to the worker of the land, compared to the immediacy of external interference in his access to land. It is crucially important to be aware that status can change without necessarily disrupting established patterns of land-working.

A detailed picture of the realities of peasant holdings is much more difficult to construct. The crucial source for the Pharaonic period is found in the Middle Kingdom letters of Hekanakhte:[86] crucial because they provide direct insights into the finances and the decision-making process of an individual farmer. Hekanakhte belonged to a class of intermediate rural notable. He held the function of *ka*-priest, and so was beneficiary of a waqf-like tomb endowment. He was the head of a substantial family, able to draw on about half a dozen grown men for field-work, both sons and regular associates or labourers for wages.[87]

[83] *Urk* I, 209–13; Goedicke (1967), 55–77.

[84] Cf. Stadelmann (1981) on pyramid towns, and cf. Kemp (1989), 141–9.

[85] Helck (1974); Gratien (1995), 44–5.

[86] James (1962); for recent translation of the most important letters see Parkinson (1991), 101–7 and Wente (1990), 58–63.

[87] Described as a 'gentleman farmer' by Wente (1990), 58. On his standing see James (1962), 8–12; Luft (1994a).

His documents provide focus on the role and importance of the joint household and family group as the basic, or rather most effective, unit of rural organisation.[88]

To work grain land it was necessary to bring together seed, ploughing animals, and labour on a plot that had received water appropriate to the crop sown. This can only be achieved on the basis of decisions taken through the summer as the local situation develops. The man with seed and oxen has financial dominance over the man with the field or only his labour, but all need to be exploited on a very tight time-scale. Hekanakhte held a strong negotiating position. He had at his disposal sufficient capital resources to finance the farming of a larger area than he and his immediate family could work. He also owned a herd of cattle, both breeding and plough animals.[89] Another account may refer to standing trees (rather than felled timber).[90]

Hekanakhte's letters display serious concern about the level of the coming inundation. He gives clear instructions about decisions to be taken in the lead-up to and the assessment of the inundation, stressing that he holds his son responsible for cultivation of 'what is inundated in our fields', and for conservation of the necessary seed grain. He moves on to suggest that an additional plot of land should be rented and worked in another village, provided the labour can be spared.[91] Specific instructions are given about two men who can act as intermediaries, through personal contacts, in finding suitably watered lands; his son should not rent just anybody's land. Crops are to be sown in relation to the nature of the inundation; emmer for preference, but barley if necessary. Cost levels, rents and margins are discussed. Hekanakhte, rather surprisingly, seems to be paying rent in advance, and is eager that so far as possible this should not be paid in grain, which was in short supply.[92] The second letter puts his family on half rations because the inundation was poor and famine a real threat. He gives additional instructions concerning the weaving of cloth and its use to finance these transactions; he gives orders that one plot of land is not to be leased out, but used to grow flax.

[88] Cf. Hopkins (1987), esp. 3, 67–95; Cuno (1995); Bagnall and Frier (1994), esp. 57–64 and noting their comment p. 71 on the correlation between household size and wealth. Cf. also the Middle Kingdom fragments of census data *P. Kah.* pls ix–xi, xxi, discussed briefly by Valbelle (1985), 77; Kemp (1989), 156–7; Eyre (1992), 215.

[89] James (1962), pl. 10, Account V.

[90] James (1962), pl. 12, Account V, vs.

[91] The third letter refers to grain stored in three different villages, presumably in each case from local cultivation.

[92] In another letter he expresses a preference that payment due to him (possibly from men cultivating land) should be made in grain rather than its equivalent in oil. As with 'prodomatic' leases in the Graeco-Roman period, there is at least a suspicion that the poor year may have increased the bargaining power of the lessor with cash in hand. Cf. Rowlandson (1996), 264–5 and below, p. 150.

The evidence of Hekanakhte's letters is isolated,[93] and illustrates only one facet of land management. The picture does, however, ring true in a way that higher-level generalisations often do not. The parameters within which he worked seem to be very similar to those seen in land leases of much later periods. His letters raise many of the basic issues, not just legal but practical — parameters such as the area a man can plough, holding sizes and crop versus rent rates — where comparative data necessary to put the information into context has to be taken from much later sources. For instance, Hekanakhte held, and was keen to rent, additional land in more than one village. Fragmentation of holdings in more than one village, whatever the reason, is well attested in the Ptolemaic, Roman and Byzantine periods, not just among landowners who may not be resident, but for the plots cultivated by ordinary farmers.[94] This provides a useful caution against over emphasis on village identity and exclusiveness, at least in the matter of access to private land available for rent.

A group of demotic land leases of the Saite period,[95] very much later than the Hekanakhte texts, which shows individuals with resources contracting and sub contracting cultivation, can be interpreted in the same framework. These leases were typically made during the summer. They were based on a single year of cultivation, and adjusted the rent according to who provided the seed and plough-oxen. In some cases the lease was little more than an agreement to provide labour for a share of the crop. It is necessary, however, to turn to leases of the Graeco-Roman period to get a fuller picture of the range of private tenancies and leasing strategies: the self-sufficient family enterprise both leasing and renting land as most convenient and profitable; the sharecropping tenant, whose only resource was his labour; the rural capitalist, leasing land at an advantageous rate, and supplying the capital necessary to profit from sharecropping subtenancies; women and minors leasing plots they were not in a position to cultivate personally; the well-off, who treated land as a reasonably secure investment and source of income.[96]

At no period is the documentary record fully representative. Leases were only written because one of the parties wanted the security of a document. Even in the Roman period the written lease was the exception.[97] Hekanakhte would not have used a written lease. The ecology of the Nile Valley largely accounts for

[93] But note, for instance, the complex argument about cultivation in the 6th Dynasty letter *P. Turin* 54002 = Roccati (1968), 14–22 = Wente (1990), 57, and the late New Kingdom letter *P. Berlin* 8523 intended to serve as proof of lease, Allam (1973), 274–5, pls. 76–7; (1994a), 1–7.

[94] Rowlandson (1996), 268–71.

[95] Hughes (1952); (1973); cf. Eyre (1994b), 129–30; (1994), 60, n. 23.

[96] Rowlandson (1996), esp. ch. 7.

[97] Rowlandson (1996), 71, 165, 211; Mrsich (1994), and note especially Richards (1993), 107, stressing the high level of leasing in modern Egypt, with much informal oral leasing for a single season, in a context where legal protection of tenant holdings is extremely strong (see Hopkins (1987), 64;

the predominance of annual leases in Egypt. It reflects the real flexibility necessary in a system of natural recession or basin agriculture, at the interface between the field-labourer, the manager, and the landlord.[98] Land management depended on mobilisation of labourers and investment on the right plot at the right moment. For the farmer, access to land in more than one flood-basin could be of great importance. Long-term tenancy of a specific plot was not necessarily a guarantee of stable income.[99] The land 'owner' must share the risk, suffering loss in a year that land is not cultivable, and providing a reservoir of farming capital in seeds and oxen. Written leases for a longer term are exceptional. However, plots were often worked by the same tenant year after year, with both landlord and tenant relying in practice on the long-term security of tenure.[100] The annual lease does, however, mark an active involvement by the landlord that is crucial to achieve a satisfactory return from holdings in the Egyptian countryside, and without which direct claims to tenure were difficult to sustain.[101] It gave a tenant access to land, but limited his right to tenure.

In the Saite demotic leases it is the landowner, not the farmer, who is responsible for any 'tax'.[102] Taxation registers of the New Kingdom were used as evidence in disputes over tenure rights. Women appear as a substantial proportion of landholders/taxpayers. The implication is that the registered taxpayer was the recognised holder of tenure, and that registers were concerned with responsibility, and not with recording who actually worked the land.[103] This evidence points to heritable and customary tenures. The interest of the state was to maintain its

Richards (1993), 102; Moursi (1993), 150–2; Saad, ch.18, below), and a written lease might lay the owner open to a claim for secure tenancy at low and legally fixed rent. Surviving leases will overrepresent not so much arrangements that were out of the ordinary as ones where for some reason the trust between landlord and tenant was not taken for granted, though they may just reflect the personal preference of one of the parties for the use of documents.

[98] Failure to understand the complexities of land categorisation lies at the heart of the difficulties raised by the major land registers of the New Kingdom. Cf. Rowlandson (1996), 210–11 on the native and local background to the custom of annual leasing of specific plots, and esp. 64–5, 75–80, 91–2, 100–1 on the Roman government's failure to address the issue properly in its fiscal regime.

[99] See Cuno (1992), 66 on land-tenure patterns and annual assignments of plots for cultivation in Upper Egyptian basin lands in the 18th and early 19th centuries, and cf. Rowlandson (1996), 70–1, 81–3 on the absence of evidence for formal reassignments in the Roman period. At issue is flexibility in the face of annual variation, and the interpretation put on local mechanisms to achieve that flexibility.

[100] See Kehoe (1995), 254–8; Rowlandson (1996), 252–7; and cf. *P. Berlin* 8523 = Allam (1973), 2274–5; (1994a).

[101] Eyre (1994b), esp. 116–19.

[102] Eyre (1994b), 129–32, and cf. (1992), 219–21; cf. also Rowlandson (1996), 37, 226; Hopkins (1987), 60–1 for the opposite situation of tenants who pay tax, and owners who have difficulty in claiming ownership or rents.

[103] Accuracy in the register need not be a major issue, if land is worked as a joint family enterprise. Leaving it registered in the name of a deceased family member might have advantages where land was undivided: cf. Hopkins (1987), 61, 64. Cf. also Youtie (1973).

income, and the customary taxpayer in his holding.[104] This was not necessarily the man working the land. For instance, in both size and fiscal regime the early Ptolemaic gifts of land as kleruchic holdings were calculated to provide income for men who might not work the land personally. They would provide sufficient profit if either farmed by wage-labourers or leased to subtenants. The *ḫnty-š* holdings of the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties, although attached to pyramid endowments, should be compared to the typical five-aroura holdings associated with military and other low-level service in the New Kingdom, and both should be compared with kleruchic holdings in the Ptolemaic period. Annual leasing and subletting, or subcontracting of labour are likely to have been characteristic for such landholdings.

I am arguing that even in the earliest historical period the basic unit of the agricultural regime, which is fundamental for understanding the social and economic structure of the village, was the local family-based enterprise rather than a bureaucratic organisation of dependent workers. The great estate is to be envisaged as a lordship, not a bureaucracy, and the rural population as individuals, working to their own economic advantage within the socio-economic constraints of their village or estate, not a regimented mass. The argument attributes a broad and general significance to the available evidence for land-tenure and rejects the alternative, which is virtually to disqualify all such data as evidence for the norm in land exploitation, and to relegate it to the backwater of a limited category of 'private' ownership.[105] I would suggest rather that the evidence of short-term leases is likely to illustrate reasonably well the sort of conditions on which land was held by a long-term resident peasantry on large estates.

Sharecropping rather than a ration or wage arrangements was probably characteristic for the men working the fields, individuals cultivating specific plots rather than managers farming a larger area as a unit, with a body of men at their disposal. The role of local men—including men with the simple 'title' of *ḫwty*, 'cultivator'—as agents or middlemen is clear in the Ramesside Wilbour Papyrus,[106] while in contrast, there is no clear evidence for latifundia-style exploitation of lands.[107] The Middle Kingdom P. Brooklyn 35.1446[108] does deal with the role of an institution translated as 'the Great Prison' in pursuing persons who have 'fled' (*w'r*) or 'deserted' (*tš*) from agricultural service, while an 'Office of Assigning People' (*ḫ3 n dd rmṯ*) is mentioned a number of times in

[104] Inscription of Mose: see Eyre (1994b), 116–20.

[105] Both the categories of tomb and temple endowment have been discussed in the context of 'the origins of private property': a perennial issue in the history of land-tenure in Egypt.

[106] Katary (1989), 11, 17, 22; Eyre (1994b), 120, 127.

[107] Eyre (1987a), 206–9; (1994b), 109–10.

[108] Hayes (1955), esp. 34–56; 134–44; Menu (1981).

documents of the late Middle Kingdom.[109] Its role appears to be one of enforcing tax-responsibility and the manning of land. Old Kingdom decrees protect temple endowments from forms of recruitment and service (*wpt*, *h3*, *st-h3*), the nature of which is not clear.[110] There is no evidence for the use of corvée to work land on a regular basis. Such material points at most to the concern of the government for ensuring the occupation and working of the land by restricting the mobility of the rural population.

Subsistence and Cash Crops

The hero of the Middle Kingdom Story of the Eloquent Peasant loaded his donkeys, to 'go down to Egypt to bring food (*'qw*, literally 'loaves' = 'rations') from there for my children.' His home was in the Wadi Natrun, at the margins of Egypt, and the produce he carried was exotic. It is stressed that he would leave just enough in his house to feed his family for the time of his absence.[111] This was not a peasant growing grain in a flood-basin. Carrying products of the marshes and desert margins, he was apparently intending to trade for staples, travelling to the (then capital) city of Heracleopolis. When he sues for the restitution of goods taken by a minor official through a mixture of trickery and violence, the judge's entourage advised:

> Presumably it's a peasant of his, who has come to somebody other than him. Look, it's what they do to their peasants who come to others apart from them. Look, it's what they do. Is it a case for punishing this Nemtynakhte over a bit of natron and a bit of salt. If he is ordered to replace it, he will replace it.[112]

The assumption is that local bosses controlled the supply of non-staple goods coming into town, supplying grain to the men coming in with produce from the marshes and desert margins.

These mechanisms of exchange illustrate and emphasise a crucial issue: the nature of economic and social controls imposed on the rural population, related to the efficiency of central government. The primary issue is that of the subsistence of the individual, whether the farmer typically received a ration (a 'redistributive' model) or retained the produce of the land he worked (a tenure model). A free market in grain cannot be detected in Pharaonic sources, but this is not significant in view of peasant attitudes to the purchase of staple foods. Two imperatives are perhaps universal. The farmer wants the security of growing the

[109] Quirke (1990), 112–13.
[110] Eyre (1987), 18–19; Franke (1983a) for the question of a possible etymological relationship with *h3w*, 'family'.
[111] Peas. R 1.3–6; B1, 112–13 = old B1, 81–2.
[112] B1, 75–80 = old B1, 44–9.

grain he eats, regardless of whether he could use the land more profitably. Beyond subsistence the farmer wants to grow cash crops for profit, and may be extremely sensitive to market forces. Grain is a subsistence commodity, and the medium for paying rent and tax on land, but it is not a cash crop,[113] even though in the New Kingdom at least a notional fixed value of grain against the gold/silver/copper standards is clear,[114] and a few violent fluctuations against that value are attested, serving as evidence of bad times or even famine. One did not take grain to market, or rather one did not sit at market displaying grain for sale; one took cash crops. Depictions of markets appear erratically in tomb scenes,[115] with stalls displaying fruit, vegetables, prepared food and drink, fish, and small craft goods, notably cloth. This is not to say that grain did not play a part in such transactions, but rather to stress that cultivation of non-staple crops, vegetables, fruit, herbs, and the rural activities of fishing and fowling, had a market context even at the village level.

The argument suggests that in the village a thriving local exchange, local enterprise and local bargaining characterised the life of the peasant. Self-sufficiency for an agricultural settlement involves all local sectors. Grain farming and field cultivation are distinct from orchard and vegetable gardening, and from exploitation of the 'forest' and marsh, with fish, poultry, and herding, and all are distinct from local craft production. These involve local agricultural exchange. For instance in the Ptolemaic, Roman and Byzantine periods, the most 'commercialised' sector of the economy were orchards and vineyards,[116] together with carefully controlled and regulated commodities such as oil crops (often termed 'monopolies'). Information about oil production is virtually lacking for the Pharaonic period. Gardening and fruit production were necessarily always a high-investment enterprise in Egypt, requiring perennial water, protection from inundation, and specialist workers; they always required 'commercial' investment. For these a market of sorts is structurally essential for village society, as indeed is internal exchange, since the climate is not identical through the country, and wine production is necessarily concentrated in the Delta and the Fayyum. It should be emphasised, however, that the argument for such a scenario moves the focus from the better known and frequently discussed evidence for the

[113] Cf. Rowlandson (1996), 245, and cf. 188–9.

[114] Janssen (1975), 109–32: at Deir el-Medina a valuation of 2 deben of copper per khar of either grain was the notional standard. Hekanakhte, letter II, vs. 1 hopes to rent 20 aroura using 24 deben of copper, but it is not clear if this is the total sum. According to letter I, 12 this area should cost 100 khar of barley; letter III equates 1 hebnet of oil with either 2 khar of barley or 3 khar of emmer.

[115] Eyre (1987), 31–2; (1987a) 199–200; Müller-Wollermann (1985), esp. 138–42; Römer (1992); and on trading practice, cf. Kemp (1979); Janssen (1994); Janssen (1961); Condon (1984).

[116] Rathbone (1991), esp. 278–306; Kehoe (1992), esp. 12, 15, 84–5, 100 n. 99. It is, however, important to note the unevenness of documentation in the Graeco-Roman period: the best documentation is for intensively cultivated cash-crop lands.

employment of people on the staff of temples or state work-forces, contracted to supply produce for the wages or rations of their staff.

Conclusion

I have focused on early periods in this paper, because this allows me to attack at source the idea that the Pharaonic period was significantly different in its basic economic patterns and its rural regime, and to try to undermine any axiomatic dichotomy between ancient and modern, or even ancient and classical economies. In the study of Egyptian society, ideology has usually had the advantage over reality, whether it is the ideology of the historian or the ideology of the Egyptian ruling class itself. An explicitly comparative approach is able, potentially, to sharpen the focus on reality, although it also has the potential to create new fictions from a different ideology. There has been little attempt, or even opportunity, to apply the perspectives of comparative peasant studies to Pharaonic data, but it is clear that this type of approach does highlight issues such as rural stratification, the practical and not merely the legal complexities of tenancy, and dislocations between the government machine and the actual field-labourer, mediated by various categories of middleman. The organisation of the countryside has always been seen in one light by the farmer, for whom the relations of production are social—family- and community-based—and in a different light by the government and ruling class, for whom the countryside is a source of income to be managed. The vision of the government oversimplifies by stressing standardisation and ideals. The vision of the farmer overcomplicates, by constant focus on the individual transaction. For antiquity, however, it is the presence of genuine complexity, variety, and individual enterprise that needs to be emphasised against the idealisation. The primary evidence for the Pharaonic period is severely limited, but it does make clear that the underlying issues for the farmer and for his ruler were not qualitatively different from other periods.

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