Area Review

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Recent Developments in the Social and Economic History of Ancient Egypt

Abstract: Recent developments in Pharaonic social and economic history help provide a more balanced interpretation of ancient Egypt. Landscape research shows the succession of several micro-regions in the Nile Valley. The conditions prevailing in some of these regions show that cattle rearing played a crucial economic role, while mobile populations from Egypt and abroad could lead lifestyles alternative to cereal cultivation. Trade also appears as a largely underestimated activity, where markets, private merchants and agricultural "entrepreneurs" fuelled exchanges not only within Egyptian borders but also abroad. Their role was crucial in the transformation of agrarian produce into wealth while their activities were in many ways autonomous from any institution, including temples or the crown itself. Not surprisingly, the social structure appears less rigidly organized than previously thought. Elites and peasantry, for instance, actually encompassed very distinct social groups whose goals and interests were not always coincident. While the former included not only officials and high dignitaries but also local potentates and chiefs of villages, the latter encompassed a variety of conditions, from poor rural workers and forced labourers to wealthy cultivators and rich peasants. The local power of such sub-elites enabled them to head extensive patronage networks. Their cooperation with the royal administration was crucial for the stability of the monarchy, even if their appearance in official sources is rather elusive. Politics, the negotiation between factions and groups for power, between the core of the kingdom and the provinces, were common practice, quite far in fact from the supposedly autocratic power of pharaohs.

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The year 1975 represents an important milestone in Egyptological studies. A congress held in Cairo focused on the current state of the art in Egyptological research and, more precisely, on critical shortcomings which hampered the proper growth of Egyptology as a mature sub-discipline within ancient history and archaeology. Because of the – in many cases – obsolete perspectives, methods and academic practices still prevailing in ancient Egyptian studies, participants suggested several neglected themes to be urgently dealt with in order to "normalize" Egyptology among social sciences and to promote inter-disciplinary research (Weeks 1979). Not by chance the congress was titled *"Ancient Egypt: Problems of History, Sources and Methods"*, as it stressed that the study of Pharaonic history, the analysis of Egyptian sources and the methods currently used in Egyptology were in many cases inadequate, if not utterly outdated, thus contributing to the alarming gulf setting Egyptology apart from the social sciences. However, such isolation could have been hardly conceivable nearly two centuries earlier, when the publication of the *Description de l'Égypte* (1809–1818) and the decipherment of hieroglyphs (1822) were celebrated as two of the most brilliant results of the new scientific mind inspired by the Enlightenment. Egyptology was then in a unique position to become a leading historical discipline, opening the path for what would now be labelled "inter-disciplinary research" by bringing together such diverse fields as history, geography, archaeology, economy, natural history and ethnography. Unfortunately, it was not the case, and the weight of treasure hunt as well as the widespread idea that only *beaux arts*, religious and literary texts, monumental buildings (mostly restricted to temples and tombs) and epigraphy deserved the interest of researchers, proved to be too formidable obstacles. Conservative agendas of research were not the only direct outcome of those narrow views but, perhaps more regrettably, it was commonly admitted that philology and an archaeology of beautiful objects were the main *raisons d'être* of Egyptological work (Moreno García 2009 and in press a). One example among many others can illustrate the tragic consequences of this limited approach: the full potential of the information contained in the *Description de l'Égypte* for the study of landscape history and irrigation management was not fully recognized until … 1992 (Alleaume 1992).

It was precisely against such paralysing situation that the participants at the Cairo congress in 1975 proposed new paths of research on such diverse fields as

urbanism, economy, history, archaeology and comparative research. Several decades later, social and economic histories have certainly made important progress, but they are still somewhat disregarded as secondary fields within Egyptology. Thus, for instance, the recent book *Egyptology Today* (Wilkinson 2008) contains, significantly, no chapter at all devoted to social and economic history. Even when Egyptologists work on economic matters, their research usually consists of the translation and philological commentary of single documents or limited sets of them, while interpretation is usually relegated to remarks mostly based on common sense rather than on a solid methodology. Not surprisingly, economic analysis based on current debates and methods prevalent in ancient economic history, comparative research and economic theory are almost completely absent if not utterly ignored. One of the rare exceptions is the frequent reference to the writings of Karl Polanyi. Traditionally regarded as a bureaucratic ultra-centralized agrarian economy, where commodities circulated almost exclusively through redistributive circuits controlled by the state, Polanyi's redistributive approach could thus provide the Pharaonic economy with an appropriate and respectable academic pedigree. However, the insufficiencies of the Polanyian paradigm have come under close scrutiny and criticism during the last decades, while recent research emphasizes the role played by non-institutional actors and activities as well as by mobile populations and trade. Unfortunately, none of these new developments has significantly defied the predominance of the redistributive model in Egyptology, as well as the overwhelming centrality ascribed to state agency, but alternative views have arisen in recent years (Moreno García 2014a: 7–15).

Similar concerns affect social history, although significant improvements in the last decades, especially in the English sphere, have renewed its perspectives of research (Trigger et al. 1983; Kemp 2006; Meskell 1999; Wendrich 2010; Moreno García 2010a; Baines 2013). Yet a long-established tradition still sees ancient Egypt as the quintessential example of a highly centralized bureaucratic state. At the top of the social hierarchy stands Pharaoh in splendid isolation, supported by an army of dignitaries and scribes attentive to implement any order issued from the king; at the bottom, an undifferentiated mass of peasants and artisans provided for the needs of their superiors in exchange for services like the organization of irrigation, the redistribution of basic commodities and the celebration of cults. An absolutist rigid structure like this has had little room not only for politics and local and informal networks of power (like patronage) but also internal stratification and diverging interests among elites or among producers (say, "peasants") were simply underestimated. Regional particularities remained obscure too under the apparent uniformity of the Nile Valley, while mobile populations and non-sedentary lifestyles were reduced to a

marginal role. Nevertheless scribes, priests and courtiers only represented a small part of the elite; powerful local potentates were also crucial for the continuity and stability of the monarchy, albeit often difficult to visualize in an artistic and epigraphic record usually reserved for members of the court circles in a broader sense. As for "peasants", this vague term encompasses in fact many social categories, from autonomous landholders to rich peasants, from agricultural dependants to rural "entrepreneurs" (Moreno García 2013a, 2013b and 2013c); and an increasing body of archaeological evidence reveals the huge differences in wealth and lifestyle between them. Finally, notions like "elite" and "peasant" become entangled in the case of well-off landowners, well placed in social networks, occasionally holding priestly titles and enjoying substantial and diversified sources of income as well, like Heqanakhte at the beginning of the 2nd millennium or Tsenhor and Djekhy in the middle of the 1st millennium BCE (Allen 2002; Donker van Heel 2012 and 2014). Their relevant position, especially in the local context of villages and districts, explains the actual condition of sub-elites as indispensable intermediaries for the royal administration. Finally, herders, foragers and traders, among other occupations, far from being marginal, played a crucial role in the exchange of goods and in the exploitation of natural resources (grazing land, salt, plants, honey, game, charcoal, fish, etc.). Their relationship with the institutional sphere as well as with agriculturists was a complex one, composed of occasional conflicts, autonomy and collaboration in a general context of mutual interdependency (Moreno García 2010b and 2013c; Kóthay 2013).

While much still awaits exploration, and many commonplaces are to be revisited in the realm of economic and social history, new paths of research and fresh perspectives have also emerged in the last years. It would be impossible to treat all of them in detail in only a few pages, so I shall devote the next sections to explore some of the more important topics, whose contributions are changing many long-rooted ideas about the social and economic structure of ancient Egypt.

Landscapes, habitats and irrigation

Thanks to the increasing use of satellite images, surveys and extensive archaeology, a decisive shift has finally taken place in the study of the landscape and territorial organization of Pharaonic Egypt. Until recently research was mainly limited to the analysis of written sources of unequal value and to the identification of place-names, with little attention devoted to actual geographical conditions, settlement hierarchies and habitat (Parçak 2008). Furthermore, information from literary and religious texts was often uncritically combined

with that derived from administrative sources and monumental "historical" epigraphy. The confused amalgam thus resulting consisted of little more than simple lists of toponyms and landmarks, where actual features, metaphoric senses and characteristics from different periods were combined in a confused hodgepodge that offered little information about actual settlement hierarchies, land use or the very nature of the localities, sites and land features under scrutiny. Diachronic transformations and landscape history became thus entirely blurred, and any spatial dynamics was simply unintelligible as research was focused on "urban" environments. And even these were reduced to the tombs and temples in their surroundings (a recent example among many others is Leclère 2008). Not surprisingly, crucial aspects like rural history, the interaction between settlements and their hinterland, the cycles of occupation and abandonment of specific areas, as well as the existence of competing strategies over the resources of single zones were simply ignored (Moreno García 2010b and 2014b).

Fortunately archaeology is gradually providing a more balanced picture of settlement history and landscape organization in ancient Egypt. Research projects on urban settings have greatly benefited from the pioneering work led by Barry Kemp at Amarna, Manfred Bietak at Avaris/Tell el-Dab'a and the German Archaeological Institute at Elephantine, and continued at localities like Balat, Kom el-Rabia (Memphis) or Edfu among others (Bietak, Czerny and Forstner-Müller 2010). Attention is thus focused not only on prestige architectural remains but also on the very organization of cities, their differentiated specialized areas and their surrounding hinterland. In this vein, extensive surveys are providing invaluable information about the structure of occupation and its diachronic transformations over time (Spencer 2008; Wilson and Grigoropoulos 2009; Wilson 2011). Far from the common assumption of a more or less uniform and regular distribution of sites along the Nile Valley, what emerges from these studies is the coexistence of very different patterns of settlement within the Egyptian borders, open to a diversity of lifestyles and forms of exploitation of their resources depending on factors like human density, soil characteristics, ecological and environmental conditions, water availability, the consequences of the seasonal flood and the impact of taxation. Several distinctive micro-regions can thus be distinguished, while pastoralism appears as a decisive economic lifestyle largely underestimated under the alleged predominance of cereal agriculture. This, in turn, opens new possibilities for the interpretation of the role played by Libyans, Nubians and "Asiatics" in the Nile Valley, not only in the Pastoral Crescent encompassing the Western Delta, the Fayum area and the upper section of Middle Egypt but also in zones like the oasis of the Western Desert, the area between Aswan and – roughly – Thebes, or the Eastern Delta and Wadi Tumilat (Moreno García in press b).

The North-West Nile Delta Survey Project is an excellent example of the potential of such archaeological research. The survey of several areas of the northwest Delta reveals the absence of relevant localities for most of Pharaonic history, to the point that it was not until the 1st millennium BCE that settlements and towns of some importance appear there (Wilson and Grigoropoulos 2009; Wilson 2011; Trampier 2014). Therefore, the Western Delta emerges as a very distinctive area when compared to the eastern half of the Delta, where occupation was denser and more continuous over the millennia. But even in this area the settlement history was far from homogeneous. A dense network of localities flourished along the easternmost branch of the Nile in Early Dynastic times, a process that reached its peak in the final centuries of the 3rd millennium BCE. Afterwards most of them disappeared and the recovery of urban life in this area was a slow and partial process until the 2nd millennium BCE. Not surprisingly, the overall lower density of the Delta favoured cattle raising and foraging activities as well as the foundation of royal agricultural domains and specialized plantations (vineyards, orchards, olive groves). Pastoral populations crossed Lower Egypt and quite probably settled there and interacted both with sedentary and pastoral "Egyptians", but the archaeological identification of their settlements and activities has attracted little attention from Egyptologists. In any case, the possibilities they opened up for trade and pastoral activities were already present in late prehistory, when archaeology reveals that populations from the Western Desert arrived in the Levant, Levantine peoples settled in Lower Egypt, and Libyan products circulated across the Delta and were consumed by the nascent Pharaonic elite. A connected aspect, which still deserves more in-depth analysis, is the role played by hunter-gathering and fishing as alternative ways of life in this area. Sources from all periods evoke in fact the presence in the Delta of peoples that managed to preserve a certain autonomy, from the "northerners" of predynastic and Early Dynastic sources to the *sekhetyw* "countrymen" of Middle Kingdom to the *boukoloi* of Roman times, just to mention only some of them (Moreno García in press b).

Similar patterns are noticeable in the area around Fayum and northern Middle Egypt. Here, the region stretching from Assiut to El-Minya seems to represent the southern "horn" of the Pastoral Crescent. Scarcely populated during most of the 3rd millennium, recent archaeological surveys reveal the predominance of a swamp and marshy environment, especially west of the Nile, thus creating a territory ideal for pastoral activities along the Nile and its western branch, the Bahr Yussef. Bersheh and Sheikh Said emerge as the main poles of human settlement, followed by Assiut, Meir and Beni Hassan at the end of the 3rd millennium. Farther north, the area between El-Minya and Fayum appears as distinctively deprived of any significant town until the middle of the

2nd millennium. In fact, pastoral activities and occasional references to Libyan herders in this area suggest that peoples from the West crossed this area and settled or were occasionally employed as herders. Low-population density, abundant water and grazing land, and easy access to desert tracks towards the Western and Eastern Deserts made this area a crossroads where pharaohs historically concentrated most of their efforts to found agricultural domains of the crown (Moreno García 2007). The end of the 2nd millennium is one of the best-documented periods in this region thanks to documents like papyrus Wilbour. This land record registers thousands of plots in the hands of individuals (about one third of them were military) as well as more than 150 domains held by temples and the crown. Not surprisingly, many private landholdings were concentrated around only a few clusters of settlements, while the rest appear scattered over an extensive area where pasture land was quite abundant. Later on, at the beginning of the 1st millennium, inscriptions from the Fayum prove nevertheless that cattle rearing was still an important activity in this area.

These examples – many more could be added – show the diversity of micro-regions to be found in the Nile Valley, the changes in land use and settlement organization they went through over time and the productive possibilities and lifestyles they offered. Hence cereal cultivation and cattle rearing, especially under the control of the state and institutions like temples, can no longer be considered as inevitable, as the only productive options available to the inhabitants of the Nile Valley. Environmental but also social and political conditions (most notably taxation) determined the final predominance of one or another. Furthermore, local environmental conditions were quite diverse, a fact outlined for example in the so-called geographical processions, in which each province was depicted as formed not only by towns and their hinterland (*w*-"districts") but also by marshy areas (*pehu*). In fact, two additional hydrological features can help us to understand the importance of swamps and residual flooded areas. The first one is the changing watercourse of the Nile. Over the millennia the Nile experienced a gradual shift towards the east in many areas of its valley. Geophysical research in specific zones reveals a complex pattern of a principal and several secondary branches of the Nile producing a landscape dotted with islands, swamps and sandbanks. Their traces have been detected in places like Thebes, Memphis, Hermopolis and Meir, to the point that zones that appear nowadays as floodplain were in the past crossed by the Nile or by some of its local minor branches. In other cases, marshes covered substantial areas that only became floodplain over the centuries (Alleaume 1992; Gillam 2010; Bunbury and Jeffreys 2011).

The second feature is islands. The seasonal floods produced many islands and sandbanks close to the riverbank. Their existence was often ephemeral but

in some cases they consolidated over the years, became covered with vegetation and provided fertile agricultural land. Gradual silting due to sediments carried by the Nile or by nearby wadis ended up connecting the islands to the mainland, thus expanding the floodplain and contributing to the displacement of the Nile towards the east. Hierakonpolis is a perfect example of this process, and the island hieroglyph that designates this locality preserves the memory of its distant origins as a Nile island. The papyrological and epigraphic record evokes such islands as privileged agricultural areas usually under the control of the crown, worked by prisoners of war, criminals, soldiers or just workers forced to carry out their corvée duties there (Moreno García 2013f).

These examples reveal the progress accomplished in the last years in the knowledge of the environmental and hydrological conditions of the Nile Valley. Their contribution to replacing old visions of the Nile Valley as a monotone static agricultural floodplain, where irrigation was controlled by the state, has been crucial. However, the study of the dynamics of settlement and land use has not enjoyed comparable advances. Urban history, for instance, has gradually detached itself from the routine enumeration of temples and cemeteries and focuses more and more on the analysis of city plans, distinctive functional areas and the interaction between cities and their hinterland. Yet such work is only limited to a handful of sites, usually former capital cities (Avaris/Pi-Ramesses, El-Amarna, Memphis) and state-sponsored localities (Illahun, Deir el-Medina). Much less attention has been devoted to provincial sites, despite the brilliant work in progress at Elephantine, Balat or Edfu and the potential still offered by many dozens of tells spread all over Egypt. This explains why hierarchies of settlements, the impact of urban foundation or simply the history of settlement on a regional basis still remain obscure. Only work carried out at predynastic sites like Abydos, Hierakonpolis and even Elephantine reveals the succession of patterns of occupation and abandonment of villages following the growth and decline of neighbouring cities. Recent research on the Ptolemaic impact on sites and regions (most noteworthy Fayum) increasingly provides a more accurate picture about settlement dynamics for later periods.

However, rural centres (villages, hamlets, farmsteads) still remain underrepresented in archaeological research, and their study is usually reduced to lexicographical discussions of single terms that rapidly reveal their limits. Another problem is that urban archaeology has traditionally focused its attention on institutional settlements like “pyramid towns” (occupied by the attendants of kings’ cults), “workers cities” (inhabited by artisans and labourers employed in kings’ works), fortress-towns (like the Middle Kingdom fortresses in Nubia) and capital cities (Amarna and Avaris/Pi-Ramesses being the best known). This means that the very specific characteristics of such settlements

have often been generalized to any urban layout, with heavy implications on social history. The case of Middle Kingdom Illahun is quite revealing. Its houses, planned for housing nuclear families, suggested at first that nuclear families constituted the very basis of Pharaonic social structure. Only later archaeology revealed that subtler changes occurred over time, when walls were removed and the original internal disposition of single houses were modified in order to accommodate extended families. Similar changes are also apparent in other settlements. To put it another way, settlement structures were modified in order to adapt them to the needs and realities of Egyptian families, made up of extensive kin groups (Kóthay 2001). In other cases, houses quite probably belonging to wealthy peasants have been discovered in Lower Egypt, and they open up the possibility of detecting peasant stratification through architecture. Neighbourhoods are also evoked in 1st millennium BCE literary texts, as well as the dense network of social obligations (from patronage to dominance) built around them (Agut-Labordère 2011). The growing number of late 1st millennium BCE tower-houses discovered in Lower Egypt and the Fayum provides another glimpse into urban and rural social stratification. Formerly interpreted as tombs, forts or magazines, they appear instead as true dwellings forming sometimes neighbourhoods (Marouard 2012). Rural villa and towers (*swnw*, *bekhen*, etc.) are sometimes evoked in administrative and literary texts, together with "houses", walled plantations and other types of dwellings. The social implications of their nature, extent, spatial distribution and hierarchy are inseparable from crucial aspects like landscape organization, fiscal geography (warehouses, production centres, work camps, threshing floors, etc.) and, of course, of the overall productive activities that supported the whole structure, including the irrigation network, communications, the local availability of firewood and pasture land, etc. Local and regional diversity, as well as the modalities of changes over time, could provide crucial information about social and economic dynamics still to be exploited.

Mobile populations: the other dwellers of the Nile Valley

Given the regional variability in environmental conditions, population density and local resources just evoked, cereal cultivation appears not as an unavoidable economic activity but just as one of several productive possibilities open to ancient Egyptians. Furthermore, in scarcely populated areas, where settlements were rare and where woodland and grazing land bordered extensive marshes

and swamps, boundaries can hardly be conceived as clear dividing lines between political entities, populations and lifestyles but, quite the contrary, as porous zones crossed by mobile populations. Recent archaeological research reveals in fact that mobile populations from the Levant, Libya, the Eastern Desert and Nubia habitually crossed the Egyptian borders and settled within Egypt, in sharp contrast with an official ideology in which foreigners appear only as intruders to be repelled.

Predynastic localities in Lower Egypt show the traces of Levantine presence, but, on the other side, Egyptian herders also lived in southern Palestine among Levantine agriculturalists (Nicolle 2009: 38–40). It also appears that people from the Western Desert crossed the Delta and even reached Ashkelon. At this early stage of Egyptian history, there are no signs of conflict. That populations crossed Lower Egypt and had economic interactions is quite apparent from evidence recovered at localities like Tell el-Farkha. Here locally produced cereals and pork meat were exported to the southern Levant, a region where localities with abundant traces of Egyptian presence and culture have been found (Czarnowicz 2011). Formerly interpreted as "colonies", they probably represent in fact nodal points in trade routes through which copper and valuable local produce (wine, olive oil, resins) were imported into Egypt. The disappearance of such centres, as well as the decline of Tell el-Farkha, coincides with the consolidation of the united monarchy in the Nile Valley and, quite probably, with the capture and centralization of formerly autonomous exchange networks (Nicolle 2009). It would be misleading, however, to consider that Eastern Lower Egypt became closed to Levantine populations during the 3rd millennium. The discovery of a temple with Levantine plan at Tell Ibrahim Awad, in the Eastern Delta, suggests that a substantial population of foreigners lived there (Bietak 2003). Later on, at the end of the 3rd millennium, hundreds of settlements flourished in the Sinai and southern Levant, probably occupied by pastoral populations trading copper from southern Jordan into Egypt (Jirásková 2011). Their funerary tumuli even appear in the Eastern Delta, where occasional epigraphic evidence suggests the presence of populations who lived in round settlements like their contemporaries in southern Levant. Also noteworthy is the fact that in this same area lived autonomous populations, the *sekhetyw* "countrymen", whose mobile lifestyle made them the object of a particular administrative attention by early 2nd millennium pharaohs, when Levantine populations gradually settled there, especially at Avaris/Tell el-Dabʿa and they became gradually detached from the Egyptian monarchy at the end of the Middle Kingdom (Moreno García in press b).

A similar pattern characterized the interactions between Eastern Desert peoples and the Nile Valley. In despite of the modest attention archaeology

has paid to them, it appears that populations like the Medjay or the Pan-Grave can no longer be considered as marginal groups of herders living at the edge of Egyptian society. The analysis of predynastic petroglyphs reveals that the Eastern Desert around Edfu and Elephantine was crossed by peoples who left abundant representations of boats. Quite surprisingly, they are more abundant than at Wadi Hammamat, the shorter path between the Nile Valley and the Red Sea. One can wonder if such populations were not in fact involved in exchange activities as middlemen, transporters, even itinerant traders. Later on, in Middle Kingdom times, many Pan-Grave cemeteries appear in the Nile Valley, in what is now considered evidence of the movement of at least some sections of Pan-Grave society into the Nile Valley as itinerant traders with their packs of asses (Näser 2012).

Such is the impression that also emerges from the latest archaeological discoveries in Nubia and southern Egypt. In fact, Nubians were not confined within the narrow limits of a section of the Nile Valley but, since predynastic times, they spread over the neighbouring deserts, crossed southern Egypt and settled and were buried at several localities between Elephantine and the area around Hierakonpolis and Armant (Friedman 1992, 1999 and 2001; Giuliani 2006; Raue 2008; Gatto 2009). The discovery of Nubian material at the Middle Kingdom Red Sea port of Mersa/Wadi Gawassis, east from Coptos, confirms their participation in trade activities, either on their own or as partners or members of Egyptian expeditions (Manzo 2012). In this respect, the end of the 3rd millennium and the first centuries of the 2nd millennium saw the consolidation of Nubia as a major crossroads of international trade routes. On the one hand, Nubian Kerma material appears in the Eastern Desert in what seems a terrestrial route connecting Kerma with Punt and the Red Sea. On the other hand, finds of a variety of Asiatic millet (*Panicum miliaceum*) at Ukma (close to Kerma, in Nubia) open the question about the extent of the contacts in which Nubia was involved (Boivin and Fuller 2009; Fuller et al. 2011). Finally, gold was exploited on a seasonal basis by local populations in the area of the fourth cataract and later exported towards Kerma. The astonishing elaborate and massive brick architecture discovered at Kerma itself gives an impressive glimpse into a political power that competed with Egypt for the control of important resources (Bonnet 2012). As proof, see the discovery of an inscription at Elkab stating that a coalition of Nubian, Puntite, Medjay and oasis tribes attacked this locality during the Second Intermediate Period (Davies 2003). Once again, the rhetoric of Egyptian inscriptions about borders as impermeable boundaries deserves careful qualification.

The same considerations concern the relations between Libyans and Egyptians. The rare combination of fresh archaeozoological, paleo-botanical

and epigraphic data about the locality of Kom el-Hisn, on the central western border of the Delta, raises many questions about the nature of Libyan and Egyptian interaction in the 3rd millennium BCE, with important consequences for later periods (Moreno García in press b). Kom el-Hisn was a locality specialized in cattle, sheep and goat rearing, where grazing land was abundant (Moens and Wetterstrom 1988; Redding 2014). However, traces of cattle consumption are relatively rare, while pig, sheep, goats and fish constituted the main sources of animal proteins for the local population. A selective pattern of meat consumption thus emerges, suggesting that Kom el-Hisn was a centre specialized in cattle raising where select parts of the herds were removed by an authority (Redding 2014).

Epigraphy confirms this picture. About a dozen overseers of Kom el-Hisn were recorded in monuments from the Old Kingdom (ca. 2686–2125 BCE), thus making this locality a uniquely documented case in Lower Egypt (Moreno García in press b). All of them bore important court and administrative titles and were buried around the capital, Memphis, and not at Kom el-Hisn itself. This locality appears then to have enjoyed a very special position in the economic and administrative organization of the kingdom. However, and contrary to what could be expected, the activities of these overseers mainly involved control over grazing land, provision of the king's table, management of local natural resources and supervising access to the (Western) desert, and only very rarely cattle management. Control over grazing land was therefore their main concern, and the fact that at least some of them also policed the neighbouring desert areas suggests that they kept a close eye on western populations. As no fortress is attested in Western Delta, it seems that no menace was expected from Libya. Finally, the chronological distribution of the overseers of Kom el-Hisn is quite uneven, with a clear tendency to cluster around three periods: the early Fourth Dynasty (around 2600 BCE), the reigns of Sahure to Nyuserre (2487–2421 BCE), and the beginning of the Sixth Dynasty (2345–2287 BCE). The first two clusters witnessed military campaigns against Libyans followed by the capture of cattle and prisoners, as if the appointment of overseers at Kom el-Hisn was the immediate outcome of a "Libyan campaign". However, no such conflict accompanied the advent of the Sixth Dynasty. To sum up, Kom el-Hisn emerges as a Pharaonic checkpoint for pastoral populations, granting access to grazing land in the Delta and controlling the circulation of people and animals through western Lower Egypt, and even the Fayum, a vast area where extensive cattle raising was a common practice. Such arrangements could have proved to be mutually convenient for Libyan herders and Egyptian administrators, thus resulting in collaboration and not in conflict, only rarely disturbed by clashes whose very nature remains obscure (Moreno García in press b).

To complete this picture, it would be too simplistic to assume that Libyans, Nubians, Asiatics and peoples from the deserts were pastoral intruders into an otherwise agricultural and sedentary world. Quite the contrary, micro-regions within Egypt provided ideal environmental conditions for economic activities not necessarily based on agriculture. One of the oldest extant archives, the papyri of Gebelein, lists the names of dozens of inhabitants of several villages around this locality south of Thebes. All of them were classified according to their occupations from a fiscal point of view. Thus, for instance, the majority of them were not considered as "peasants" but as "serfs of the king". But many others figure as "hunters", "honey gatherers", even as "nomads" (lit. "those upon the sand"). Thus many members of these small communities were occupied in the exploitation of wild resources. Later on, towards the end of the 3rd millennium, several inscriptions from Upper Egypt reveal that extensive cattle rearing in a non-institutional context, fowling and fishing were considered "abnormal" ways of life that required the intervention of authorities in order to settle these populations and raise cattle within an institutional framework. Contemporary inscriptions mention dignitaries in charge of fowlers and hunters at Dendera or Thinis, close then to important routes leading into the deserts. Under these conditions, the very concept of porous border aptly evokes that Egyptians and "foreigners" shared similar lifestyles in areas well suited for their mobile productive activities, especially in Middle Egypt and the Delta, two regions with a long tradition of autonomous populations whose interaction with the Egyptian administration oscillated between collaboration and conflict. Like their southern Mesopotamian counterparts, they provided sedentary populations and institutions with indispensable goods, from hides and meat to fish, salt, firewood, honey, charcoal and aromatic and medicinal plants (Moreno García 2010b).

Agriculture/agricultures in ancient Egypt

Three major developments have recently contributed to a renewed interest and a re-evaluation of the economic base of Pharaonic Egypt. Although it is still the case that economic history remains an underrated field of research within Egyptology, as Janssen put it nearly four decades ago, any serious attempt to understand the dynamics of Pharaonic history inevitably passes through a better understanding of the economic structure of the country and its changes over time. That is why an increasing wave of economic studies in Egyptology has emerged during the last years (Warburton 2000; Fitzenreiter 2004; Cooney 2007; Zingarelli 2010; Papazian 2012; Warden 2014; Moreno García 2014a), including the organization of several

conferences on the topic (Moreno García 2006; Fitzenreiter 2007; Hudecz and Petrik 2010). Quite probably this interest is inseparable from the current flowering of ancient economic history and comparative research on ancient states. Moreover, the publication of new sets of documents of, broadly speaking, economic and administrative nature has inspired discussion on topics like agriculture, prices, circulation of goods, landholding or tribute (Moreno García 2014a). In some cases, well-known documents have benefited from a full exploitation of their economic potential thanks to recent thorough analyses (Allen 2002). Finally, recent re-evaluations of the very foundations of Egyptian agriculture are more and more attentive to its social organization (Eyre 1994, 1999 and 2004; Manning 2003; Monson 2012; Moreno García 2006 and 2014b). As a consequence, a gradual distinction emerges between different types of agriculture, not only based on chronological, paleo-botanical and regional criteria (like the introduction of new techniques and plants) but also on the social and fiscal conditions underlying agricultural choices, landscape management, work organization and the circulation of produce.

For all these reasons, Pharaonic agriculture appears as a far more complex issue than its traditional interpretation as a fundamentally uniform, conservative and centralized set of practices (Eyre 2004; Moreno García 2006: 11–78 and 2014b). A basic distinction can be made between institutional and household agriculture. The first corresponds to the cultivation of vast tracts of land belonging to the crown, to temples or to domains held by courtiers and dignitaries in exchange for their services to the king. Extensive cereal cultivation and cattle rearing, as well as the use of ploughs and draught animals, imply the availability of enough manpower and animals, with yields that were probably lower than in an intensive regime. As for domestic agriculture, the very particularities of the flooded soil of the Nile Valley made the use of ploughs unnecessary; in any case ordinary peasants could hardly afford them, especially considering that keeping draught animals was expensive. Domestic agriculture was probably centred on the intensive cultivation of small plots of land (about 1.5 ha would suffice to nourish a nuclear family) and on pig rearing. The improvement in artificial irrigation around the middle of the 2nd millennium BCE, with the introduction of the *shaduf*, enabled well-off Egyptians to grow not just staples but lucrative crops like dates, fruit, flowers, and vegetables on small plots, quite probably intended for urban residents. Epigraphic and papyrological evidence from this period onwards records indeed small tracts of land provided with wells and cisterns in the hands of well-off Egyptians and, in some cases, purchase strategies sought to control the plots surrounding such wells. Iconography and archaeology reveal in fact that vineyards, fruit trees and ponds were common in rich residences (Moreno García 2006 and 2014b).

Not only written sources provide new evidence for the analysis of agricultural practices. The archaeology of production is also making important contributions to the understanding of agricultural production as well as of transformation, transport and storage methods. Given the scarcity of research on peasant habitats and production areas, most of the results correspond to activities carried out in an institutional setting. Thus, for instance, the discovery of the Workers' City at Giza has revealed huge areas devoted to the transformation and preparation of food for the workers employed in the king's architectural projects, including a corral where cattle was stocked and areas devoted to the preparation of animal by-products (fat, hides, etc.: Redding 2011; Yeomans 2011). Zooarchaeology also enables us to detect patterns of animal breeding, butchery and consumption, as at Old Kingdom Balat (Pantalacci and Lesur 2012) or at the Middle Kingdom temple of Senwosret III at Abydos (Wegner 2000; Rossel 2004). A Third–Fourth dynasty complex found at Elkab consisted of storage facilities, silos, and sites where agricultural produce was transformed (Hendrickx and Eyckerman 2009); moreover, many seals recovered at Elkab reveal the activities of several high officials also known from seals unearthed at Beit Khallaf, Abydos, Elephantine, and El-Kubanieh, who served under kings Khasekhemwy and Djoser and who were mainly involved in the management of ploughs and granaries. The geographical scope of their activities and the nature of their responsibilities confirm the role played by the crown in the organization of networks of agricultural, storage, transformation, and supply centres, as well as in the management and control of the resources of the kingdom (Regulski 2009). One such centre, dating to the Fourth Dynasty and specialized in the production of stone vessels, has been discovered at Bersheh and the ceramic and organic evidence recovered there reveals that the workforce was supplied by the administration (Vereecken 2011). The site of 'Ain el-Gazzareen at the oasis of Dakhla was a butchery and bread production centre, probably related to the provision of overland caravans going westward into the desert; however, the absence of administrative or written evidence suggests that this station was not subject to the control of the Pharaonic administration (Pettman, Thanheiser and Churcher 2013). Urban centres also provide evidence for the large-scale storage and processing of cereals, as in the case of Edfu. Late Sixth Dynasty underground silos associated with domestic units coexisted with an official building with numerous traces of metallurgic activity, a large quantity of bread moulds and beer jars. Later on, a large granary court with 18 silos dating to the Second Intermediate Period was part of an administrative quarter and constituted the major grain reserve of the town (Moeller 2010). As for flax production and its role in textile manufacture, in a fundamental study Kemp intelligently explored the perspectives opened by experimental archaeology (Kemp and Vogelsang-Eastwood 2001).

The fiscal geography built up on agricultural activities still awaits more in-depth research, but important first steps have already been taken. Threshing-floors bordering the Nile, for instance, were regularly visited by the flotillas sent by the landholding institutions in order to collect taxes and rent (Janssen 2004), while in other cases mooring-posts served the same purpose. In general, focal points conceived to organize and collect agricultural revenue from the fields under their control dotted the Egyptian countryside. They formed networks, a sort of itinerary frequented by expeditions, messengers, agents of the king and soldiers, where food and provisions were available for them. Only very rarely, however, did administrative documents describing their activities survive, as in Middle Kingdom Elephantine, where a set of inscribed bowls records the delivery of different kinds of goods to the personnel serving an institution (Andrássy 2012). Because of these constraints, titles provide essential information about some of the institutions that formed the links of such networks. Thus, during the early Old Kingdom, *swnw*-towers were associated with a category of agricultural workers at very specific locations in Egypt, usually at the starting points of caravan trails leading into the Western Desert. Later on, during the last centuries of the 3rd millennium, other agricultural centres of the crown provided with fields (the *hwt*) were attested in almost every province. In fact, *hwt* and temples were then the main components of such networks. The disappearance of the *hwt* at the beginning of the 2nd millennium was concomitant with the development of the *kheneret*, a kind of work camp, fortified enclosure and administrative centre. Finally, from the middle of the 2nd millennium on, temples and royal granaries were the main institutions related to the collection of agricultural revenue. This very general outline of the fiscal geography of Egypt still needs much more qualification; the contribution of archaeology and the discovery of administrative documents will be crucial in this respect (Moreno García 2007 and 2014b: 61–72).

A growing body of evidence also reveals that the very concept of peasantry encompasses in fact a diversity of categories and social statuses, from small peasants to cultivators at the service of institutions and forced to till standard domains; from lessors to poor labourers forced to sell themselves to powerful patrons; from forced workers assigned to agricultural tasks to well-off peasants. Far from the image of the *fellah* as the undifferentiated quintessential embodiment of Egyptian rural workforce, the peasantry was quite diversified and a special category of cultivators emerges from recent research, that of rural *entrepreneurs*, whose role was crucial in the exploitation of the fields belonging to institutions like temples, high dignitaries and the crown itself.

In fact, New Kingdom documents like the Wilbour papyrus and others reveal the existence of individuals labelled as *ihuty*, but whose interests and responsibilities fall quite apart from those of ordinary *ihuty*-cultivators. Not only did they

till extensive agricultural domains and deliver huge amounts of grain but they also appear as mediators between the owner institution and its overseers. The careful re-examination of contemporary administrative documents sheds new light on this particular category of agricultural managers (Haring 2000). Moreover, they also appear as prominent members of their communities, thus enjoying distinctive marks of social status like any other member of the local elite, from temple landholdings like those in the hands of officials and priests to prestige items like statues and inscribed objects (Moreno García 2010a: 321–51). In fact, temples appear as crucially indispensable institutions for social elevation, and sources of the early 1st millennium evoke in a vivid way the struggle of some *ihuty*-cultivators to become priests at Elephantine. The wealth of some farmers is also expressed in private documents, like a late 2nd millennium letter from Elephantine stating that several *nemeh*-cultivators paid their taxes to the treasury in gold. Inversely, the exercise of priestly and ritual services opened the way to new sources of income for their beneficiaries, as several middle 1st millennium documents show. The archives of a very particular category of priests in charge of the cult of the dead, the so-called *choachytes*, reveal the extent of their interests. Not only did they receive a fee for the rituals they carried out for each of the mummies under their care, but they also rented land from temples, acquired slaves and cattle and purchased building land, among other activities. Their social position was thus comparable with that of a small gentry, well connected to temples and to people of a certain local importance, like priests and scribes (Donker van Heel 2012 and 2014). Sometimes literary texts echoed their status. The protagonist of a demotic literary text was a local potentate (lit. a "great man") who was also a priest in the local temple, a profitable source of income, as he obtained part of the agricultural income of the sanctuary because of his position as priest and, in addition, he also exploited some fields of the temple as a cultivator in exchange for a part of the harvest; the considerable wealth thus amassed allowed him to pay wages to the personnel of the temple, who were thus considered his clients (the text states that he had "acquired" them) and he could even marry his sons and daughters to priests and potentates (lit. "great men") of another town (Tait 2008–2009: 115–24).

Different strategies revolved around the use of institutional land by the highest elite of the kingdom, formed by dignitaries, courtiers and members of the royal family. Their impact on the organization of agricultural activities also evolved over time depending on political factors and the local balance of power between competing sectors of the elite. Inscriptions from all periods show how royal land donations were instrumental in rewarding high dignitaries and in tying their interests to those of the crown. Temples were crucial instruments in such policy as they served two goals: on the one hand, they served to organize

agricultural production and tax revenue in a given area and to put into production fallow land; on the other hand, they enabled local authorities to become integrated within the structure of the royal administration. New Kingdom royal inscriptions, for instance, often celebrate the foundation of a new temple by the king and the recruitment of cult personnel among the local nobility. The extent of such integration can be measured thanks to documents like the Wilbour papyrus, as it shows that thousands of plots granted to a low elite made up of priests, military personnel, "ladies" and well-off peasants were scattered over a limited area in Middle Egypt (Moreno García 2014b: 72–74).

However, this policy was in no way a unidirectional one. Beneficiaries of such donations also followed their own strategies and used institutional land to their own advantage (Moreno García 2013e and 2014b: 72–74). First millennium BCE "donation stelae" provide an excellent case in point (Meeks 1979 and 2009). Usually regarded as proof of genuine religious piety, their chronological and geographical distribution shed some light on the strategies at stake. Quite rare until the end of the 21st Dynasty, when they were only attested in Upper Egypt and Nubia, from the beginning of the 22nd Dynasty on, when the monarchy collapsed and multiple political powers emerged in the north, their number increased dramatically, but they were then almost exclusively documented in Lower Egypt and the Fayum area. To put it another way, they were very rare where and when a solid institutional power prevailed (i.e., the New Kingdom monarchy or the priestly Domain of Amun in southern Egypt) and, quite significantly, they became abundant in areas and periods dominated by political uncertainty and division (with the exception of the Saite Period), when their main beneficiaries were temples. In Upper Egypt, the institutional stability procured by the priesthood of Amun at Thebes explains why they remained almost virtually absent. However, in Lower Egypt, political unrest and division were accompanied by the rapid rise and decline of local powers, thus transforming the temples into foci of economic wealth, institutional stability and permanence as well as guarantors of the goods transferred to their domains. Even the petty princes of the Delta endowed temples with huge amounts of land with the ultimate goal of consolidating their own chiefdoms (nearly 2,500 ha in one case: Perdu 2004: 98–99 and 102–03). Temples also probably became centres of patronage networks and helped to preserve the patrimonies of the regional elite (Moreno García 2013d and 2013e). However, the supposed inalienable nature of the fields donated was more ideal than real: land granted to a dignitary could subsequently revert to a temple, the same field could be assigned successively to two different cults, and former beneficiaries of an endowment could be deprived of it to the benefit of a new owner. Quite significantly, the arrival of the Persian conquerors put an end to the practice

of private donations of land to the temples, when the agents of the king began interfering with the appointment of priests.

Trade and exchange: not everything is institutional

Egyptology has traditionally considered foreign trade as a virtual monopoly of the state, organized through occasional expeditions sent by the pharaohs in quest of precious and prestigious items: gold, incense, timber, ivory, exotic hides, etc. Certainly, in the absence of administrative sources, royal inscriptions and diplomatic correspondence (like the famous Amarna letters) take a disproportionate importance in the evaluation of foreign trade. Two additional regrettable consequences are the emphasis put on precious items, as if they represented the bulk of goods traded, and the neglect of non-institutional actors and networks and low-value commodities. However, occasional discoveries like the Uluburun shipwreck (SW Turkey, around the late fourteenth century BCE) reveal a different story, as the cargo consisted basically of raw copper ingots, resin and glass ingots. In other words, it consisted of ordinary perishable and transformable materials, the kind of goods that, like textiles and foodstuff, leaves few recognizable traces about their provenance or their existence. As for the people involved in this maritime expedition, it could be due to the initiative of private merchants. This single example represents a salutary warning against the "all-institutional" perspective so common in Egyptology. It also shows the highly selective nature of official sources, where exchanges are quite often disguised as diplomatic gifts, tribute or voluntary deliveries. Given the scarcity of written sources, recent developments in archaeological research help defy this extreme and reductive version of foreign commercial contacts and suggest a rather more complex setting (Moreno García 2014a: 22–26).

The excavations at Avaris/Per-Ramesses (Tell el-Dab'a), for instance, show the huge volume of trade at this locality during the Hyksos period. It has been estimated that at least two million Canaanite amphorae arrived at the city during a period of about 250 years, together with many other commodities, while the harbour could house as many as 300 ships. Later on, during the Ramesside period, it became one of the main cities of Egypt, with temples, palaces, residential and craft areas as well as several harbours (Bietak and Forstner-Müller 2011). It is quite possible that future research will identify areas occupied by warehouses, shops/markets and traders' residencies. In a different geographical context, Holladay has suggested that Egyptian-type houses in the Levant

were perhaps occupied by Egyptian traders established there. Similar "commercial diasporas" are well known in the ancient Near East, the Assyrian colony at Kanesh, in Anatolia, being the best documented (Holladay 2001). Even trade activities at ports like Middle Kingdom Mersa/Wadi Gawassis, on the shore of the Red Sea, were probably more diversified than previously thought. The recent discovery of Canaanite, Cretan, Yemeni and Eritrean wares, as well as inscriptions mentioning Punt, reveals the geographical scope of the goods traded through this harbour that connected Egypt and Punt. Abundant epigraphic evidence, both at Mersa/Wadi Gawassis and elsewhere, reveals that the kings usually organized the expeditions. However, the discovery of Nubian pottery at this site also suggests that Nubians participated in this exchange, and not necessarily in the service of the kings. In fact, Puntite traders also arrived in Egypt with their products and even queen Hatshepsut herself boasted of having obtained incense from Punt thanks to the great expedition she organized, while her ancestors were forced to pay and rely on a multitude of middlemen (Bradbury 1996). A trade station operated at the oasis of Dakhla from 1700 BCE on, apparently separate from any state initiative (Marchand and Soukiassian 2010), while Libyan peoples traded with Levantine sailors around Mersa Matruh in New Kingdom times (White 2002: 47–53 and 168–74).

Archaeology not only reveals the existence of regular trade circuits focused on nodal facilities like cities and harbours, but it also shows that exchanges over great distances were sometimes due to the initiative of diverse mobile populations, from fishermen, seamen, and herders to itinerant traders and migrants. Paleo-botanical and archaeozoological research reveals that plants and animals circulated at least since the 3rd millennium BCE over a vast area covering the northern Indian Ocean, from East Africa to India and China. No state sponsored this traffic, only a multitude of protagonists through informal circuits. This explains the discovery of a variety of millet (*Panicum miliaceum*) at Ukma (close to Kerma, in Nubia), a plant unknown in Mesopotamia, the Levant and Egypt but found in China and, from 2000 BC, also in the Indus Valley and southern Arabia, and it confirms the maritime diffusion of crops and animals between Africa and India (Boivin and Fuller 2009; Fuller, Boivin, Hoogervorst and Allaby 2011). Other circuits have become better known in recent years, like the "bitumen routes" connecting northern Mesopotamia to the Persian Gulf and northeastern Arabia, or the "tin route" extending from Central Asia to Anatolia.

The importance of such non-institutional actors finds further support at the very core of the agriculturalist and urbanized Near East. While the interest in Late Bronze Age trade has been traditionally focused on exchanges between the great powers of this period (Liverani 1990), archaeologists are gradually discovering a parallel world made up of a modest demand, itinerant traders, ordinary

goods and the gradual development of a widespread iron metallurgy escaping the control of the palatial powers, in a more general context of the massive recycling of metals from the Aegean to Egypt. These networks of exchange managed to circumvent the routes and facilities promoted by the great powers and to consolidate alternative circuits, thus leading to the breakdown of palatial trade and the final collapse of the principal monarchies of the late 2nd millennium (Sherratt 2001, 2003 and 2012). The apparent paradox of this model is that Pharaonic Egypt, one of the allegedly most centralized, bureaucratized and autarchic states of its era, constitutes an exception and survived despite the loss of its imperial conquests in Nubia and the Levant and the revenue obtained from them (Liverani 1997). In other words, its supposedly heavy and hardly adaptable economic structures continued somehow to exist. In fact, textual references reveal that precious metals circulated widely in Ramesside Egypt, including silver, imported from abroad. This probably means that the Egyptian participation in international exchange networks was greater than previously thought and that the country was able to adapt itself to the new conditions. The famous *Tale of Wenamun* tells that Egyptian exports to the Levant consisted mostly of humble commodities, like fish, hides, linen cloths, papyrus and natron at the very end of the 2nd millennium, when Tanis replaced Avaris/Per-Ramesses as an active harbour frequented by the fleets of institutions but also of private merchants. That was also a period when Egyptian semi-luxury goods found a broad diffusion in the Aegean and the Levant (Mumford 2007: 259; Moreno García 2014a: 22–26).

One final point should be also addressed: what was the role and place of traders in Egyptian society? Once again, the scarce sources may suggest some paths for future research. The fact that traders remain virtually invisible in Pharaonic monuments is noteworthy: almost no tomb, stela, inscribed statue, etc., of their own is known, just some items of funerary equipment like the *Book of the Dead*. However, overseers of traders are well known in Egyptian monuments, but they were usually officials acting as mediators between institutions (like temples) and traders. It can thus be inferred that traders were not part of the core elite of the kingdom and that, consequently, they rarely had access to the kind of prestigious monuments and commodities usually reserved for members of the clergy, the administration and the court. The absence of archives of their own and the fact that commercial neighbourhoods and facilities still remain elusive in the urban landscape further obscures the analysis of their activities, wealth, and social role. Only some isolated pieces of evidence suggest an importance hardly detectable through official sources. On the one hand, prince Simontu, son of Ramesses II, married the daughter of a Syrian shipowner. On the other hand, the son of a merchant encountered the hostile reactions of

the clergy of Elephantine when he tried to become a member of the local priesthood. Finally, a stela from the first half of the 1st millennium records the purchase of a tomb by a priest; it was adjacent to the tombs of two traders. Merchants were thus connected to court circles and the local elite but they were not considered as members of the highest and more prestigious sectors of Egyptian society. Their role was crucial as mediators for the commercial operations of temples, institutions and well-off Egyptians, however, while literary texts mention their activities up and down the Nile, lending money to peasants, being involved in traffic between cities, carrying the agricultural production of rich landowners into the Levant, and operating with copper and precious metals for the king. In more dubious contexts, their contribution was essential in order to "launder" gold and silver stolen from temples and royal tombs during the late 2nd millennium. Their almost complete documentary obscurity is thus a very selective one, and it is quite possible that further research beyond temples and tombs, in urban contexts, will cast some light on their activities, networks, residence and values (Moreno García 2014a: 19–26). It is even conceivable that people represented as priests in statues and stelae only emphasized some of the activities they exercised, the most prestigious ones, while the rest of their occupations (like trade) remained discreetly concealed. The nature and limits of this (very selective) available evidence is a good reminder that crucial social sectors still remain poorly documented in despite of their importance.

Beyond the official world: "invisible" authorities and elites

The case of traders and wealthy peasants is just the tip of the iceberg. In fact, recent research is more and more aware of the fact that the bulk of the documentary and archaeological evidence at our disposal only concerns a slight segment of Egyptian society. Even entire sectors of the ruling elite are almost invisible because they were not part of the administration and their access to high-quality items produced in palatial workshops, from inscribed stelae and statues to decorated tombs, was an exception, not the rule thus making their archaeological identification difficult. Furthermore, in an overwhelming illiterate rural world, they probably had little need to produce written documents, especially if the services of a scribe or a learned priest were locally available. Under these conditions, archaeology and occasional textual references may cast some light on these elusive members of the elite, like rural and provincial potentates, village chiefs, heads of extensive patronage networks, well-off individuals, etc. Their role was

nevertheless fundamental as they enabled authority to circulate effectively between upper and lower social strata and between the court of the kingdom and the provinces. In fact, the protection dispensed by powerful men and patrons was frequently invoked in literary texts as a crucial means for solving conflicts, even when people had legal recourse (Moreno García 2013b).

Patronage thus appears as a basic pillar of Egyptian society. It represented a fundamental instrument of social influence for potentates, while providing some measure of protection and access to authority for common people. Egyptian sources reveal, for instance, that the composition of well-off households included not only people linked together by blood relations but also other persons defined as co-residents, serfs, clients, "friends", and dependants, all under the authority of the chief of the household. The correspondence of Heqanakht, a moderately well-off early Middle Kingdom official, is a good example of one such household. It was made up of 18 people, including his mother, his second wife, his son, two daughters, his older aunt or daughter, his youngest brother, his foreman (and this man's dependants), three cultivators and three female servants (Allen 2002: 116–17). His letters and some accounts from his archive also record 28 men with whom Heqanakht had financial dealings. The most prestigious were three prosperous landowners and officials like Heqanakht himself, while the other 25 (also neighbours in some cases) owed him barley and emmer, including a "mayor" or "governor of a *hwt*". Thus, the social network built around Heqanakht included people from different social environments (from higher, equal and lower strata). In other cases, the geographical provenance of teams of workers was indicated either by the name of the locality from which they came or by the name of the official or potentate in charge of a specific area, as if his name had some kind of toponymic connotation, like the teams coming from the *remenyt* "domains" or from the fields of some potentates. Even more extraordinary is the case of the officials designated as *bw* "place", whose names were followed by the determinative of a town so as to express the geographical provenance of certain groups of workers. These rare insights into local social conditions reveal that prominent dignitaries but also local potentates with no administrative titles were responsible for the delivery of workers; they also show that the workforce thus mobilized depended in some way on its "patrons", and that such "patrons" were recognized as heads of the districts where they lived. The close relationship thus established between patron and client was often formalized through the use of kin terms, as in the case of Old Kingdom *sen-djet* "brother of the body", Middle Kingdom *sa* "son" or first millennium *sheri* "son" (Moreno García 2013b and 2013c: 88–91). Finally, the social position of local potentates was recognized through the use of significant epithets, like "great man, man of importance", "powerful one", *wr/aa* "great one", even *hery-tep aa* "great chief", like powerful Ramesside Wenennefer,

who proudly boasted about being "a priest, skilled in his duties, a great magnate (*hery-tep aa*) in Abydos".

Village chiefs and mayors (*heqa nwt, haty-a*) also enjoyed real local authority, and their potential leadership was especially acknowledged in periods of trouble, as a passage of papyrus Harris I evokes referring to the anarchy prevailing at the end of the 19th dynasty: *"the land of Egypt was in the hands of chiefs* (*wrw*) *and of rulers of towns* (*heqa nwt*)*"* (Grandet 1994: 335). The precedents might be traced back to late Old Kingdom and First Intermediate Period inscriptions, when governors of villages (*heqa nwt*) and "chiefs" (*hery-tep*) are mentioned in enthusiastic terms, their role as mediators in the administration of temple land recorded in royal decrees, and priests and scribes proudly proclaimed that they worked for simple village governors (*heqa*), chiefs (*hery-tep*) and administrators. Middle and New Kingdom inscriptions confirm that they collected taxes for their superiors, provided royal agents with supplies and manpower and cultivated the fields of the pharaoh (Moreno García 2013b and 2013c: 88–91).

Finally, wealthy peasants and commoners remain rather elusive in the archaeological record, but increasing evidence points to the existence of prosperous social sectors whose activities were not primarily related to institutions. In some cases, they have been labelled "middle class" to describe their comfortable condition and their display of symbols of status (especially in the funerary sphere) in spite of the fact that they were not holders of administrative, courtly, or priestly titles (Seidlmayer 2003; Richards 2005 and 2006; Cooney 2007; Woda 2007). In other cases, the architecture, dimensions and equipment of their houses, like silos, domestic furniture and other storage facilities, reveal their comfortable status (Adams 2007; Wilson 2011; Marouard 2012). Only future archaeological research in urban and rural habitats will produce further evidence about the wealth, culture and social organization of people whose important social status is hardly evoked in official sources (Agut-Labordère 2011).

State theory: towards a model of the Pharaonic monarchy

A final point to be dealt with concerns the very articulation of economy, society and culture through political action in order to produce a model of the Pharaonic state. Historical thinking about this topic has been surprisingly rare and the impact on Egyptology of comparative research about ancient states has been marginal. Two possible reasons might be invoked. On the one hand, the simplistic assumption that the Pharaonic monarchy was an absolutist

bureaucratic monarchy still pervades Egyptology, as if further research about how power originated and reproduced itself had little to add to a supposedly solid narrative. On the other hand, the isolation of Egyptology from the social sciences makes it difficult to incorporate concepts, methods and problems common in other fields of research (Yoffee 2005; Routledge 2014). The perverse consequence is that Egyptological contributions to discussions on these topics are quite often banal and, as a consequence, ancient Egypt usually plays a marginal role in comparative research on ancient states (Moreno García 2009 and in press a).

Some recent initiatives stand against this frustrating background, sometimes from an archaeological and anthropological point of view, in other cases from the historical perspective of tributary states (Baines and Yoffee 1998; Richards and van Buren 2000; Trigger 2003; Moreno García 2010a). Crucial elements are the organization of production, the circulation of goods, the forms of accumulation and display of wealth and the role played (if any) by central powers, especially in irrigation, foreign trade and extensive farming. A gradual shift from centralization to an emphasis on more autonomous ways of economic organization becomes apparent in recent work, where mobile populations, private entrepreneurship and autonomous trade networks help balance former interpretations mainly based on institutional archives. Another important element is how elites arose, reproduced themselves and contributed to the stability of ancient monarchies. Hence, the posited absolutism of ancient Egypt gives way to more balanced interpretations, where elites are conceived as a quite diverse social group, with divergent interests and whose integration into the monarchy depended on negotiation, politics and alliances with the royal family. The cultural and symbolic consequences of such a changing balance of power may be observed in arts, literature, religion, and in what might be considered "self-consciousness" as expressed in peculiar compositions like "autobiographies" and litanies. Inversely, the instruments for state action appear more dependent on a delicate equilibrium between different powers, institutions and interests (thus enabling the king to act as mediator) than on an alleged unrivalled royal authority (Moreno García 2013a and 2013b). Future research should still explore these new paths of research where politics played a crucial role.

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