The Old Kingdom and First Intermediate Period

The Old Kingdom is usually characterised as the first great epoch of Egyptian history, when the phenomenal cultural, iconographical and political developments of the late Predynastic Period and the Early Dynastic Period coalesced to give an eminently visible culture that says 'Ancient Egypt' to modern man. This development may best be symbolised by the pyramid, the most persistent image of the era. For its part, the First Intermediate Period is the first clear manifestation in Egyptian history of the periods of disunity and systemic weakness that have affected every long-lasting ancient and modern culture in one form or the other. The time-period covered in this section illustrates for the first time the highs and lows of Ancient Egypt.

The Old Kingdom (OK) is usually defined as consisting of the Third to Eighth dynasties of Manetho (2686–2125 BC), and the First Intermediate Period (FIP) of the Ninth and Tenth and roughly two-thirds of the Eleventh Dynasty (2160–2016 BC). All dates are of course approximate.

An historical outline

It is conventional to begin the Old Kingdom with the Third Dynasty (2686–2613 BC),[1] since the reign of Netjerikhet Djoser, the first or second king, saw the beginning of large-scale building in stone, a technical achievement that characterises the Old Kingdom.[2] Relatively little is known about the history of the Third Dynasty, in complete opposition to what is known about its architectural achievements. After the Step Pyramid of Djoser at Saqqara, most of the monuments appear never to have been completed. The successors of Djoser were Sekhemkhet and Khaba, and the last king of the dynasty was probably Qaihedjet Huni, who may or may not have been involved in the building of the pyramid at Meidum, just north of the Faiyum. The successor of Huni was Sneferu, first king of the Fourth Dynasty (2613–2494 BC), although there is no clear family break in contemporary records.[3]

Sneferu (2613–2589 BC) is recorded in the Palermo Stone as raiding Nubia, and it is quite likely that incursions started by Egyptian kings in the First Dynasty (3000–2890 BC) meant that this area was depopulated from then until later in the Old Kingdom; a graffito of Sneferu from Khor el-Aquiba can be interpreted as referring to an expedition contributing to this process of depopulation, perhaps for labour needed in Egypt.[4] He certainly built two pyramids at Dahshur, and had a significant involvement in that at Meidum. Sneferu survived in Egyptian mythical memory as a beneficent king, whereas his son and successor, Khufu (Greek Kheops) was recalled as a tyrant; these aspects are best known from the late Middle Kingdom Papyrus Westcar.[5] Perhaps the sheer size of Khufu's funerary monument, the Great Pyramid at Giza, suggested to later Egyptians that he must have been a despotic ruler. Little is known about Khufu himself, but it is quite clear that the vast amount of pyramid building going on at this time required the development of a strong central administration to enable such work to proceed. Khufu's son Djedefra built his pyramid at Abu Roash to the north of Giza, but his successor, another of Khufu's sons called Khafra (Greek Khephren) returned to Giza to construct his funerary monument; construction of the Great Sphinx at that site is usually attributed to him.[6]

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[1] The principal references for the major issues in this historical outline will be found in the 'Further Reading' below. Some individual issues are discussed further below. Many of the references in this article are to surveys in which fuller bibliography will be found.

[2] A survey of all pyramids of the period covered in this article will be found in Verner 2001a.

[3] See von Beckerath 1997 for a reliable survey of Egyptian chronology, dates and rulers; the individual names of the rulers will be found in detail in von Beckerath 1999.

[4] See López 1967 and Helck 1974.

[5] Translated Lichtheim 1973: 215–22. Khufu as a tyrant is perhaps most widely known from Herodotos' History Book II, Chapters 124–7.

[6] The identity of the builder of the sphinx has most recently been considered in Stadelmann 2003, which article argues for Khufu as its creator. See Lehner 1992 for a study of the monument.

Although the last two known royal tombs of the Fourth Dynasty did not rival those of the earlier rulers, the Fifth Dynasty (2494–2345 BC) adopted more modest designs for its pyramids. The reason for this may not have been so much economic overreaching resulting from the immense projects of the preceding dynasty as a change in emphasis to the building of more temples, including the 'sun temples', dedicated to the king and the sun god just north of the predominant royal burial site of Saqqara/Abusir.[7] The cult of the sun had been growing in influence since the middle of the Fourth Dynasty when, for example, Ra, the name of one of the principal forms of the sun god, became a standard part of the royal names.

Changes in the way in which the administration was structured are evident at this time. While previously the royal family had filled many of the offices of state, private individuals were increasingly promoted to high levels.[8] While the tombs of many Fourth Dynasty officials are relatively close to their kings at Giza, more of a separation was observed in the Fifth Dynasty, with the majority at Saqqara while most pyramids were at Abusir. Private tombs became more elaborate, and there is an increase in the number of texts. Increasing levels of decoration are attested in royal temples, and in those of Neferefra and Neferirkara at Abusir substantial remains of administrative archives were uncovered.[9] The number of rock inscriptions in the Sinai and elsewhere suggest a growth in expeditions abroad.[10]

The construction of sun temples seems to have ceased in the reign of Djedkara, the penultimate king of the dynasty, who also built his pyramid at the relatively little-used site of South Saqqara—although how much should be read into either development is debatable. Also about this time a somewhat changed attitude to provincial officials is seen; whereas the provinces had before been mostly administered from the capital, more tombs of important persons are now found outside Memphis.[11] This may indicate not so much a shift to decentralisation but rather an attempt to govern and exploit these regions more effectively, as some of these officials came originally from the Memphite region. The last king of the dynasty, Unas, was the first king to inscribe the Pyramid Texts on the walls of the burial chambers of his pyramid at Saqqara; tombs of some of his high officials were built adjacent to his pyramid complex. After Unas, the Turin Canon makes its first clear break, which coincides with the rise of the Sixth Dynasty (2345–2181 BC).[12]

Even if there was a family change, the Old Kingdom continued apparently much as before. Teti, the first king, built a pyramid at Saqqara, around which clustered the tombs of his high officials. A possible ephemeral king called Userkara might have reigned for a short while after Teti, and an argument has been advanced for some instability in the early years of the Sixth Dynasty, involving assassinations and palace intrigues.[13] However, the longish reign of Pepy I (2321–2287 BC) ensured a measure of stability, and this king seems to have carefully modified the balance of power of provincial officials to prevent any one becoming too powerful.[14] He also built a series of temples throughout Egypt at major cult centres, which might have included some of the first stone examples of such structures, which had previously mainly been of mud brick (the use of stone had previously been concentrated on funerary temples and tombs designed for eternity).[15] He may also have conducted military campaigns on the borders of Egypt. His son Merenra had a short seven year reign, after which he was succeeded by the child king Pepy II, who may have been a son of either of his predecessors. Tradition holds that this Pepy was aged six at accession and lived to be 100 years old.

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[7] See Kaiser 1956.
[8] See Strudwick 1985.
[9] See survey in Strudwick 2005, 39–40.
[10] See Eichler 1993.
[11] See Martin-Pardey 1976 and Kanawati 1980
[12] The so-called 'Turin Canon' is a fragmentary papyrus bearing a list of royal names, probably a king-list of the Ramesside Period, much used to reconstruct the sequences of kings and chronology before the New Kingdom (Gardiner 1959).
[13] See Kanawati 2002.
[14] See Kanawati 1980.
[15] It is not clear, however, whether these temples were for the cult of the local god or were actually soul chapels dedicated to Pepy. See discussion and examples in O'Connor 1992.

The first signs of internal weakness that may eventually have put paid to the strong centralised Old Kingdom possibly appear at this time (*c.*2250 BC). The successors of Pepy II seem to have been relatively short-lived, although royal decrees from Koptos[16] suggest that Memphis at least held nominal control over the country until the end of the Eighth Dynasty, but at some point around 2170 BC central control disintegrated.

The kingship seems to have passed to the governors of Herakleopolis, a town just to the south of the Faiyum. The period of around 160 years that followed is usually termed the First Intermediate Period. It is not really known why the kingship moved to Herakleopolis, as this city is almost unknown during the later Old Kingdom; presumably the local nomarchs saw the chance to seize power in a vacuum. Manetho assigned the Ninth and Tenth dynasties to these rulers, although so little is known about them that making a clear division between these dynasties seems over-optimistic.

Much better attested is the situation in the southern part of Egypt. The Eighth Dynasty rulers were recognised in Upper Egypt—some of their principal attestations are in the aforementioned decrees from Koptos— but at some point following the demise of the Eighth Dynasty the local chiefs of each ran their provinces as local fiefdoms with little or no reference to whatever central government there was. There are many monuments of these men, and they attest to fighting and disputes between the southernmost provinces. The most famed document is the biography in the remarkable tomb of Ankhtifi at Moalla in the Upper Egyptian third nome (province).[17] The best-known disputes are those between the third and fourth nomes of Upper Egypt (Moalla and Thebes). The result was that the Theban rulers of the Eleventh Dynasty, whose names were Intef and Mentuhotep, and who before long began writing their names in cartouches and calling themselves kings, gradually extended their control south to Aswan and north to beyond Abydos. There they came into conflict with the nomarchs of Asyut, who seem to have been loyal to the Herakleopolitan rulers. So much is attested in inscriptions, and although it cannot be precisely dated, the expansion north to Abydos seems to have been completed before the end of the reign of Intef II Wahankh (2112–2063 BC). Progress towards the eventual reunification of Egypt under his successor Mentuhotep II (2055–2004 BC) has to be pieced together from more convoluted sources, above all a series of royal name changes which are presumed to reflect a combination of aspirations and achievements, culminating in the name 'Uniter of the Two Lands' in about his year 39 (*c.*2016 BC). At that point in the Eleventh Dynasty it is normal to end the First Intermediate Period.

Available data

Monuments: an almost complete series of pyramids for kings from the beginning of the Third to the end of the Sixth dynasty exists in the Memphite region, from Abu Roash to Meydum, as do tombs for the major rulers of the Eleventh dynasty at Thebes.[18] There is, however, a major gap in material relating to the Herakleopolitan kings and officials.[19] The Old Kingdom and First Intermediate Period probably has the widest geographical range of non-royal elite tombs of the Pharaonic period, and is perhaps also the least incomplete of all the great Egyptian epochs. The tomb locations include the large court cemeteries of Saqqara and Giza and the lesser ones of Abusir, Dahshur and Meidum. South of the Memphite region, tombs, or elements of them, primarily of the Fifth to Eleventh dynasties, are known in almost all of the 22 Upper Egyptian nomes. The state of publication of this material is mostly quite good, in particular for

[16] See for example Strudwick 2005: 116–24.
[17] See Vandier 1950.
[18] Porter and Moss cover the bibliography of the Memphite cemeteries extensively in vol III, 2nd edition. Basic coverage of the southern sites is also available in vol I 2nd edition and volume IV. Several publications have, however, appeared on the early Theban royal tombs since PM I² appeared (Arnold 1976, Arnold 1979, Arnold 1974–81), and new tomb publications appear all the time.
[19] See Pérez Die 1995 for discussion of the Spanish Archaeological Mission's work at Herakleopolis since 1966, including the excavation of a FIP cemetery.

the site of Giza. One notable gap in this type of evidence concerns temples, other than those in the service of royal cults; it is assumed that many were of brick and were lost in later re-buildings.[20]

Textual: the majority of texts come from tombs, and are thus of a funerary nature.[21] Many tomb owners had inscribed for themselves a biographical text, quite a number of which are of an idealising nature, but there are others that seem to refer to real events. As their context is the tomb, they tend to stress the strengths of the owners and are short on what we might consider historical detail.[22] Temple texts are few in number, but they include many royal decrees, usually giving exemptions from state requirements, which can shed light on administrative practices.[23] Administrative texts are limited at present to major archives from Abusir and Gebelein, the former relating to two royal cults and the latter to a funerary estate. These provide a wealth of detail, but, as administrative documents, they make no allowances for the lack of background of the 21st century AD reader.[24] There are in addition a number of letters and the like, as well as sealings from various sites. The principal religious texts of the Old Kingdom are the Pyramid Texts, which also formed the basis of the Coffin Texts of private individuals in the First Intermediate Period.[25] Many earlier publications assign three so called 'Wisdom texts' (associated with the OK 'sages' Ptahhotep, Djedefhor, and Kaigemni) to the OK, but the most recent studies date them to the Middle Kingdom.[26]

Settlements: The Egyptological study of preserved material remains suffers from a rather extreme skewing in favour of objects from tombs and temples. This is partly due to the ancient Egyptians' deliberate attempts to preserve those aspects for eternity, as their beliefs required, partly to the fact that most settlements were located in the cultivated areas where the environment is not conducive to the preservation of remains, particularly organic ones, and partly to the unfortunate but understandable attraction of fieldworkers in the 19 and 20th centuries AD to the easier and perhaps choicer pickings from the tomb contexts. In addition, town sites have been frequently rebuilt over the past 5,000 years, and often modern investigators have been technically ill-equipped to deal with the more complex archaeology encountered in these locations.

This situation has only really began to change during the three decades since Bietak published his overview of this subject.[27] The first settlements to be studied and published were mostly connected with funerary establishments, in particular that of Khentkaues at Giza;[28] fieldwork presently being undertaken in the town of the pyramid builders at Giza by Lehner and Hawass will reveal much interesting information about this neglected group of people.[29]

However, a number of town sites are now being investigated in the Nile Valley, the Delta and the oases. Most of these excavations are still in progress and incompletely published; some sites suffer from the regrettable preference given by their excavators to continuing fieldwork to the detriment of the writing up of the results.

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[20] See also Seidlmayer 1996 and O'Connor 1992.

[21] Many documentary texts are collected in hieroglyphs in Sethe 1932–33 (better known as Urk I) and Clère and Vandier 1948. A set of translations of most OK sources is Strudwick 2005, which book also has an introduction to the period and the texts and language; many of these texts are translated into French in Roccati 1982. Further publications and collections of texts of the FIP, mostly with translations, include Vandier 1950, Schenkel 1965, Edel 1984 and Daoud 2006.

[22] Kloth 2002 is a study of biographical texts of the Old Kingdom.

[23] The royal decrees were examined by Goedicke 1967.

[24] The Abusir and Gebelein papyri are edited in Posener-Kriéger and de Cenival 1968, and Posener-Kriéger 2004. A fascinating commentary on the Abusir Papyri is provided in Posener-Kriéger 1976. Further papyri were discovered at Abusir in the 1970s and 1980s: Posener-Kriéger, Verner and Vymazalova 2007.

[25] The pyramid texts were first collected in Sethe 1908–1922, and translated into English most recently in Allen 2005. The Coffin Texts edition is that of de Buck 1935–61; English translation Faulkner 1973–78.

[26] Translations and comments in Lichtheim 1973 and Parkinson 1997.

[27] Bietak 1979.

[28] See Hassan 1943.

[29] See Lehner and Wetterstrom 2006.

The settlement at Elephantine dates back to the Predynastic Period, and in the Old Kingdom there was a sizeable town and, most important of all, a fortress.[30] Further sites in Upper Egypt that have seen investigation and study for the Old Kingdom and First Intermediate Period are Kom Ombo,[31] Edfu,[32] Dendera[33] and Abydos.[34]

No doubt many of the main Delta sites have occupation levels that cover the Third to Eleventh dynasties, but this region has been largely ignored until relatively recently. Some examples of Delta sites where Old Kingdom and First Intermediate settlement phases have been revealed are Tell Basta,[35] Tell el-Dab'a,[36] Mendes[37] and Kom el-Hisn.[38] Particularly intriguing is the late Old Kingdom and First Intermediate Period site of Ayn Asil in the Dakhla Oasis. While the site was used in later periods, the earlier occupation phases, which include settlements, the governors' palace, and of course the associated cemeteries, are by far the most important. This material sheds light on an area much different from the Nile Valley.[39]

Specific historical issues

Periods and dating: Egyptology tends to be shackled by various structures imposed in the past, and broad dating is no exception. In many Egyptological publications, the Seventh and Eighth dynasties are not included in the OK, although it seems clear from cautious use of the king lists that they should be so included. Likewise, some authors include the whole Eleventh Dynasty in the FIP, although I prefer to terminate it with the reunification in the latter part of the reign of Mentuhotep II.

The dynastic structure employed today is still basically that of Manetho, but research has shown that such a structure is not something Egyptians of the time would have recognised. Thus, while Manetho conceived of each dynasty along the lines of a 'ruling house', there are clear family links between the Second and Third dynasties, probably between the Third and Fourth, and almost certainly between the Fourth and Fifth. The Turin Canon may be instructive in this regard, as it places its first sub-total of kings at the end of the Fifth Dynasty; Jaromir Malek has suggested that the manner in which this document was copied might even have given rise to some of the historical divisions which led to Manetho's structures.[40]

The early periods in Egypt have an additional dating complexity, that of the manner in which the years of individual reigns are expressed. Dating may have started out at the beginning of Egyptian history by recording the years based on events, and this is probably reflected in the compartments of the Palermo Stone.[41] The key event seems to have been a recurring census of the cattle of Egypt within the reign of a king, the first of which would haven taken place not long after his accession to the throne, presumably as a way of establishing and announcing the authority of the new ruler, and the recurrence of this event

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[30] This site has long been under investigation by the German Archaeological Institute. Much of the information is in their preliminary reports, but there is a partial overview of some of the Old Kingdom information in Seidlmayer 1996, and Ziermann 1993 includes the fortifications of the Old Kingdom.
[31] Kemp 1985; from this survey, the remains from the Old Kingdom and the First Intermediate Period appear to be the most extensive.
[32] See Moeller 2003.
[33] See Marchand and Laisney 2000 and Marchand 2004.
[34] See Adams 1998.
[35] See el-Sawi 1979.
[36] Bietak CHECK??
[37] Wenke and Brewer 1996.
[38] Wenke and Brewer 1996.
[39] In course of publication in the *Balat* series by the French Institute in Cairo. Note particularly the pottery workshops (Soukassian *et al* 1990) and the palace (Soukassian *et al* 2002); Pantalacci 1998 is an overview of the social composition of the oasis in the Sixth Dynasty.
[40] Malek 1982.
[41] See Wilkinson 2000 for a recent overview of the Palermo Stone and other annals. Aspects of the Egyptian approach to history and annals are considered in Redford 1986.

seems to have given rise to the principal dating system employed in the Early Dynastic Period and Old Kingdom. Thus an Old Kingdom document might be dated 'the year of the x-th occasion of the count of the cattle', sometimes, but not always, accompanied by the name of a king; this is frequently abbreviated to 'year of the x-th occasion'. The problem with understanding this system is our uncertainty concerning the frequency of these counts, as there are many cases where the count is indeed biennial, but others where the textual and other data cannot be reconciled. The solution is not to impose our modern rigorous concepts of dating but to understand that the Egyptians knew what they meant, and that was what mattered.[42]

Most **historical issues** are still at the rather basic level of the succession of kings and reign lengths. There are a number of reigns where the evidence of the king lists is contradicted by dated contemporary monuments.[43] The whole **Third Dynasty** is quite suspect, even allowing for the fact that several royal pyramids are known; the problem is making the links between the rulers, and obtaining some idea of the reign lengths.

The Fourth Dynasty. Bicheris and Thampthis, two of the names given by Manetho in his history of Egypt,[44] cannot easily be equated with known kings. This is supported to some extent by the Turin Canon, which seems to have spaces for two otherwise unknown kings in the dynasty. One of these kings could be the owner of the 'great excavation' at Zawiyet el-Aryan, which is thought to be the substructure of an unfinished pyramid of Fourth-Dynasty date, presumably of a ruler who died after a short reign. Builders' marks of uncertain reading have been found at this site, and the name of the king has been suggested as Nebka or Bikka, which it may be possible to reconcile with Bicheris.[45] No other monuments can be associated with these kings, and (almost) contemporary lists of kings include no others than the well-known ones. It has been speculated that there was a split in the family over the succession of Khufu, based largely on some damage in the Eastern Cemetery at Giza, where members of the royal family are buried, and on the variable location of Fourth Dynasty pyramids. Specifically, the decision of Djedefre, the son and successor of Khufu, to build his funerary monument at Abu Roash, several kilometres to the north of Giza, has been viewed as evidence of a split. The latter is rather misleading however, as both his predecessors had chosen new sites for their burial complexes (Dahshur and Giza), and thus it would be logical for their successor to seek a new site. It can actually be argued that the other two kings who built at Giza, Khafra and Menkaura, were acting out of sequence, perhaps due to nothing more than a lack of good alternative sites.

Fifth Dynasty. The question of the transition between the later Fourth and earlier Fifth Dynasty, and the succession and origin of the kings is still an issue. The Turin Canon makes no break anywhere in this period, and the archaeological evidence tends to support that. A crucial figure in the transition seems to be Khentkaues, a queen buried in a tomb which has been termed the 'fourth pyramid of Giza', the excavation of which caused a sensation in the 1930s when inscriptions were found that called her 'mother of two kings of Upper and Lower Egypt'.[46] From her burial location she would seem to be a queen of the later Fourth Dynasty, although to whom she was married is unclear. An interesting attempt was made by Altenmüller in the 1970s to argue that she and the two kings were the prototype for the story of Radjedet in the Westcar Papyrus, although this theory now seems to find little favour.[47] The identity of her sons is not certain, although the preferred candidates are Userkaf and Sahura. The picture is somewhat complicated by the existence of a second Khentkaues with the same title, this time a wife of Neferirkara and known from Abusir. Who were her sons? Neferirkara was succeeded by Neferefra and Niuserre for certain, both of whom have pyramids at Abusir, but there is also a rather shadowy king called

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[42] See my overview of this issue in Strudwick 2005, 10–12, with further references.
[43] Spalinger 1994 surveys the dating information available from contemporary monuments. See also Verner 2001b for the Fourth and Fifth dynasties.
[44] Waddell 1940: 47.
[45] See Cerny 1958.
[46] Hassan 1943: pl. V, VI.
[47] Altenmüller 1970.

Shepseskara, known only from sealings from Abusir and from his possible association with the cartouche of the equally unknown king Isi.[48]

While the succession of the remaining kings of the dynasty is not questioned, we know little about their relationships to each other. The pyramid of Menkauhor is the only funerary monument of a major Old Kingdom ruler never to have been located. The monument is named in various titles, but it is also mentioned in the decree of Pepy I for the pyramids of Sneferu at Dahshur, in which it is forbidden to take labour from these pyramids to that of Menkauhor, and there is a certain logic to the argument that this ought to mean that the missing pyramid was therefore in the vicinity of Dahshur. However, another location has also been proposed at north Saqqara, not far from the pyramid of Teti.[49] The pyramid of Djedkara at south Saqqara has never been fully published, and it is possible that further information about family relationships might be revealed there. Unas, whose pyramid complex is well known, is also a king whose origins are somewhat mysterious.

The locations of the so-called 'sun temples' remains a significant problem. The titles of officials of the Fifth Dynasty make it clear that a new category of royal temple came into being, which we term 'sun temples', characterised by prominent obelisks and courts open to the sky. Perhaps some of the reduction in size of Fifth Dynasty pyramids when compared with those of the Fourth can be attributed to a shift in emphasis to other temple construction; certainly we can see from the Abusir papyri how the sun temple worked in tandem with the royal mortuary temple in the provision and distribution of the income from the royal estates which was used for maintaining the royal cult. Six temples are known from titles (attributed to Userkaf, Sahura, Neferirkara, Neferefra, Nyuserra and Menkauhor) but the remains of only two have been found (those of Userkaf and Nyuserra). Where were the others? The answer is unknown, although suggestions have been made over the years that the temples were reused, or dismantled.[50] This is an archaeological problem with an important historical and religious dimension. It is particularly a mystery in relation to the sun temple of Neferirkara, which is so frequently attested in the Abusir papyri from the mortuary complex of the same king.

There seems to be a further little-known king early in the **Sixth Dynasty**, named Userkara, who is attested from a small number of sources. An apparent gap in the listing of the Turin Canon between Teti and Pepy I suggests his presence, and the Sixth Dynasty annals on the lid of the sarcophagus of Ankhesenpepy (noted only in the 1990s) suggest that he reigned for a short period at that time.[51] Recent excavations in the Teti pyramid cemetery at Saqqara have suggested that a number of tombs of the early Sixth Dynasty there show signs of deliberate damage as if there were some dispute over the succession.[52] Other historical problems in the Sixth Dynasty revolve mainly around the reign lengths of Pepy I and II. The former is given 20 years in the Turin Canon list, which is flatly contradicted by contemporary dates, and it is not impossible that whatever happened surrounding Userkara may have skewed the historical record to some degree. The reverse is true for Pepy II, who is said by Manetho to have come to the throne at the age of six and to have reigned until he was 100; the Turin list gives 90 years for him. However, contemporary sources seem to provide few dates that might encompass the last three decades of the reign, and this has given rise to suggestions that he may have reigned for 60–70 years. This of course assumes a certain regularity in the year recording systems about which caution has been expressed above.

The end of the Old Kingdom: Probably the most debated and vexatious issue is the end of the Old Kingdom: who ruled, for how long, where, and so on. The long reign of Pepy II was followed in the sixth dynasty by a couple of short reigns, one of whom has for many years been considered that of a woman

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[48] Verner 2001a: 310–11 argues that a second unfinished pyramid at Abusir (in addition to that of Neferefra), excavated in the 1980s, might have been built for Shepseskara. See also Verner 2001b: 395–400.
[49] See Berlandini 1978 and Verner 2001a: 322–4.
[50] Kaiser 1956 is fundamental reading for the sun temples. See Stadelmann 2000: 540–2 for the argument that the Userkaf temple might have been modified for use by Sahure and Neferirkare.
[51] See Baud and Dobrev 1995.
[52] Kanawati 2002.

known by the Greek name Nitocris. It seems that this idea has now become less plausible if a misreading of the Turin Canon is accepted.[53] A further group of names is found in the Turin Canon, plus a mysterious reference to 'missing six years'. A total of 855 years is then given, and next the Ninth and Tenth dynasties are reached. Many scholars have equated the aforementioned 'further group of names' with the Eighth Dynasty while the 'missing six years' may perhaps be the Seventh Dynasty. The Seventh and Eighth dynasties have also been linked with a list of otherwise little-known kings in the Abydos king list.[54]

Few significant monuments have survived from this period at the end of the Old Kingdom. All the evidence points to a number of short reigns following that of Pepy II, and this implies a level of instability, to which I will return shortly. It seems that Manetho's Seventh and Eighth dynasties were very short-lived, and the only substantial evidence of them comes from a series of decrees set up by one of the last rulers, Neferkauhor, at Koptos.[55] At least one pyramid of this dynasty, that of Ibi, is located at Saqqara, and it is reasonable to assume that they ruled from Memphis, and that southern Upper Egypt was still under their control, as shown by the Koptos Decrees.

However, it is evident that it was not long before the authority of the central government declined. Upper Egypt had for a very long time been composed of a series of 22 nomes, and it appears that each of these became its own little kingdom for a time. What caused this collapse of the central government? Various theories have been suggested over the years,[56] ranging from instability outside Memphis caused by the increasing power of provincial officials during the Sixth Dynasty, to economic problems caused by low Niles and subsequent famines.

It used to be fashionable for scholars to favour one theory or the other. Economic problems were once favourite, as there are a number of references in tomb texts of the late Old Kingdom and First Intermediate Period to possible famines,[57] and studies suggest that Egypt did indeed become drier in the later Old Kingdom.[58] But it is not right to assume the total historicity of tomb texts, given that they are a form of religious document intended first and foremost to promote the personality of the tomb owner and not to tell his objective history, and it is plausible that possible difficulties were exaggerated as the mention of famine became a fashionable subject in these texts.[59] Likewise the growth in provincial cemeteries as the Old Kingdom progressed has been taken as an indication of growing independence of these local magnates, and yet studies have shown that by and large, power over these rulers was maintained by the central government.[60] Yet some instability after the reign of Pepy II is undeniable, as shown by the paucity of royal monuments and the rapid turnover of kings. It is in fact most likely that the causes were a multiplicity of factors, including those mentioned, and that the structures that underpinned the Old Kingdom could not take the new strains placed on them. The result was the eventual disintegration of the centralised state.[61] More contemporary material is needed to help with these problems.

The reunification: While the south of Upper Egypt is quite well documented for the FIP, the largest gap in our present knowledge is the nature of the Ninth and Tenth dynasties, and their defeat by the Theban rulers of the Eleventh Dynasty. Despite evidence pointing to these rulers as having come from Herakleopolis, excavations at the site have revealed a singular lack of material of that date, and nothing

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[53] Ryholt 2000.
[54] Von Beckerath 1997, 149 uses these Abydos kings in his reconstruction of the Eighth Dynasty, although he believes that the Seventh Dynasty is wholly spurious (von Berckerath 1999, 66).
[55] Translation, Strudwick 2005, 117–23.
[56] See, for instance, Bell 1971, Kanawati 1977 and 1980, Müller-Wollermann 1986 and Vercoutter 1993.
[57] Vandier 1936.
[58] Bell 1971.
[59] See Seidlmayer 2000: 129–33 for a discussion of the interpretation of FIP biographical texts.
[60] Kanawati 1980.
[61] See particularly Müller-Wollermann 1986.

approaching tombs of significant officials or rulers of the town has ever been found. Even the identity and sequence of the Herakleopolitan rulers is uncertain;[62] their most characteristic name is Khety, and they are sometimes referred to as 'the House of Khety'.[63] The only evidence for a royal tomb of the Ninth or Tenth dynasties, that of Merykare, appears to come from Saqqara.[64] However, there are impressive tombs of governors of adjacent provinces, for example at Asyut, Beni Hasan and el-Bersha,[65] and the texts from Asyut, as well as certain funerary stelae and the Instruction for Merykare,[66] make reference to fighting between the Thebans and the Herakleopolitans. Nonetheless, there is a distinct lack of evidence for the conflict in the north—the only possible source is a graffito associated with the nomarch Kai from el-Bersha in the quarries at Hatnub, and this is frustratingly imprecise.[67] Thus there is a historical void roughly between years 14 and 39 of Mentuhotep II, in which momentous events must have occurred, but of which we are almost entirely ignorant.

Further reading

Readers are referred to publications such as Malek 2000 and Seidlmayer 2000 for a more detailed overview of the OK and FIP. Kemp 2006 should be read by anyone seeking insights into the development and functioning of ancient Egyptian society. A 'cultural' perspective on the Old Kingdom will be found in Assmann 2003: 46–77. The First Intermediate Period does not attract a great deal of 'accessible' studies, although it has been very fertile ground for archaeological, textual and artistic study. The OK figures prominently in all books on **Egyptian art and architecture**, but perhaps the best introduction to this is the catalogue of an important exhibition in 1999–2000 (Metropolitan Museum of Art 1999). Stylistic and artistic criteria formed the basis of the important studies by Cherpion 1989 and Harpur 1987. For **administration and the dating of monuments,** the abundance of decorated tombs and titles, particularly for the OK, has made it the subject of many administrative studies, and also studies of other areas which need to establish good dating criteria before moving to the area of interest. Beginning with Helck 1954, such work has moved through that of Baer 1960, Kanawati 1977 and 1980, Martin-Pardey 1976, Strudwick 1985, Cherpion 1989, Harpur 1987 and Baud 1999, all of which have contributed to our detailed knowledge of the officials of the period.

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[62] See Seidlmayer 2000, 138–9; Helck and Otto 1975–92: I, 945–7; von Beckerath 1997: 143–4; von Beckerath 1999, 72–5.
[63] For example, on the stela of Djari, Clère and Vandier 1948, 14.
[64] Malek 1994. This is presumably the king of the same name to whom a famous instruction text is ascribed: Lichtheim 1973: 97–109.
[65] See Edel 1984 for the texts from Asyut; Newberry et al. 1893–1900 and Shedid 1994 for the tombs at Beni Hasan; Griffith and Newberry 1895 and Brovarski 1981 for tombs at Deir el-Bersha.
[66] Such as stela BM EA 1203 of Inyotef (Strudwick 2001). See Lichtheim 1973: 102–3 for the reference in Merykare; caution must be applied against over-using such a literary document as a historical source.
[67] Giuliani 1997.

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