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# Villages and the Old Kingdom

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Narratives on ancient Egyptian settlements often focus on the New Kingdom, mostly because of two exceptionally well-preserved towns: Deir el-Medina and Amarna. Settlements dating to the Old Kingdom are of great interest too, even though much less is known about them, because the little we know indicates this was a time of early urbanization and increased influence of the central state. There has been an ongoing discussion among Egyptologists on how much the state influenced the daily life of farmers and villagers, and how much villagers organized and governed their own affairs. Until recent decades, some Egyptologists held the view that the Old Kingdom state registered people throughout the land, put bureaucrats in charge of provincial settlements, and replaced villages with strictly controlled estates and new towns (Eyre 1999; Helck 1975:18–44; Malek 2000:102; Malek and Forman 1986:35, 65, 87; Seidlmayer 1996). As Richards (this volume) points out, the gigantic pyramids of the early Old Kingdom suggest an extensive degree of economic and social control. The inference of an invasive state reorganization of the countryside in the early Old Kingdom draws strength from the power of the early gigantic pyramids to impress. Eyre (1999) expressed quite the contrary view and considered Egypt a village society at all periods, with broad continuities throughout history in the way Egyptian villages operated.

We can look at the evidence for ancient Egyptians villages from a global perspective or from a local perspective, two scales that are not mutually exclusive. As in any complex adaptive system, it is the local rules that generate global order. Sometimes central authority designs and imposes order, and sometimes authority is parasitic on organizations that generate and regulate themselves. In pre-modern periods better documented than the Pharaonic millennia, villages were semi-autonomous, and served as the basic fiscal unit of the Egyptian economy. One way of approaching villages, then, is to examine through time, as best the data allows, their role in the larger economic and political network. The other scale, the local perspective, concentrates on the structures of everyday life, the local rules, the algorithms, which generate larger social orders (families, households, nomes, states). The paucity of settlement archaeology and the differences in

preservation of the textual and archaeological record give very uneven information for villages and urban centers from different periods and disparate parts of the country. If we want the local, fine-grained perspective, that is, if we want to know the village inhabitants – men, women, children, aged persons, and their animals – and all the variations of individual and social experience, one village from 3000 years of Pharaonic history gives sufficient detail: Deir el-Medina, the community nestled at the foot of the high Theban western desert that housed workers who created pharaohs' tombs during the height of the New Kingdom empire. But we should calibrate our knowledge of Deir el-Medina detailed life against what we know or can reasonably infer about the broader context of settlement and population in Pharaonic Egypt.

### Early Egyptian Population and the Village Horizon

The population and area of the larger early Egyptian settlements that functioned as provincial centers, “towns” in our terms, were themselves probably of a scale we would equate with a village. Modern categories, like Roberts’ (1996) farmsteads, hamlets, villages, and towns, probably have little to do with the ancient Egyptians’ own categories, and neither, probably, do our categories of rural and urban, public and private. The question is whether we could classify, in our terms, almost every early Egyptian settlement as a village or cluster of villages.

In his seminal study on the geography and ecology of early Egypt, Butzer (1976) concluded that population was concentrated in the two places where the Egyptian Nile Valley narrows. The southern concentration was in the Qena Bend, the homeland of pharaohs, roughly between Hierakonpolis and Abydos. Within this latitude, the river valley makes its great eastward bend with Luxor, ancient Thebes, on the south and Qena on the north. The northern concentration was in the stretch of valley between the entrance to the Fayum and the apex of the Delta – the “capital zone.”

In the 4th Dynasty, the short period of truly gigantic pyramids, royal family members and high officials built huge mastaba tombs in the court cemeteries near these pyramids, the earliest in a series of pyramids that line the western side of the capital zone.

Old Kingdom texts and relief scenes depict offering bearers bringing produce from villages (*nīwt*) and estates (*hwt*), many of which Egyptologists can locate in Middle Egypt, where the cultivated Nile Valley is widest, and in the expansive Delta (Jacquet-Gordon 1962; Kemp 1983:87–92, fig. 2.2). This geographical pattern, along with the title “overseer of new towns” or “villages” (*nīwt*) beginning in the 5th Dynasty (Badawy 1967), suggests an active program of internal colonization by the royal house in those areas that were hinterlands, perhaps in part to feed the pyramid projects. Prior to this internal colonization, Upper Egypt might have contained fewer villages than, say, the reported 956 villages in Upper Egypt, and, even more likely, fewer than the reported 1439 villages in the Delta (total 2395) for the period 934–968 CE (Hassan 1995:560, based on Maqrizi). Provincial mastaba tombs, and the first family tombs, appear in the 5th Dynasty. Kemp wrote, “the continued history of Old and Middle Kingdom civilization

contained an important element of free wheeling on the apparatus created through the building of the early pyramids” (Kemp 1983:89).

During the Early Dynastic period and Old Kingdom, people built thick enclosures around towns like Elephantine, Kom Ombo, Edfu, El-Kab, and Abydos. These became provincial capitals, and some contained an unusually large residence (Moeller 2004). The disappearance of earlier smaller settlement sites fortifies the idea that people abandoned more numerous villages to reside in walled towns (Jeffreys and Tavares 1994; Kemp 2006:194–201; Seidlmayer 1996). Moeller suggests that, aside from other functions like defense, the walls carried symbolic value, “marking the town as a town” and distinguishing it “from other types of settlement such as villages” (Moeller 2004:265).

Kemp sees a “modest scale of Egyptian society compared with what is normal experience in much of the present world, a scale commensurate with the modest size of the population,” which for the Old Kingdom totaled somewhere around 1.2 million compared with 70 million today (Hassan 1995:560; cf. Butzer 1976). “Especially for the Old Kingdom ... the valley landscape, richer in wildlife and far more lushly vegetated, would have seemed oddly deserted” (Kemp 2006:200). Taking as an example the settlement at Elephantine/Aswan, Kemp compares the estimated area of the town during the Old Kingdom with the area in 1798 CE. He suggests that the increased size of this settlement parallels similar increases in other towns while the number of settlements remained about the same (Kemp 2006:200). We should note that several times in recent centuries authorities actually counted the number of villages in Egypt. Using counts from the first and second millennia CE, Hassan (1995) estimates just under 3000 villages for all of Pharaonic Egypt.

Following Kemp’s examples for archaeological exposures of early settlements, towards the end of the Old Kingdom, Elephantine contained a very large residence, probably of the local governor (Kaiser 1998; Raue 2002, 2005). Archaeologists found another Old Kingdom governor’s palace in ‘Ayn Asil in the Dakhla Oasis at the heart of a settlement surrounded by a thick wall with semi-rounded towers on one corner and flanking an entrance (Soukiassian et al. 2002). Much of the exposure of Early Dynastic or Old Kingdom settlement at Hierakonpolis belongs to a little-understood palace. In the center of this exposure, a thick, mudbrick, monumental doorway opens into a maze of walls and passages that lead through an indirect route inward to a dais. Behind the platform a ramp rises from large round silos to a platform at the level of the dais (Adams 1995:66–67; Fairservis 1986; Kemp 2006:83, fig. 26, 196–197, fig. 68). We can recognize more developed forms of the features inward from the decorated gate in palaces from later times.

The suggested demographic context of urbanization during the early Old Kingdom is a lower overall density of population for Upper and Lower Egypt, with more people living in the Qena Bend and in the northern narrow valley from the Fayum entrance to the Delta apex, and in both places a move from a wider scatter of smaller villages to those villages that grew into walled towns.

Old Kingdom settlements detected in borings and trenches of the late 1980s and early 1990s for water projects from Giza to Abu Rawash and the area of west Cairo seem to be the archaeological correlate to the art historical and textual

record of an expansion of new settlement in the early Old Kingdom (Hawass 1997:57, fig. 1; Jones 1995, 1997; Sanussi and Jones 1997). Old Kingdom settlements at Giza and Abu Roash were newly founded on sand of the low desert or on the interface between the low desert and the banks of a main Nile branch that flowed close to the western edge of the valley (Jeffreys 2008; Lutley and Bunbury 2008). The limited exposures do not allow us to know the form and function of these settlements.

We know little about the smaller settlements lying farther afield in either the northern or southern “capital” zones, much less in the hinterlands of Middle Egypt and the Delta. We might expect to also find evidence of Old Kingdom settlements on virgin ground in the Delta, unless the “new” villages and towns were simply reallocations of existing settlements around old centers like Sais, Buto, Mendes, and Bubastis. While we have textual and pictorial evidence of an internal colonization, we really do not know whether the Old Kingdom state had an interest in urban layout, the footprint and form of settlements in the provinces (Kemp 2006:201).

### **Central Planning or Self-organizing, Orthogonal and “Organic”**

By the Middle Kingdom, settlement planning culminated in what Kemp (2006:211–231) calls model communities. He bases this characterization upon archaeological exposures of Middle Kingdom settlements at Kahun, Dahshur, Abydos South, Tell el-Dabaa, Thebes, and Qasr el-Sagha that display “a grid iron or orthogonal plan.” These are for the most part state-planned urban centers, at least in their beginnings. As in Kahun, Kemp notes that the rectangular models fit the bureaucratic and structured character of the Middle Kingdom. But this bureaucratic tendency was already on the rise in the Old Kingdom, when planners laid out the town along the causeway leading to the monumental tomb of Queen Khentkawes in the late 4th Dynasty (Hassan 1943). This settlement is just as rigid and compact as Kahun, albeit on a smaller area, and the same is true for the central Gallery Complex Heit el-Ghurab settlement at Giza (Lehner 2002).

Birds-eye, map views of villages from widely disparate times and regions very often display irregular, so-called “organic” path systems, a self-organized complexity (Schaur 1991; as in the “Islamic city” – see Schloen 2001:108–116; Wirth 1992, 1997; and for one village example in modern Egypt, Berque 1957:48–49). People who live within the intricate order (for it is not chaos) of such ground plans tend to move about topologically, by visual memory. The order is self-organized, with no central authority, and no overarching design. Order of a very complex sort *emerges* in such settlements from inhabitants following local rules (based upon considerations of kinship; path or water proximity; craft specialization; or field access). The resulting order can sometimes tend towards the orthogonal (as in some cellular and crystal structures), but self-organization, which indeed characterizes much of the organic world, is the opposite of design.

Towns and villages in the floodplain were more likely obliged to organize themselves upon limited high ground that the Nile floodwaters surrounded from six to eight weeks every late summer into fall. We might imagine that these villages were

not rigorously planned (Vercoutter 1983:136) on the basis of the self-organized character of unplanned settlements and villages of many times and places (Schaur 1991). We have to imagine this feature of ancient Egyptian villages because we have hardly any plans of what might have been this more common village pattern. In fact, Egyptian villages are nearly invisible in the published archaeological record. One finds few plans of wholly excavated villages and only a few excavated parts of settlement that might be classed villages, such as Kom el-Hisn in the western Delta (Cagle 2003; Wenke et al. 1988) or parts of Elephantine at different periods (Kaiser 1998; Ziermann 2003). One reason is the dearth of settlement archaeology in general in Egypt, until recent decades, in favor of monumental temples, tombs, and capital sites. Many of the towns and villages of ancient Egypt probably lie under the towns and villages of modern Egypt, built up over the centuries. In fact, because their non-linear complexity makes such villages hard to “read,” and therefore hard to map, one is hard pressed to find maps of unplanned villages from any period, even recent premodern and modern times (Berque 1957:48–49 for an exception).

### **Core and Province: Material Culture Correlates**

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Archaeologists found a material culture correlate to the inferred relationship between provincial villages and the state center when they compared material culture from an Old Kingdom settlement in the western Delta with that from an urban center at the foot of the Giza Pyramids Plateau.

Kom el-Hisn, possibly the Pharaonic place named *ʾIm3w*, occupied an ancient Nile channel that ran through Nome 3 of the western Delta (Figure 5.1 bottom). The Old Kingdom settlement here dates to the 5th and 6th Dynasties, with some settlement continuing into the early Middle Kingdom (Wenke et al. 1988:13), although the Middle Kingdom component is small (Redding, personal communication). Systematic retrieval and analysis of animal bone and plant remains yielded evidence that the inhabitants raised cattle. The carbonized plant remains, recovered through flotation, contained a high percentage of fodder and forage plants such as clover and mustard, which suggests they derive from the use of cattle dung as fuel in hearths. The excavators also found fragments of burnt dung. Grasses would have suggested the cattle grazed in pastures, but the dearth of grasses in the Kom el-Hisn corpus strongly indicates that these were pen-fed or stabled cattle. Moens and Wetterstrom (1988) relate this botanical evidence to historical information. The inhabitants worshipped a cow goddess, Hathor, as a deity. Kom el-Hisn might have been the location for the “Estate of the Cattle” (*ḥwt ḥwt*) attested for the Third Lower Egyptian Nome as early as the 1st Dynasty. At the same time, paradoxically, the investigators found very little cattle bone, and high numbers of pig bone, with a 0.04:1 ratio of cattle to pig (Redding 1992:101). Pig is a village animal, which does not travel well with its short legs. Pigs can be fed waste food products, while providing high-calorie meat (Redding 1991). It appears that in the Old Kingdom, Kom el-Hisn residents raised pen-fattened cattle for export to the ritual and political centers, the temples and pyramid complexes near the apex of the Delta. Redding (1991) predicted that

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**Figure 5.1** Core and periphery: the Heit el-Ghurab settlement at Giza (top), with the village footprint of Kom el-Hisn in the Western Delta (inset, bottom). They represent the very rare information on core and periphery settlements in the Old Kingdom. The Gallery Complex at Heit el-Ghurab expresses an orthogonal layout we might expect as the hallmark of central authority, while villages throughout Egypt like Kom el-Hisn supported the infrastructure, which made it possible for the royal house to build the gigantic pyramids of the early Old Kingdom. This Kom el-Hisn footprint covers about 75 m<sup>2</sup>, while that of Heit el-Ghurab covers approximately 75,000 m<sup>2</sup> (7.5 ha). Plan of Kom el-Hisn: courtesy of Robert Wenke.

samples of animal bone from settlements in the capital zone, like Giza, would yield reverse patterns from Kom el-Hisn: high ratios of cattle to pig, and high numbers of sheep and goat to pig. The ratio cattle to pig for the entire 4th-Dynasty Heit el-Ghurab settlement is 6:1, and for certain areas as high as 16:1. We infer that central authorities were provisioning Heit el-Ghurab with prime meat on the hoof, possibly enough to feed 7000 to 10,000 people 200 to 300 g a day, which eleven cattle and thirty sheep or goat could provide (Redding, personal communication). People living in large houses of the area we call the Western Town had preferential access to prime cattle meat (Redding 2007b). People living in the eastern zone of small houses that we call the Eastern Town consumed higher numbers of pig (Redding 2007a:267; in press). The fauna and other material culture, including the objects and flora, from the Eastern Town are more characteristic of material we would expect from a village (Lehner and Tavares forthcoming).

These results correspond to predictions that we can make from a model of the Old Kingdom core and province relationship, where provincial settlements, some newly founded, supply the state provisioning of the center. Or, simply, the results are congruent with Old Kingdom texts and relief scenes that depict offering bearers bringing produce from villages (*nwt*) and estates (*hwt*). However, the Old Kingdom components of Kom el-Hisn (5th–6th Dynasties) are not quite contemporary with the Giza settlements (4th Dynasty). The best we can say is that we expect the patterns we see in Kom el-Hisn assemblages would also obtain in a 4th-Dynasty Delta settlement.

Estates and villages that fed cities (cf. Zeder 1991 for Mesopotamian parallels) or pyramid-building company towns need not have been new settlements whose footprints were laid out by central planners, nor new forms of community organization. The state, which in the early Old Kingdom was basically the royal house (Baud 2005; Strudwick 1985), might have simply expected quotas from designated estates and villages, perhaps a version for its time of the New Kingdom quota system, which had households throughout cities like Amarna supplying linen to temples and palaces (Kemp and Vogelsang-Eastwood 2001:427–434; for a recent premodern parallel, in the reign of Mohamed Ali, see Cuno 1992). In the core–periphery provisioning system, people and households in estates and villages probably functioned like basic constituents of complex organizations in other domains: the elementary parts experienced no major changes despite major changes of phase in an overarching network. Phase transitions between statehood and fragmentation, that is, major change for the “state” of the overarching network, must have sometimes impacted villagers. However, it is possible that sometimes for them the difference was simply what authority, at what level, had a call on their production.

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### Village Inhabitants in the Center

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The Heit el-Ghurab site in Giza (Figure 5.1 top) would seem like the last place to look for evidence of villages in the Old Kingdom, because it was the center of the Egyptian state. Located at the southeastern foot of the Giza Plateau, 400 m

south of the Great Sphinx, the Heit el-Ghurab was one district of a larger series of settlement patches strung out north–south along a main Nile channel which ran 200 to 300 m east of the site at Giza (Jeffreys 2008; Lutley and Bunbury 2008; Sanussi and Jones 1997), and so, like Amarna some 1500 years later (Kemp 2008c:34), the 4th-Dynasty Giza settlement was a major inland port at the center of the Egyptian state.

More than twenty years ago, Kemp (1984) drew the disparity between what we know from Deir el-Medina and the workmen's village of Amarna because of the plethora of texts in the former and the paucity in the latter. We are even more textually challenged at Giza. The only texts from over twenty years of excavation (1988–2009) consist of clay sealings. However, just as we know from an abundance of textual culture that the state provisioned the Deir el-Medina workmen's village, we know from an abundance of carefully retrieved and meticulously analyzed material culture that a millennium earlier the state provisioned the Heit el-Ghurab community.

The central feature is the Gallery Complex. State planners assembled large modular units, "galleries," with width to length ratio of 7:1, into four great blocks separated by three cross streets. People in gatehouses restricted and controlled access to the streets (Abd al-Aziz 2007a, 2007b; Kemp 2006:188–190; Lehner 2002). A long open colonnade at the front of each gallery could have provided a sleeping area for forty or fifty people. Structures for food production and storage surround the Gallery Complex on the east, west, and south. These include the replication of modular, open-air bakeries with a production capacity beyond the needs of an individual household (Lehner 1992:3–9; 1993:60–67). A large enclosure, the "Royal Administration Building," at the southeastern corner of the settlement features a sunken court of silos, probably for grain storage (Lehner and Sadarangani 2007). In his assessment of the settlement as a work camp, Kemp (2006:189, fig. 66) is missing the Western Town, a maze of walls between the Royal Administrative Building and the escarpment in which we can recognize the thicker walls defining large "elite" houses (Lehner 2007:45–46). This part of the settlement, and certainly the Gallery Complex, display the orthogonal planning that is the signature of top-down design. But the Eastern Town, a series of small chambers and courts, reflects more the self-organization characteristic of villages. Here we find grinding stones for producing flour for the bakeries that surround the Gallery Complex from grain in the central storage of the Royal Administrative Building. In spite of the proximity of state storage and bakeries, we find in the Eastern Town individual hearths and small household storage silos.

At first glance, this urban footprint is so opposite all that a village is thought to represent that we might take it simply as a confirmation of the state overriding of families, households, and villages. The early Old Kingdom state, as in the older view of Egyptology, would have forced service by exactly such a regimented footprint as the Gallery Complex, trying to eradicate the messiness and the illegibility (Scott 1998) of the village and countryside. Gendered spaces, activities, and objects form a major dimension of the "natural" social order. In the Gallery Complex we might expect extreme gender restriction (Wilfong, this volume), on the assumption that barracks would house men, and perhaps only young men at that.



But when we look critically and in more detail, the Heit el-Ghurab site could yield signs that authorities worked with natural social structures, even as they modified them to begin to reach for an economy of scale. For the barracks the planners used the components of a traditional Egyptian house: a relatively open, more public front with columns, smaller back rooms forming a more private domicile, and rear cooking chambers (Lehner 2002). They assembled this catalogue of domestic parts into the Gallery Complex. We might see the galleries as barracks, yes, but also as enlarged houses, where the planners reached for the large scale through the enlargement and reproduction of smaller domestic units.

Groups housed in these units might have come to Giza from specific regions, nomes, communities, or villages. Graffiti on Middle Kingdom pyramids, which Arnold (1990) understood as control notes, indicate that workers served royal duty in home-based fellowships. Scrawled large across explicit written instructions for literate scribes, larger made-up signs like crossed sticks and pitchforks that were not part of the formal repertoire of hieroglyphs may have represented smaller villages for those who could not read formal text. Other marks refer to known towns, “the Memphis team” for example, and some teams may have been named after the owners of large estates. For the Old Kingdom pyramid builders we have to think first of the Egyptian unit of labor organization, *za*, written with the hieroglyph of a rope tied into ten loops – a cattle-hobble. Two millennia later, *za* was translated as the Greek, *phyle* (literally, “tribe”). Eight Heit el-Ghurab galleries could each have housed two gangs of the four *phyles* attested in the 4th Dynasty (Lehner 2004:190–192; Roth 1991). The social basis of the Old Kingdom *phyle* system needs further discussion.

The segregation of people in the Gallery Complex from the rest of the site increased over the time, a segregation marked by a thick enclosure wall (Lehner and Tavares forthcoming). The Gallery Complex may have been “gender-restricted” to only males, but settlement areas outside the Enclosure Wall around the blocks of galleries were probably more gender-balanced. As Wilfong (this volume) points out for Kahun and Deir el-Medina, male workers and administrators probably inhabited the Eastern and Western Towns along with their families, although in the absence of texts other than sealings we must make this inference based upon the house-like patterns and artifacts.

Tavares (2004) identified bone points, bone rods, copper needles, and stone spindle whorls of the sort associated on other sites with weaving, spinning, and sewing. Such objects derive mainly from the Royal Administrative Building and the Western Town. It has been suggested for Egypt and elsewhere in the ancient Near East that weaving and spinning, particularly with the early horizontal loom, were primarily women’s activities (Barber 1991, 1994). In reviewing this question, Kemp and Vogelsang-Eastwood conclude that “there is in fact no independent way of determining what proportion of men as against women were engaged in the different stages of textile manufacture or whether gender or loom type went together” (Kemp and Vogelsang-Eastwood (2001:436). When people abandoned the Heit el-Ghurab site at the end of the 4th Dynasty they took most objects of value with them. Numerous dolerite stone pounders or fragments of such have been found all across the site. It is commonly assumed that such pounders derive from stone working, and that therefore men primarily used them, but given the

wide distribution across the settlement, these objects perhaps had a more general use, and might have been part of the household as well as the mason's toolkit. In spite of abundant evidence of baking in fieldstone extensions flanking the mudbrick Gallery Complex east, south, and west, almost no grinding stones or querns were found in these areas. The Royal Administrative Building yielded several, found around the sunken court of large mudbrick silos – evidently centralized storage – and we found more grinding stones scattered in the Eastern Town. Tomb scenes, limestone models, and later wood models may primarily show women grinding, but we need a more thorough study before deciding grinding was primarily women's work.

The Eastern Town walls conform roughly to the orientation of the planned installations and to the cardinal directions, but this part of the settlement appears to have “self-organized” by incremental additions. Accreted to the grand design of the Gallery Complex, the warren-like character of the Eastern Town layout is similar to non-orthogonal village layouts from widely disparate times and regions. The various kinds of material culture from the Eastern Town – especially the plant remains and animal bone – are also most like samples from village sites than any other part of the site (Lehner and Tavares forthcoming; Redding in press). Indeed, the Heit el-Ghurab site can be seen as a village (the Eastern Town), a town (the Western Town), and a state barracks cobbled together into a larger urban center.

### **The Exceptional Village of Deir el-Medina**

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Half a century of archaeology (1905–1951), some eighteen volumes by Bernard Bruyère and others, and an extensive and continuing publication of tombs, chapels, burials, artifacts, and texts, (mostly ostraca – texts written on limestone flakes and pottery vessel fragments) convey to us adjudications, oracles, buying and selling commodities (Janssen 1975), social and sexual relations, laundry lists and love songs (McDowell 1999), and even hints of “village-wide menstrual synchrony” (Wilfong, this volume). Meskell (1998, 1999, 2002) takes Deir el-Medina as a case study in the archaeology of social relations, the archeology of the individual, of gender, of the household, of body and soul. In *Private Life in New Kingdom Egypt*, she begins the section on village life by noting that, “given the paucity of excavated settlement sites, one cannot really discuss rural villages, where most of the farming population would have lived,” and that “Egyptologists regard [Deir el-Medina] as so anomalous as to be unrepresentative in terms of daily life” (Meskell 2002:38). She concludes, however, that the Deir el-Medina houses and their fixtures were relatively modest when compared to Amarna, and apparently on this basis suggests that daily life and domestic conditions in the village were similar to many other non-urban sites. In contrast, she states that ultimately Amarna's “unrepresentative character limits fruitful extrapolation to other settlements” (Meskell 2002:33).

In spite of the modest dwellings, Deir el-Medina must have been one of the most unusual villages of its time. At the outset of her book *Village Life in Ancient Egypt*, McDowell (1999) lays this out clearly: “The state supplied its inhabitants with all their needs, not only foodstuffs such as grain, fish, and vegetables (and

in good times also pastries), but also fuel, pottery, and laundry service” as well as water. If we understand the Theban east and west banks combined, with their temples connected by processional ways, as one vast urban layout (Kemp 2006:266), Deir el-Medina was in the midst of the prime New Kingdom urban and religious center. The village was close to the Ramesseum, the memorial temple of the 19th-Dynasty king Ramesses II, which became the administrative center for Thebes West, and even closer to the later temple of Ramesses III at Medinet Habu, which overtook the administrative role from the Ramesseum. We get such a fine-grained look at life in this village because of the texts found in its vicinity. Texts are few for the early period (18th Dynasty), more plentiful in the 19th Dynasty, and come with such abundance by the 20th Dynasty that “it is possible to write a day by day account of official activities for much of the period” (McDowell 1999:22). Scholars estimate that 40 percent of the residents were literate and almost every male was taught to read and write. Their buying and selling of everything from bulls (which they must have kept on property elsewhere) to coffins, and their ties to government officials, “puts at least the officials of the gang in the top 2 percent of the population” (McDowell 1999:4–27).

Meskell (1998, 2002) sees textual, architectural, and artifactual evidence for gendered spaces in the Deir el-Medina houses. She associates with women the features of a front room: a low enclosed bed-like structure (the *lit clos*); wall paintings of women breast feeding, grooming, and making music; and figures of the god Bes, a lion-headed dwarf deity associated with sexuality, music, and protective magic. Meskell associates with men the features of a second room: a divan or bench, “cultic cupboards,” painted false doors (paneled dummy doors for communication with spirits), and ritual objects. She makes the inference about the second room and men largely on the fact of the divan and its historical and ethnographic parallels in other houses (Meskell 2002:117). At the same time she indicates we cannot assume exclusivity of rooms (Meskell 1998:218). With as many as eight to twelve inhabitants per average house size of 72m<sup>2</sup> (Valbelle 1985:117), people may have slept and probably carried out a variety of activities in these spaces, as well as on the roofs. To a certain extent we can take these findings as a common culture in New Kingdom Egypt. Excavators found divans in many Amarna houses, both in the main city and in the workmen’s village. They also found paintings of women, of Bes, and Taweret, the hippopotamus goddess of childbirth, in the front rooms of the workmen’s village and other houses at Amarna. One such room contained a bin or altar (Kemp 1979; Meskell 2002:113–114). These parallels suggest that people living at Deir el-Medina and, earlier, at Amarna shared the associations of rooms and gender. On the other hand, for the *lit clos*, “parallels beyond Deir el-Medineh are surprisingly absent” (Meskell 1998:223) and the majority of finds on which Meskell makes her inferences date to occupation during the later Ramesside period. Unfortunately, the Deir el-Medina excavations lack anything approaching stratigraphic control from which we could accurately construe occupation phases. In spite of this, we should not reject the rich Deir el-Medina findings in our attempt to understand village life in ancient Egypt. It is hard to imagine that the villagers of Deir el-Medina developed basic mores, customs, and habits that were radically different from those of other villagers of their time.

## Amarna the City of Villages

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At Amarna, the short-lived 18th-Dynasty capital of Akhenaten in Middle Egypt, the state stepped down, left its footprint, and walked away in only twenty years. If we assume a rural–urban dichotomy familiar to recent Western culture, Amarna becomes marginal to a study of villages. But was it indeed the case that, “as today, life in larger cities was very different from that experienced by people living in villages and rural settings” (Meskell 2002:17)? If we should not impose our categories, “kitchen, bedroom, foyer” on ancient Egyptian houses (Meskell 1998:218), neither should we impose our rural–urban categories on the entire ancient Egyptian community experience.

The Amarna residential zones, in which houses alone covered approximately 240 hectares (Kemp 2008c:34), flanked a royal center. The suburban dwellers appear to have situated their houses, like people settling in on a beach, free of state planning. Because of its short life, the site is a record of self-organized settlement by colonization (Kemp 2008c:35). Clusters of small houses surround larger villas. As Kemp indicates, the resultant order emerges from many individual choices of larger house owners and their dependents, decisions based on “rules” or preferences, of which we can only guess. To this extent the larger suburban order, though void of town planning, was not chaos. Suburban Amarna was self-organized, characteristic of unplanned settlements (Schaur 1991).

In El-Amarna, outside the corridor of royal buildings, planning petered out altogether. Instead of a grand unity design we find a few broad but far from straight streets running more or less parallel to the Nile to join the suburbs to the centre, while narrower streets cross at right angles. The overwhelming impression is of a series of joined villages. (Kemp 2006:327)

The major buildings of the royal city center exhibit design and planning (Kemp 2008c:37). But even in the central city, “whilst its regularity of layout and open space set it apart from the housing areas, in its scale and building materials it was a continuation: another piece of mud-brick village standing in stark contrast to a handful of monumental structures” (Kemp 2008c:37).

In the residential zones, house plots of various sizes connect in complex patterns that make distinctive neighborhoods in which, by and large, “rich and poor lived side by side” (Kemp 2006:327; 2008c). The larger houses included kitchens with bread ovens, intramural animal byres, sheds and enclosures that were possibly workshops, gardens, and granaries, shrines for the richest households, and living accommodations, including a porter lodge by the gate, in addition to the private rooms of the main house. In sum, “the larger houses look like little farms” (Kemp 2006:329). The official residents themselves were the farmers. Judging from patterns of land holding documented elsewhere in ancient Egypt, they probably enjoyed produce from plots widely distributed in the floodplain and country. As a conglomerate of “farm centers,” the basic building block of hamlets and villages (Roberts 1996:15–18), the suburbs of Amarna offer another glimpse of village life.

Recently, Kemp amplified on the settling into the Amarna suburbs of official residents and their retainers: “The result was a series of tiny, intermingled villages,

in which the houses of the officials were, in effect, the houses of the village headmen” (Kemp 2008a:34). The Amarna headmen were priests, administrators, and army men (Kemp 2008c:34) who had strong connections to the countryside where they held land (Kemp 2008b:44), a pattern of “home village” that persists in Egypt’s capital down to the present day. But if administrators at the center would return to social origins in provincial villages, villages also came to the center. The Amarna headmen probably brought dependents from provincial home villages or their urban estates in Thebes or Memphis (Kemp 2008b:44). The High Priest, Panhesy, had his own little village arrayed alongside his enormous urban estate, a bit reminiscent of the Eastern Town alongside the Gallery Complex and Royal Administrative Building in the Heit el-Ghurab site. Panhesy’s house was one of the “nuclei around which the bulk of the housing developed,” the architectural expression of networks held together by a “common bond of dependency upon an important official” (Kemp 2008c:36–37).

### Change and Tradition in Village–State Relations

We know that the Old Kingdom state could intervene and conscript. Weni, who, like his father, rose to the office of Vizier in the 6th Dynasty (Richards, this volume), led a “state” military operation against Asiatic Bedouin at the height of the Old Kingdom. Weni led an army composed of natives of the Delta, five Nubian tribes, Libyans, and

nobles (*ḥṣty-ꜣ*), royal seal bearers, sole companions who were great estate chiefs (*ḥwt-ꜣṣty*), [local] chiefs (*ḥry-tp*), and town rulers (*ḥkꜣ ḥwt*) of Upper and Lower Egypt, companions, overseers of foreigners, chief priests of Upper and Lower Egypt, and chiefs of *gs-pr* at the head of the troops of Upper and Lower Egypt from the manors (*ḥwwt*) and towns (*nwt*) that they governed (*ḥkꜣ*) and from the Nubians of those foreign lands. (Urk I 102-3-8, trans. Eyre 1999:38)

Eyre comments that the levy is territorially based, made up from village or manor: “The military context is one where village identity is revealed strongly” (Eyre 1999:38). A similar kind of village-based levy for pyramid building in the 4th Dynasty might be inferred from the settlement pattern at Giza.

From the archaeological remains we can infer reciprocity between villages and the central government, but not its exact nature and organization. Could officials from the central government have registered and compelled male members of villages, estates, or farmsteads to serve in barracks at Dahshur and Giza for a rotation of duty building the pyramids? More likely the royal house sent an order to provide a quota of labor to local rulers and heads of villages, who would then seek members of the households within their domain to send to the large government projects.

We can relate the question of the degree to which Deir el-Medina people lived exceptional lives to a question about the workers’ community at Giza, a thousand years earlier. For building royal tombs in the form of the gigantic Giza pyramids, did the members of the royal house override common social

structures of their culture, or work within and through them? The multiplication of households for up-scaling in Heit el-Ghurab to meet the task of building Egypt's largest pyramids is a sign that in the Old Kingdom the household was the most important/fundamental social unit, which could not yet be replaced by a more abstracted compulsory civil service. The very example of Deir el-Medina shows that for even its most exceptional projects, the state allowed the household to function as a basic unit in settlements we would classify as villages or, for larger settlements, a composition of villages.

Most probably ancient Egypt was indeed always a village society (Eyre 1999), not just because most people lived in small settlements and practiced agriculture. Urban living in some vague sense that we have in mind when we assume a distinct life style between "urban" and "rural" hardly existed in Egypt's earliest periods. Even the "towns" were of a scale and composition we might categorize as "village." Unfortunately, factors of preservation and the short history of settlement archaeology in Egypt have not salvaged and recorded many settlements for the early periods. But we sense the presence of the village throughout the early Egyptian social landscape in the textual record, in the few settlements or parts of settlements that archaeologists have exposed, and even in the archaeological record of very exceptional settlements, like Deir el-Medina, Amarna, and the Heit el-Ghurab settlement of the pyramid builders.

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