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Tradition and Innovation

The Middle Kingdom

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In the study of ancient complex societies, considerable attention has been devoted to the processes of primary state formation as well as the factors involved in cases of state disintegration and collapse. No less significant, but certainly less fully investigated as a phenomenon, is the process of *re-formation* whereby state systems are able to re-establish and redefine themselves. Archaeologists in recent years have begun to focus more attention on this issue of “second generation” states, and how societal complexity is reformed in new ways following periods of social fragmentation and decline (Schwartz and Nichols 2006). In the comparative study of state regeneration, the case of ancient Egypt is particularly significant. One of the hallmarks of ancient Egypt is the remarkable longevity of a civilization which managed to adapt itself for the better part of three millennia, surviving significant periods of internal social flux, and in the context of vastly evolving global influences. Popular and scholarly notions of the static, timeless culture of ancient Egypt have long been overturned by richer understandings of the dynamic cultural, social, and political forces that continually acted to reshape Egyptian civilization. Nevertheless, striking in the diachronic study of ancient Egypt is the resilience of its “great tradition”: a core political ideology built around the persona of the pharaoh as the divinely sanctioned ruler who was responsible for sustaining Egypt in a state of existence called the *sema-tawy* (“binding together of the Two-Lands”). This was achieved through the king’s maintenance of *maat* (divine order) against the continual threat of chaos or *isfet* (see Richards, this volume). These concepts and a rich, embedded system of iconography and religious symbolism formed a civilizational template that became particularly relevant during periods of state reorganization such as the Middle Kingdom (11th–13th Dynasties, c. 2050–1650 BCE), Egypt’s first major period of state regeneration which grew out of the political fragmentation of the First Intermediate Period.

As we have seen in earlier chapters in this volume, archaeological and written sources indicate that during the late Old Kingdom and First Intermediate Period significant changes occurred in the nature and expression of political power. During the Old Kingdom, administrative institutions and the language of elite

culture had emphasized the pre-eminence of the kingship and royal government. At the end of the Old Kingdom, elite culture underwent a centrifugal process of change. Modes of cultural expression such as burial practices and personal biographical inscriptions reflect an increasing emphasis on provincial authority. The concomitant decentralization of political power culminated in the First Intermediate Period. While there exists evidence for harsh physical realities at that time (such as increased levels of mortality: O'Connor 1972), many scholars have emphasized the degree to which the daily life of the average Egyptian did not change significantly as a result of the shifting relationship between central and provincial elites. Indeed, as local rulers and their administrative mechanisms stepped into the vacuum left by decreased royal power, the degree of economic prosperity of many provincial centers, particularly the local provincial (nome) capitals, may – in general – have increased (Seidlmayer 2000:119–120). Nevertheless, in terms of its political and socio-economic organization, Egypt was at a crossroads, one that potentially might have replaced the unified state with a form of city-state system familiar from many other ancient civilizations of both the Old and New Worlds. It is of considerable significance in the study of pharaonic civilization that during the Middle Kingdom this latter model was soundly rejected as the centralized state re-emerged with renewed vigor (Morris 2006). The Middle Kingdom represents the first major period of state rebirth in Egypt. Here we will examine some of the key areas of socio-cultural change that define this period of state regeneration.

Inherent in the Egyptian phenomenon of state reformation is the role of historical memory and political critique, which can be part of any society, but is particularly prevalent in literate, complex societies that possess a long written tradition and monumental record (Tait 2003). It is perhaps not surprising that Egyptians during the Middle Kingdom looked conspicuously backwards to the Old Kingdom and Early Dynastic Periods as providing a civilizational template to be emulated. Earlier periods of unity and centralized authority emerged during the Middle Kingdom as models for constructing the present. Egypt's Middle Kingdom provides an instructive study of a society engaged in actively constructing its past and reinventing itself. One significant set of information on the historical and political outlook of the Middle Kingdom is provided by its rich literary tradition. These texts include quasi-historical narratives, “tales” set in past ages, *sebayet* or “teachings” which examine the themes of justice and rulership, as well as poems and hymns treating issues of cosmic order. Together they form a high tradition, an elite discourse, which reflects a sophisticated cultural appraisal of society, power, and the role of both the king and the individual (Parkinson 1991). Whether one interprets the resulting Middle Kingdom as incorporating a new emphasis on social responsibility (Wilson 1956), along with the emergence of a “moral economy” (Richards 2000:43–45), or alternatively as an autocratic and “prescriptive society” designed from the top down (Kemp 2006:241–244), it was a period of dynamic change. The modes in which areas of cultural expression as diverse as kingship, literature, and the domestic arts were redefined reflect a period of cultural renaissance mediated by self-awareness, and even purposeful social engineering. To a significant extent, the study of the Middle Kingdom seeks to understand the interwoven influences of

tradition and innovation in the crystallization of a distinctive set of cultural forms which define this phase of Egyptian complex society.

The Middle Kingdom arose through a process of military and political expansion initiated by a line of provincial rulers (nomarchs) of the Theban nome of southern Egypt (for a recent overview: Grajetzki 2006:7–75). Following a protracted conflict against a northern political coalition led by kings at Herakleopolis (9th–10th Dynasties), the Theban ruler Nebhepetre Mentuhotep II defeated the Herakleopolitans in c. 2050 BCE and achieved a political reunification of the country (see the map at start of this volume). Symbolically this act of reunification was emphasized as a repetition of Egypt's initial moment of unification; Mentuhotep II declared himself to be the Horus *Sema-Tawy*: the Horus-king who, in accord with past models, had unified Upper and Lower Egypt (Postel 2004). Mentuhotep II and the two kings who succeeded him, Mentuhotep III and IV, belong to the 11th Dynasty, a phase of state reformation that expanded significantly when Amenemhat I, formerly a vizier under Mentuhotep IV, established a new ruling house, the 12th Dynasty. A significant political move at the beginning of the 12th Dynasty was the re-establishment of the royal residence in the Memphite area. After initially returning to Memphis itself, by the end of his reign Amenemhat I had founded a new capital, Amenemhat-Itj-Tawy, “Amenemhat-Seizes-the-Two-Lands” (generally abbreviated to Itj-Tawy), located between Memphis and the entrance to the Fayum region, an area that emerged as a core zone of state-sponsored development during the Middle Kingdom (Arnold 1991; Simpson 1963). The eight kings who comprise the 12th Dynasty ruled for c. 215 years forming a lengthy phase of stable royal reigns. The 12th Dynasty included four kings named Amenemhat (Ammenemes), and three named Senwosret (Sesostris). It ended with the reign of a female pharaoh, Nefrusobek, following whom the ensuing 13th Dynasty displays changes in the expression of political power and patterns of royal succession. A series of some fifty to sixty kings are attested for the 13th Dynasty spanning a period of roughly a century. Some of these kings reigned for as little as a few months, yet there exists no evidence for internal conflict or competition between rival claimants to the throne. Egypt's governmental system continued unabated through this period but at the level of the kingship the traditional pattern of father to son succession appears no longer to have formed the dominant model (Quirke 1991, 2004). At the end of the 13th Dynasty, the Middle Kingdom state retracted back to Thebes, relinquishing its control of the Nile Delta and northern Egypt to other political powers, most prominently the Syro-Palestinian rulers formally known as the Hyksos 15th Dynasty.

Elements of continuity that bind the period c. 2050–1650 BCE include the uninterrupted evolution of the state administrative system, and – after the beginning of the 12th Dynasty – the use of Itj-Tawy as the royal residence city and seat of central authority. Also a prominent feature of the Middle Kingdom is the emergence of a professional military tradition which includes a cadre of career military officials as well as an evolving system for manning the army. The most overt physical expression of the Middle Kingdom military organization is seen in the annexation of Lower Nubia (the area between the First and Second Nile Cataracts) and construction of a permanent fortress system established at the beginning of the 12th Dynasty and maintained through the late 13th Dynasty

(Smith 1995; Trigger 1976). Beyond the dynastic framework of the period, the Middle Kingdom can be discussed effectively in terms of two cultural phases, “early” and “late” Middle Kingdom, based on trends in administration, social organization, funerary traditions, and material culture. The reign of the 12th Dynasty king Senwosret III is a period of rapid socio-cultural changes and a temporal point of transition between these two phases. In broad terms, the early Middle Kingdom (11th Dynasty and first half of 12th Dynasty, c. 2050–1850 BCE) forms a period of consolidation and redefinition of Egypt’s state system influenced significantly by the pre-existing social and political order of the First Intermediate Period. The late Middle Kingdom (late 12th Dynasty and 13th Dynasty, c. 1850–1650 BCE) then constitutes the “formal” or “developed” phase of the Middle Kingdom state (Figure 7.1).

In order to investigate processes of change that characterize the Middle Kingdom, and define what makes it distinct from other periods in Egyptian civilization, I propose here to examine two key areas that exemplify its shifting socio-cultural features:

- 1 changes in religious decorum and allied forms in material culture which illustrate new ways in which Egyptian society constructed the interface between the human and the divine;
- 2 the construction of authority and administration as expressed in mechanisms of integration between royal/state government and local towns and communities.

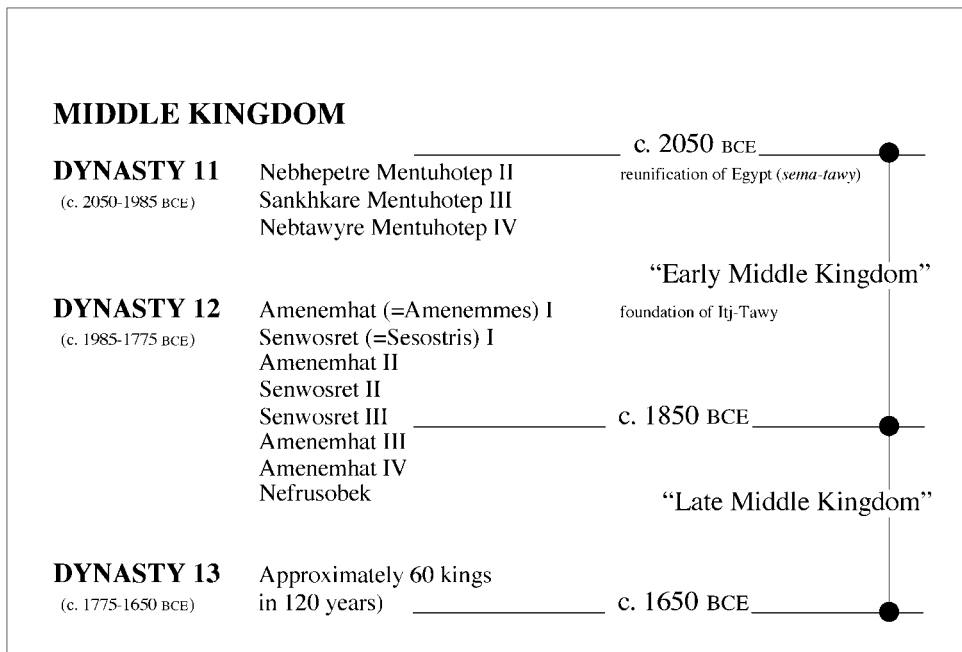


Figure 7.1 Chronological framework of the Middle Kingdom.

For these issues the ongoing contribution of new archaeological evidence serves alongside the rich body of textual evidence to refine our understandings of social and cultural change in the Middle Kingdom. Consequently, we examine these topics through application of an archaeological case study which derives from ongoing archaeological work at the mortuary complex of Senwosret III at South Abydos. The complex of Senwosret III, anciently named Wah-Sut-Khakaure-maa-kheru-em-Abdju (“Enduring-are-the-Places-of-Khakaure-justified-in-Abydos”), is a royal cult foundation built at the height of the 12th Dynasty and maintained until the decline of the Middle Kingdom state at the end of the 13th Dynasty. The site is located 2 km south of the main center of Abydos, cult center of Osiris. As the ancient name indicates, the locale belonged notionally to the greater entity of Abydos. It includes a subterranean royal tomb, an associated mortuary temple, as well as a settlement site that housed a significant population who were involved in the religious and economic maintenance of the Senwosret III mortuary cult. While there exist many potential case studies which would highlight contemporary research in Middle Kingdom archaeology, the value of South Abydos for our present purposes lies in its integrated combination of elements illustrative of various facets of late Middle Kingdom society. South Abydos forms a microcosm of Egypt’s late Middle Kingdom, and an opportunity to investigate the changing modes of cultural expression as they emerge during the period c. 1850–1650 BCE. For our case studies, late Middle Kingdom South Abydos therefore constitutes a focus as we turn our archaeological lens on the adaptation of traditional culture and formation of new traditions which define the Middle Kingdom.

Innovations in Religious Decorum and Material Culture

During the Middle Kingdom a significant range of new forms emerge in material culture. Social practice at the time appears to have permitted a widening degree of access to material cultural forms, particularly those incorporating divine symbolism, which formerly had been most closely linked with the elite of the Old Kingdom. A majority of scholars logically anchor a discussion of the Middle Kingdom within the socio-economic and political changes of the First Intermediate Period. It has become a generally accepted tenet that major changes in social organization, cultural forms, and materialization reflect the process of political and economic decentralization of the late Old Kingdom and First Intermediate Period. Provincial elites and other social groups below the levels of royal administration now had access to cultural forms previously defined and controlled by the Old Kingdom elite (see Baines and Yoffee 1998). Formerly royal and elite cultural forms, in this understanding, were co-opted by lower-status social groups. As a result of the better preservation of desert-edge cemeteries, and traditional emphasis on funerary archaeology in the study of ancient Egypt, much discussion has focused on changing features evidenced by mortuary traditions. One of the long-standing formulations in this line of understanding has been the process broadly termed the “democratization” of the afterlife, exemplified by a process of popularization of funerary literature. The fact that royal mortuary literature, the Pyramid Texts,

initially limited to royal usage, was adopted by non-royal elites at the end of the Old Kingdom and became part of an evolving non-royal tradition of funerary literature has suggested that we may be witnessing a downward diffusion of formerly “high” cultural forms to lower echelons.

More recently, other scholars have argued in favor of a form of ideological “trickle-down” whereby lower levels of society increasingly adopted and manipulated elite symbols and iconography in the funerary sphere. Access to these elite forms notionally emerges not simply as a wealth indicator but as a form of legitimizing commodity (see Richards 2000, 2005). Funerary traditions become a reflection of changing social organization suggesting ongoing modifications as part of evolving strategies of communication and display. While the outward diffusion of elite prerogatives is certainly *part* of the process, we must question the role of this elite/lower order dichotomy in examining the unique material culture that comes to define the Middle Kingdom (if not also earlier periods: see O’Connor 2000). It is fundamental to recognize that many of the materialized forms that first emerge in the First Intermediate Period – and then culminate during the Middle Kingdom – are not merely transpositions or emulations of high cultural forms. Rather they are drawing from a pre-existing repertoire of cultural expression (*some* elements of which are in origin elite and royal), but rendered in significantly altered modes. Indeed, the cultural repertoire is augmented by a quite dynamic and unique set of forms new to the material tradition, the majority of which have no direct antecedents in elite culture of the Old Kingdom.

One problem frequently encountered in the study of Egyptian material culture is the penchant for modern archaeologists to divide artifacts categorically into those which belong to “daily life” and those classed in the realm of “funerary traditions.” While there are objects whose functions and patterns of use placed them discretely into either of these two spheres, the ancient Egyptians did not make such a concrete, bi-partite distinction. Human birth, life, death, and the transition to the afterlife appear to have been conceptualized as a continuum, albeit divided by transitional stages that needed to be navigated, often with divine aid. A wide spectrum of material culture notionally bridged the temporal spheres of life and afterlife. The phenomenon of the “democratization” of the afterlife is, in fact, only one facet of an extensive set of changes in Egyptian society that influenced ideas of access to divinity, and, as a consequence, the material culture of the period. Here we can define this changing pattern of “access to divinity” broadly speaking as an evolving web of cultural values that defined the role of divine models, myths, and religious practices, and the ways in which they impacted, and had relevance to, the experiential world of humankind.

A significant cultural change during the late First Intermediate Period and Middle Kingdom is a marked increase in the use of both two-dimensional and three-dimensional divine imagery which manifests itself in many areas of Egyptian material culture. Magical amulets are one example of a material cultural category where we can see this pattern of changing decorum in the application of divine symbolism. Although amulets had been a component of Egyptian material culture since the Predynastic, their use underwent an exponential increase during the Middle Kingdom. Many of these amulets are structured around the adaptation of divine symbolism, drawn primarily from the fabric of Egyptian myth and

tradition. The most popular forms are overtly divine emblems such as the *wadjet* (eye of Horus), *djed* pillar (backbone of Osiris), or *tjet*-knot associated with Isis (Andrews 1994; Pinch 2006). Perhaps the best known and most easily recognizable product of ancient Egyptian material culture is the scarab amulet, an adaptation of the scarab beetle into a stylized three-dimensional object, carved in stone, molded in faience, or made of other materials. This object is fundamentally a creation of the Middle Kingdom and an expression of the unique suite of the cultural and religious changes that effected Egyptian society at that particular stage in its development.

The scarab amulet form initially appeared during the late First Intermediate Period but its use proliferated through the course of the 12th and 13th Dynasties. The scarab beetle is associated with the solar cycle and symbolizes the eternal rebirth of the sun god through the actions of the beetle deity Khepri. It is notionally related also to the idea of physical transformation and change; the word *kheper*, meaning to “become,” applied particularly at the religious level to human experiential changes from birth through death and the transition to the afterlife. The adaptation of the scarab beetle as an amulet was a means of magically tying human experience (of the amulet wearer) into the regenerative and transformative cosmic powers of the solar deity.

Of note in the archaeological record is the extensive contextual range of scarab amulets: these artifacts occur in both settlement and cemetery sites, and are associated with all levels of society. Worn as amulets on the body, scarabs were often linked in their early period of development with the burials of young children. Equally, however, during the Middle Kingdom we find them among the personal belongings and burial equipment of the highest-status royal governmental officials. A hallmark of the material culture of the Middle Kingdom is adaptation of the scarab amulet for use as an administrative seal inscribed on its base with the names and titles of officials (Martin 1971), a custom particularly prevalent during the late Middle Kingdom, c. 1850–1650 BCE. In this mode scarabs functioned as part of daily administrative practices (Figure 7.2). Clay impressions produced by personal scarab seals occur in vast quantities in settlement sites of the Middle Kingdom. This single object type adapted a potent divine symbol into a form that applied directly to the transitory phases of human existence. Its use as an administrative tool brilliantly merged popular religious practice with the structured daily activities of the Middle Kingdom bureaucracy. It is a magico-religious object that seamlessly bridges the living world and funerary beliefs and traditions.

Amulets comprise one obvious artifact category which – due to their significant numbers – is symptomatic of the Middle Kingdom penchant for increased use of divine iconography at the level of popular culture. They represent, however, only the proverbial “tip of the iceberg,” and many other categories of material culture display the same cultural process at work. The increasing emphasis on religious imagery in Middle Kingdom material culture is vividly illustrated by another type of object: magical wands or “knives” which have been recovered in significant numbers, particularly from tombs of the Middle Kingdom. Carved from hippopotamus ivory, these objects are decorated with complex groupings of divine beings, zoomorphic and anthropomorphic, often with associated hieroglyphic

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Figure 7.2 Two late Middle Kingdom scarabs with the names and titles of officials. (From the fortress of Buhen, courtesy of Penn Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.)

labels (Figure 7.3). Like the scarab amulet, these magical wands show divine powers involved in the mythology of the solar cycle: the cosmic forces which underlie the ability of the sun god to regenerate and survive his daily cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Analysis of the religious imagery (Altenmüller 1965) suggests the wands were used in apotropaic rituals, most particularly during childbirth and the early life of the newborn baby, but also by extension other moments of physical vulnerability such as sickness. The combination of the divine symbols and the way the wands were used (as part of demonstrative ritual acts with spoken spells) appears to have magically transferred the mythological protection of the young vulnerable sun god to beneficially influence human experience. Again, just as with scarab amulets, these objects derive from both settlement and cemetery contexts. After a period of use, the wands were typically buried in the

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Figure 7.3 A Middle Kingdom magical wand. (From Rifeh, 12th Dynasty, courtesy of Penn Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.)

tomb, along with their principally female owners. Interment extended the apotropaic role of these objects into the funerary sphere, helping to magically ensure the sought-after rebirth in the manner of the sun god. If the Middle Kingdom Egyptians had “democratized” the afterlife, in a much more extensive shift in cultural practices and religious decorum, they had fully integrated divine models into their daily lives in a variety of new ways that generated hitherto unseen forms of material culture.

Case Study I: The Archaeology of Childbirth in the Late Middle Kingdom

If we look outside of the well-studied evidence of the funerary tradition, can we examine changes in Egyptian customs surrounding access to divinity through actual archaeological evidence? In the archaeology of the household and domestic life during the Middle Kingdom we witness evidence for a rich, evolving magico-religious tradition with a suite of associated material forms. One area which has seen only the most limited analysis in Egyptian archaeology – as indeed in archaeology at large – is the study of childbirth. As an ephemeral stage in human life, childbirth in general tends not to produce extensive, immediately recognizable physical remains in the archaeological record. The archaeology of childbirth, where it is identifiable, however, becomes an extremely informative window into cultural traditions and social practices manifested in association with one of life’s critical junctures (Beausang 2000). In Middle Kingdom Egypt there exists evidence for a sophisticated set of magico-religious beliefs and practices as well as an elaborate set of objects and tools. Significantly, as with the similarly liminal

moment of death and burial, childbirth offers insight into the evolving rules of decorum which governed access to divinity in Middle Kingdom society.

Excavations at South Abydos since 1994 have been involved in documenting the settlement of Wah-Sut, connected with the mortuary complex of Senwosret III (Wegner 2006, 2007). The major structure currently under study is a palatial-sized (52 × 80 m) residence, “Building A,” which functioned as the mayor’s home (Wegner 1998, 2001). In 2002, excavations in part of Building A recovered the only known example of an actual ancient Egyptian *meskhenet* or “birth brick,” a type of object known to exist from ancient Egyptian written sources, but never identified previously in the archaeological record (Figure 7.4). This object is an unfired mudbrick, 17 cm in width, 35 cm in length, the surface of which is painted

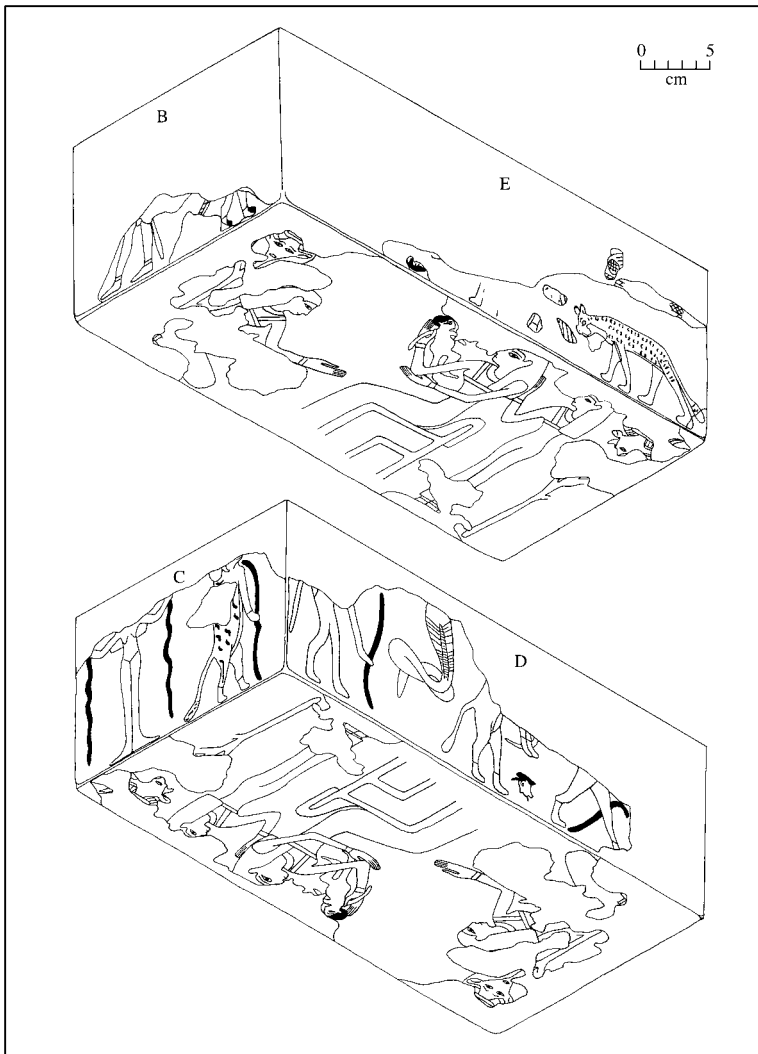


Figure 7.4 Decorative scheme of the birth brick from South Abydos, Building A.

with a complex set of magico-religious imagery explicitly associated with childbirth (Wegner 2002, 2009). One face of the object shows a seated mother holding a newborn baby flanked by two other female figures and framed by standards capped with the head of Hathor, a deity closely associated with fertility and childbirth. The four sides of the brick display a procession of zoomorphic and anthropomorphic deities. These include: the depiction of a striding serval cat, a captive human decapitated by a lion, and a blue-painted goddess grasping snakes and shown nude, standing frontally with splayed feet. The particular context of the birth brick is especially significant since other evidence, including seal impressions and additional small objects, suggest this area of Building A functioned specifically as a female residential unit. I have suggested that this part of the building may have belonged to a wife of one of the six known mayors of South Abydos during the late Middle Kingdom (Wegner 2004, 2009).

Key to the reconstructing of the functions of the Abydos birth brick is the analysis of its magical imagery through comparison with other artifacts that bear parallel iconography. Virtually identical with the imagery on the edges of the birth brick is the decorative scheme used on the above-mentioned magical wands. The iconography of the wands is expressive of the mythology of the cosmic defense of the newborn and vulnerable sun god against hostile forces. The sun god, who can manifest himself in various forms, frequently appears on the wands in the guise of a striding wild cat. Conceptually, the defense of the infant sun god in his period of uncertainty occurs through marshalling the divine allies of the sun god against the agents of *isfet* or chaos. Symbolic destruction of malignant forces is seen frequently through the motif of the decapitation of a foreign human enemy and especially through the imagery of knives brandished by the various benign deities. The images of the striding wild cat on the Abydos birth brick, the enemy decapitation, and other symbolism tie the brick with the apotropaic function of the Middle Kingdom magical wands.

The scene of childbirth on the main preserved face of the brick offers a basis for understanding the mode in which the imagery relates with the practice of childbirth itself. Notably, the human figures in the birth scene are not rendered according to normal artistic conventions. The color chosen for the hair of the mother and two assisting female figures is sky-blue rather than traditional black. Color symbolism here emphasizes the divinity of the three females. Moreover, the mother holding her newborn (male) baby sits not on a normal chair but on a solid-based throne of divinity. Flanked with images of the goddess Hathor, the birth scene is rendered in an artistic mode that emphasizes the idea of a divine transfiguration of the mother in childbirth. At the moment of delivery the mortal mother is symbolically altered into a manifestation of Hathor herself: her hair becomes a divine blue, her seat is a throne, and she sits protected by Hathor standards. This scene is not simply a depiction of the happy results of delivery, but rather a two-dimensional “visual spell” which invokes the presence of Hathor during childbirth and even magically transforms the human mother into the divine being. Significantly, extant corpora of Egyptian magical spells for mother and child (e.g. Erman 1901) are full of such invocation of divine forces for protection of mother and baby during childbirth. Here we see vividly illustrated the rich application of magico-religious imagery to the experiential world of humankind

during the Middle Kingdom. Just as occurs in funerary religion, where Egyptians of the Middle Kingdom are able to associate themselves with Osiris, so too in childbirth divine forces become a magical mechanism for surviving the transitional moments of human experience: a mortal mother is momentarily visited by and symbolically transfigured into the goddess Hathor.

The combination of imagery on the Abydos birth brick contributes to an understanding of the actual mechanics of how the birth brick may have been used. It is known through a variety of textual sources that *meskhenet* bricks were used not singly but in groups of four (Roth and Roehrig 2002). Their mode of use appears likely to have involved the stacking of bricks to compose two parallel supports for the feet and legs of the woman in labor, who would have assumed a squatting position optimal for delivery. Another level of magical symbolism embodied in this tradition of childbirth is witnessed in magical spells that refer to the woman in labor as physically creating a three-dimensional replica of the place of birth of the sun-god: "Open for me. I am the one whose offering is large, the builder who built the pylon for Hathor ... who lifts up in order that she may give birth ..." (Robins 1993). Even more than the invocation of divine transfiguration, the entire physical act of delivery while squatting on stacks of bricks appears magically to transform the human event into a replica of the solar *Akhet* (eastern horizon), and place of eternal rebirth of the young sun god. Cosmological forces are called upon as a divine model for understanding and surviving this challenging human moment.

Closely associated with the evidence for the evocation of divine models in childbirth is a wider repertoire of objects which reflect the growing emphasis on votive worship in second-millennium Egypt. Particularly relevant is a body of magico-religious objects associated with the veneration of Hathor. Fertility figurines, amulets, and images that invoke Hathor in various media (stelae, sistra, masks, plaques) are among a rich repertoire of objects that reflect both individual and community/"corporate" veneration of the fertility goddess (Pinch 1993). Evidence for use of masks and standards depicting the goddess articulates with the Hathor-capped emblems on the Abydos birth brick. These symbols consequently may refer to actual three-dimensional images used as part of birth rituals during the Middle Kingdom.

Combining the evidence of the magical wands, the Abydos birth brick, and other related artifacts provides the basis for a synthetic model of the religious beliefs and techniques of childbirth in the Middle Kingdom (Figure 7.5). Popular religious practices leading up to pregnancy appear to have included use of votive dedications and objects that call upon divine forces to beneficially influence the fertility of the prospective mother. With the inception of pregnancy a specific set of objects appear to have been used. *Meskhenet* bricks seem to have been prepared by qualified artisans and/or magical practitioners. An allied object type in the Middle Kingdom are small brick-shaped rods composed of four rectangular segments in faience or steatite with apotropaic imagery that might reflect rituals of preparation in creating the functional *meskhenet* bricks. The ritual preparation of sets of *meskhenet* bricks (which probably would have served only for a single delivery) is likely to have been a pervasive ongoing activity in the daily life of ancient Egyptian communities of all sizes and at all levels of the social spectrum. As we witness in other categories of material culture such as the funerary tradition, the

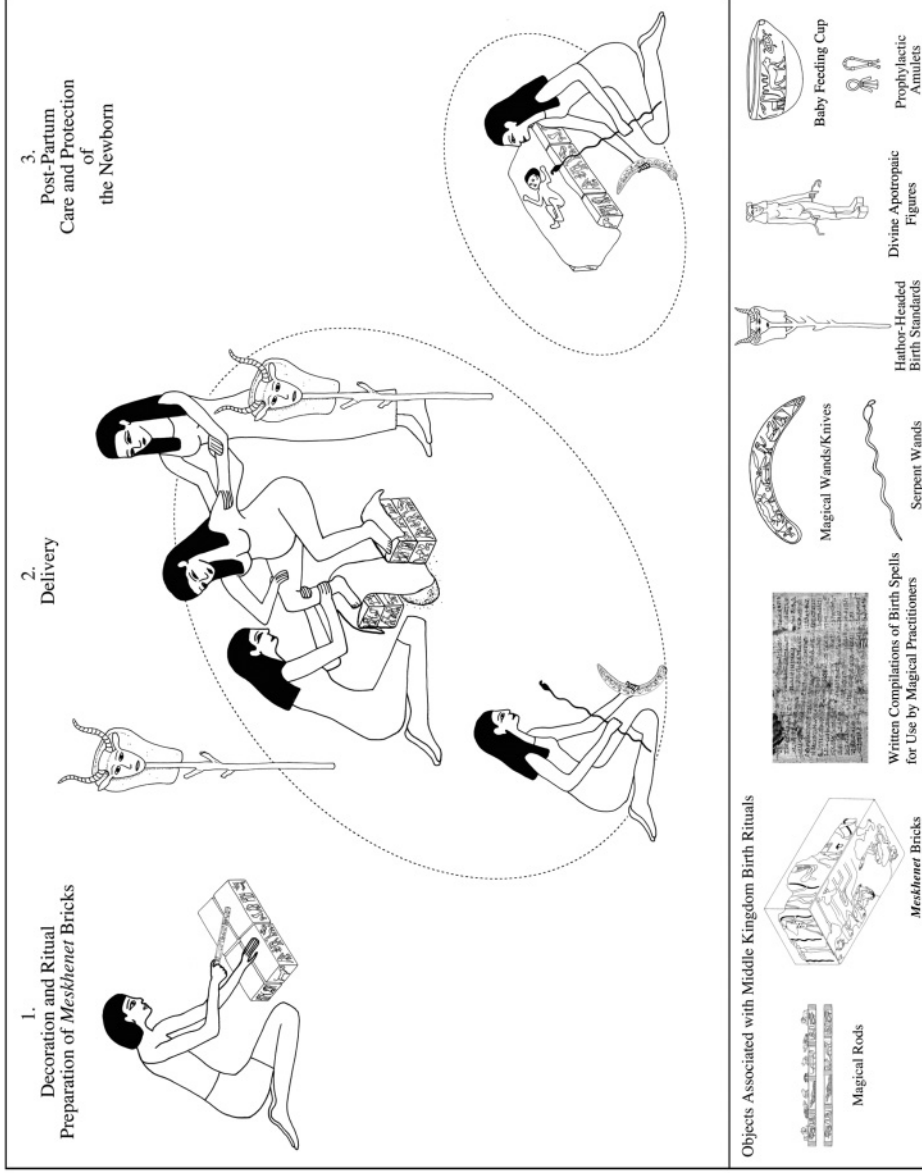


Figure 7.5 Reconstruction of the practice of childbirth during the late Middle Kingdom.

quality and level of artistic investment of birth bricks may have been a function of individual wealth and social status, rather than differing access to the system of religious beliefs and ideology that underlay the practice. The Abydos birth brick is likely to represent the elite end of a much wider practice of decorating and ritually preparing bricks for use in birth procedures. The actual use of the bricks may be closely linked to the magical wands. Commonality of apotropaic imagery suggests that the bricks were stacked to build a birth station (a “pylon for Hathor” in the terminology of the birth spells), which may have been ritually protected by inscribing a protective perimeter using the magical wands. Common evidence of wear patterns on these objects suggests their repeated use in ritual action such as scraping a protective perimeter on the ground.

The birth event would then have occurred within a miniaturized, ritually charged model of the solar *Akhet* in which the birth of the newborn baby draws magically upon the parallels of Egyptian solar mythology to beneficially influence the outcome of labor and delivery. The use of actual Hathor masks placed on standards would create a further layer of access to divinity through which Hathor is invoked not just to protect the birth procedure, but more tangibly to create a divine metastasis whereby the woman in labor becomes a momentary manifestation of the goddess herself. Upon successful delivery, birth bricks may have continued to serve as a protective platform for the newborn in continued apotropaic rituals during this very delicate phase of life. Significant numbers of stillborn and child burials in the settlement of Wah-Sut, as in other ancient Egyptian urban sites, reflect the high degree of infant mortality. This would have been matched by an undoubtedly high mortality rate for women in childbirth. These constitute physical realities that to a large extent help to illuminate the development of these sophisticated magico-religious practices in childbirth during the Middle Kingdom.

The evidence for childbirth beliefs and practices during the late Middle Kingdom at South Abydos provides an archaeological illustration of the fundamental importance of settlement archaeology in deepening our understandings of social developments and cultural practices, particularly where we seek to advance models of cultural change over the *longue durée*. The process of “democratization” of the afterlife which has struck many scholars as a singular phenomenon is definable really as only one facet of a wider complex of cultural changes which characterizes the period. The increasing access to religious imagery in society at large is not constructed just as a way of breaking down the doors to previously royal and elite ideological systems. It is part of a pervasive dynamic adaptation of cultural practices that extend from birth to death in which access to divinity was emphasized. This changing cultural emphasis on depiction of, and “access to,” divinity neither started nor ended with the Middle Kingdom, but it is during this period when we see it emerging full-blown as a defining aspect of changes in popular religious practices and material culture.

The Archaeology of Authority and Institutions

Egyptian civilization’s periodic cycling between phases of unity/centralization (the Kingdoms) and political fragmentation/decentralization (the Intermediate Periods)

has been the basis for many explanations for social, cultural, and technological change. One of the long-engrained assumptions in Egyptological discourse is the notion that the Kingdoms represent periods of state domination – suitably legitimized – where the machinery of government is able to coerce and manipulate lower levels of society. During the Intermediate Periods, the inverse of the situation occurs with the rise of kin-based, local social structures and the loss of the hierarchical, institutional mechanisms of centralized administration, often compounded by foreign intervention. For the study of the period 2050–1650 BCE these issues are significant since the Middle Kingdom state developed one of the most successful and intricate bureaucratic systems in the history of Pharaonic Egypt. How did this system function, particularly as regards the nexus between royal government and the local communities that formed the fabric of society at large?

Textual sources on Middle Kingdom administration include official biographical inscriptions on tombs (primarily from Upper Egyptian centers such as Elephantine, Beni Hasan, Deir el-Bersha, and Asyut) and discrete groups of mortuary stelae (such as the large corpus from the private cenotaph area at Abydos). Actual administrative records include prominently the Lahun papyri (from the late 12th–13th Dynasty from the pyramid complex of Senwosret II: Quirke 1990), a palace accounts papyrus of the 13th Dynasty (Papyrus Boulaq 18), and a 13th-Dynasty administrative document (Papyrus Brooklyn 35.1446: Hayes 1955). Records of specialized administrative activities include the Semna Dispatches (late Middle Kingdom military records from the Second Cataract fortresses: Smither 1945), the Reisner papyri (early 12th-Dynasty accounts papyri including records of the operations of a boatyard at Thinis), and the Hekanakht Letters (a set of correspondence detailing the operations of a small householder of the early 12th Dynasty: Allen 2002).

Despite the limitations inherent in the preserved body of data, a suite of systemic features can be delineated which suggest an evolving organization of authority and administration. A distinction is to be made between the “early” and “late” Middle Kingdoms administrative systems. Governmental organization in the early Middle Kingdom appears in many respects to represent an outgrowth of First Intermediate Period patterns of administration. Provincial titles continue to be prominent (although for the majority of regions there is no preserved evidence); the system can perhaps be seen as an evolving dialogue at the core of which was a pragmatic and piecemeal integration of existing provincial and nomarchal power structures beneath the umbrella of royal government. Over the course of the 12th Dynasty, however, prominent provincial administrative titles progressively disappear. The important Upper Egyptian hereditary title *hery-*tep-aa** (“great overlord”/nomarch) vanishes by the late 12th-Dynasty reign of Senwosret III, a phenomenon that has led many to conclude there was a political program of suppression of the provincial nobility, particularly by this ruler. This notion of an authoritarian elimination of a group of powerful feudal families has largely been discarded (Franke 1991). We do, however, see indications for a process of centralization whereby the vestiges of provincial administrative systems were superseded by a network of royal administrative bureaux and offices that to a significant extent may have streamlined the abilities of the royal government to effect control over local communities.

How was the nexus between royal government and local communities achieved? The interface between central and local authority appears increasingly to have been structured around the system of town and city mayors (*haty-a*) whose authority and activities were directly overseen by the agencies and officials of royal government. Middle Kingdom mayors typically held multiple titles, which included that of *haty-a* (literally “foremost arm”) of their local communities and titles which marked their oversight of the economic and administrative aspects of their local temples: “temple overseer,” “overseer of temple priests.” The mayoral model of local administration may be seen as a mechanism for effectively administering both local communities and their temple institutions via the fewest number of intermediaries. With the decay of “intermediate” provincial power structures that culminates with the reign of Senwosret III, there would have existed in theory only two steps between the households of any local community and the pharaoh himself.

Administrative subdivisions which lay above the level of the town and city mayors are difficult to define in the existing late Middle Kingdom records, though certainly they must have existed. The traditional nome boundaries and names continued to be used, but appear to have served only as geographical and religious designations, no longer serving as functional administrative entities. Some scholars have concluded that communities were grouped into a series of geographically defined administrative districts (*warets*). Problematically, however, the only clear existence of such a super-ordinate district is the entity named *waret tep-res* (the *District of the Head-of-the-South*), which at the time of the 12th Dynasty constituted the area between Elephantine and Asyut in Middle Egypt (traditionally the southern eight nomes), and was administered via a bureau of the vizier at Thebes. The existence of a wider, formalized system of *warets* – however notionally attractive it may be – is more difficult to ascertain. The existing evidence suggests that state administration was effected primarily through two main centers at Itj-Tawy and at Thebes.

The reign of Senwosret III appears to have marked a culmination of this shift towards an enhanced degree of centralization and perhaps a tighter articulation of oversight of local population centers and their temple institutions. As we have seen above, a wider suite of socio-cultural practices suggest a transition at this point between “early” and “late” phases of the Middle Kingdom. The ethos of administration displays an increased degree of precision with the number and functions of individual institutional and official titles being more clearly delineated. Linked to changes in administrative organization during the late Middle Kingdom is a marked increase in use of institutional stamp seals which bear the names of larger administrative entities such as temples, or “departments” such as granaries or storehouses. Paralleling the use of institutional stamps is the dramatic rise in use of scarab seals with personal names and titles as part of daily administrative activities. This practice of sealing, often using a personal name and title seal, forms a valuable window into the mechanics of administration at the height of the Middle Kingdom. Archaeologically, spheres of authority are reflected by the distribution patterns of clay sealings providing the potential for examining the realities of how administration operated on the ground, not merely in accord with a structural framework of institutions and job descriptions (whose functions as

elements of a larger system were not necessarily apparent to individual men in various positions of responsibility).

As we trace evidence for changes in governmental organization, the Middle Kingdom emerges as a period of a tightly structured system that underwent modification, perhaps partially unconsciously, but also likely in response to changing priorities and policies emanating from the king and upper tiers of the central administration. For the late Middle Kingdom in particular, impressive is the success of a system of regulation that functioned from its crystallization c. 1850 through the period of decline of the Middle Kingdom state at the end of the 13th Dynasty c. 1650. In essence, an administrative system that evolved through the period of lengthy stable reigns of the 12th Dynasty managed to operate effectively through the entirety of the 13th Dynasty and survive with apparently little difficulty the period of ephemeral kings who comprise that final stage of the Middle Kingdom.

Here I wish to turn to a model recently proposed in examining the organization of power and authority in the ancient Egyptian state. Mark Lehner has advocated application of the “Patrimonial Household Model” as a means of understanding how the Egyptian state operated, in terms of both large-scale (state-level governmental organs) and smaller-scale (local communities) structures bound as a complex adaptive system (Lehner 2000, and see his chapter in this volume). The Patrimonial Household Model – an adaptation of Weber’s “patrimonial regime” – proposes a hierarchy of nested households bound by personal ties. The administrative “system” did not function as a rational, impersonal bureaucracy, nor were there definable “public” and “private” sectors of society. The total spectrum of economic and social life according to the Patrimonial Household Model functioned as an extension of the royal household. The Middle Kingdom, with its abundant sources on state administrative systems, provides a valuable period in which to consider the applicability of the Patrimonial Household Model. Here we turn again to look at part of ancient South Abydos. The mayoral residence of the town of Wah-Sut functioned as the house of the town’s highest-ranking official, as well as the principal institutional building for this late Middle Kingdom community. Its archaeology reflects the operation of local administrative mechanisms and the nexus between central and local administrative mechanisms through the period of changing patterns of royal power.

Case Study 2: The Mayoral Residence of Wah-Sut

As we have seen above, the major structure examined to date in the town of Wah-Sut is a mayoral residence (*per haty-a*) which was occupied and used by a series of local mayors over a period of some 150 years, from the reign of Senwosret III through to the very end of the 13th Dynasty. The community at Wah-Sut, which may have numbered on the order of several thousand people, represents a state-initiated town. Designed by royal architects under state mandate, it might be suggested that this town is an instance of a special-purpose community that did not function in ways analogous with the main bulk of more “organic” towns and cities. Although it was state-initiated, the urban center established at South

Abydos appears to have replicated a system of settlement organization and administration that is representative of the late Middle Kingdom as a whole.

The mayoral residence is, as mentioned, a 52×80 m building, constructed on a low rise on the desert edge (Figure 7.6). Physically and spatially it would have dominated other, smaller households which extended down the desert margin to the edge of the Nile floodplain, as well as a series of other elite households extending in blocks adjacent to the mayoral residence. The building has a complex interior subdivided into a series of separate blocks. The structure as a whole underwent an extensive series of alterations over the 150-year history of its use. The core of the building is comprised by the actual residential unit, fronted by a pillared entry hall and ostentatious columned portico (central courtyard). Room blocks surrounding this area include areas devoted to provisioning of the core residence, as well as – in its original design – a block of chambers used for large-volume grain storage. Notable is the significant remodeling of the building's original design over the course of nearly two centuries of occupation. One major area of transformation is the northwest section, where original granary chambers were remodeled to form a subsidiary residential unit with its own pillared portico. A formal garden with planted trees flanks this area. The birth brick which we have discussed above, and a set of other evidence, suggests this area of Building A may have served as a female residential unit, perhaps occupied by a wife of one of the six known mayors of Wah-Sut.

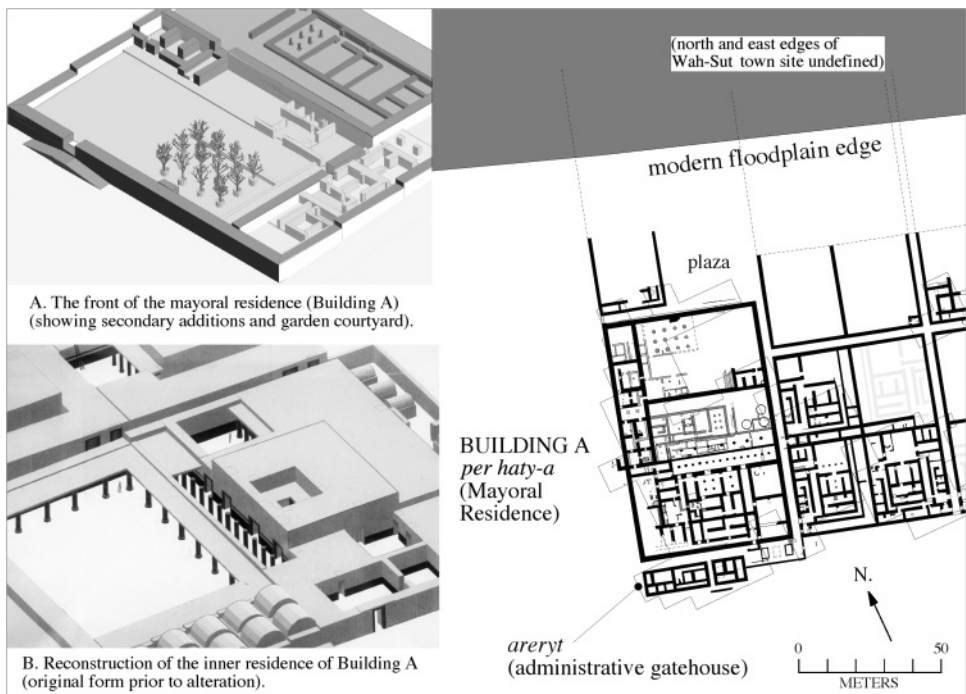


Figure 7.6 The mayoral residence of Wah-Sut, South Abydos.

Important aspects of the functioning of the mayoral residence are reflected in structures associated with the front (Nile-facing) and back (desert-facing) parts of the building. Excavation outside the front of Building A revealed a large, open town square or plaza. A ramp system against the front wall of the mayoral residence leads up to the main doorway, which was raised above the surface level of the plaza. Within the building a series of access corridors and doorways led inwards to reach the main residential unit. The nature of the architecture reflects a tightly controlled mode of access through this main doorway to the person and activities of the mayor.

A separate doorway into Building A appears to have functioned as the primary administrative entrance. Two imposing, multi-roomed brick buildings outside the back doorway have associated deposits of seal impressions which include institutional stamp seals naming the *areryt*, or “administrative gatehouse,” of the *per haty-a*. These structures appear to constitute the remains of the actual *areryt*: a facility manned by a staff of officials and scribes who managed inflow and outflow of commodities from the mayoral residence. Based on the seal impressions, activities channeled through the *areryt* included local oversight of the nearby mortuary temple of Senwosret III (of which the mayor was also the titular administrator), as well as extra-local correspondence evidenced by a high volume of seal impressions from papyrus letters. A significant component of the sealing assemblage are impressions of the seals of “royal sealbearers” – the highest tier of royal administrators (Grajetzki 2003) – as well as fragments of papyrus sealings imprinted with royal seals – the mark of operation of central governmental departments.

In a number of respects, the archaeology of the mayoral residence of Wah-Sut fits exceedingly well with predictions of the Patrimonial Household Model. This was a large local household which functioned as a nodal point in economic and social relations for the community at South Abydos. The building, and the person, of the mayor formed a point of convergence in the web of economic and administrative activities that maintained Wah-Sut. Moreover, the presence of extra-local/central state seal impressions reflects a household that was the primary channel of interaction between officials and bureaux of the central government. One can see how the entity of the mayoral residence functions as the key organizational institution of the town and linchpin in the management of the mortuary foundation of Senwosret III at South Abydos. As implied in the original formulations of Weber’s patrimonial regime, and more recently by the Patrimonial Household Model, the mayoral household appears to constitute a smaller-scale version of the greater royal household (*per-nesut*). With its dominance over local economic activities, oversight of the nearby temple, and complex system of managing the flow of goods, the *per haty-a* operated in some respects like a royal palace writ small. We see the institution of the *per haty-a* at South Abydos as an organizational vehicle which was established by royal mandate and modeled on the prevailing system of mayoral administration as the administrative nexus between communities and central government in the late Middle Kingdom.

On the other hand, however, the corpus of administrative seal impressions reflects the operations of a tightly regimented, formalized, bureaucratic apparatus (Figure 7.7). Local officials and institutions employed their seals as a mark of the



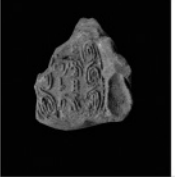













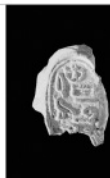



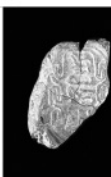





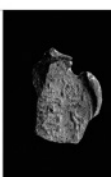



1. Royal Administrative Officials					
	 <i>Royal sealbearer, sole companion, treasurer, Senebsumay.</i>		 <i>Royal sealbearer, high steward, Res.</i>		 <i>Chief scribe of the herald, Ankhu.</i>
2. The Mayor of Wah-Sut					
		 <i>Mayor and overseer of temple priesthood, Neferher.</i>			
3. Local Cult Personnel					
	 <i>The Wab-priest Heri of Enduring-are-the-Places-of-Khakaure- maa-kheru-in-Abydos.</i>		 <i>Lector priest of Wah-Sut, Sobekhotep.</i>		
4. Production and Management of Goods					
	 <i>Attendant of the chamber of incoming goods, Hetep-wer-nefer.</i>		 <i>Carpenter of Wah-Sut, Senebef, possessor of veneration.</i>		 <i>The brewer, Amenemhat.</i>
5. Administration of Agricultural Resources					
	 <i>Estate overseer, accountant of livestock, Aamw.</i>		 <i>The bearer of documents of lands, Iy.</i>		 <i>Estate overseer, Henenu, repeating life.</i>
6. Military Personnel					
	 <i>The officer of the city regiment, Nebsumenu, possessor of veneration.</i>		 <i>Commander of the crew of the ruler Sobekhotep's son, Montuhotep.</i>		 <i>The officer of the crew of the ruler Khnum(mes) (?).</i>

Figure 7.7 A hierarchy of officials: Middle Kingdom administration as represented in the community of Wah-Sut at South Abydos.

fulfillment of responsibilities and accountability in ongoing administrative operations. Seals bearing the name of royal governmental offices and institutions reflect the presence of a hierarchically organized system by which this one local community was bound to the agencies of central administration. Moreover, although we are still lacking a large sample of comparable communities for the late Middle Kingdom, the extant textual data suggest that Wah-Sut did not function in ways that were appreciably different from elsewhere in Egypt. The governmental titles as well as range of local institutions seen at Wah-Sut are replicated from the Mediterranean to Aswan. The degree of standardization of late Middle Kingdom administration bespeaks a level of governmental “rationalization” that I believe departs from tenets of the Patrimonial Household Model. I would suggest that the Patrimonial Household Model has much to offer in understanding the organization of ancient Egyptian society. But, at a certain level, the details do indeed appear to go out of focus (see Lehner 2000:342). There was a broad, engrained structure of hierarchical households which indeed was conspicuously manipulated by the Middle Kingdom state. At the same time, however, there was a level of “rationalization” to a state system: a web of institutions, offices, and officials which was not merely a coercive overlay, but one which permeated, manipulated (and replicated) this system to the benefit of both local communities and the royal government (“great house”) of the pharaoh.

Dwelling exclusively on the household as the only unit of ownership and agency risks itself becoming as reductionist as archaeological models that create an impersonal, actor-less structure devoid of social relationships and agency. Middle Kingdom society was not merely a fractal hierarchy of nested households linked by personal ties. Perhaps we can conclude that a defining feature of Middle Kingdom society is an ongoing dialogue between the role of patrimonialism and attempts, perhaps both conscious and unconscious, to enmesh a web of governmental officers and departments with formal oversight of economic and social life. Viewed within its own terms and conceptual boundaries, Middle Kingdom governmental organization approached a high level of rationalization that permitted the system to survive even through the period of rapid turnover in the kingship that defines the 13th Dynasty.

Conclusion

The Middle Kingdom arose, initially on shaky legs, c. 2050, to spark a period of state regeneration that must be considered to be one of the great periods of Egyptian civilization. As we have seen, the civilizational template of Egypt’s “great tradition” and a nuanced historical awareness of the past informed the ways in which the elite and rulers of the Middle Kingdom defined their society. Although archaism and connections with the past were explicitly manipulated as symbols of legitimacy, the Middle Kingdom was a period of innovation and social change. Religious beliefs and practices display a form of symbolic egalitarianism whereby access to divinity, both in daily life and in funerary traditions, permeated the bulk of the population. Changes in material cultural forms show that these new traditions referenced models of the past, but, in the wake of the significant

socio-economic changes of the First Intermediate Period, archaism formed only a limited vehicle in a wider sea of change and innovation. The Middle Kingdom became in many ways a classical phase of Pharaonic civilization. Achievements in high cultural forms of art, architecture, and especially literature were, not surprisingly, again civilizational models as Egyptians of the New Kingdom cast their eyes back to the period of the kings of Itj-Tawy. It is important to recognize that the Middle Kingdom began in Thebes and ended in Thebes. The “southern city” always retained a special administrative status – as the *waret tep-resy* – through the Middle Kingdom. It was there that the final kings of the Middle Kingdom returned as their ability to rule the north disintegrated. Tellingly, one of the major achievements of this time, the highly organized administrative system which reached its formalization in the late Middle Kingdom, survived this period of decline and remained active in Thebes when the leaders of the Theban 17th Dynasty accrued power.

In the study of Egyptian history and archaeology it is important to recognize that the founders of the New Kingdom, c. 1550 BCE, were conscious not so much of their role in founding a “new” kingdom, but of their role in re-establishing the order of the Middle Kingdom. In 2005, work of the Centre Franco-Egyptien d’Étude des Temples de Karnak discovered a striking well-preserved pair-statue of the 13th-Dynasty king Neferhotep I and his queen. This figure once stood inside the Middle Kingdom temple dedicated to the god Amun at Thebes. The statue cannot be removed from the ground as directly atop it sits an obelisk of the 18th-Dynasty female pharaoh Hatshepsut. Forever supporting the obelisk of Hatshepsut above it, these monuments create a striking metaphor for the relationship between the Middle and New Kingdoms. The culture of the early New Kingdom was indelibly tied to the Middle Kingdom, just as the formation of the Middle Kingdom and its period of innovation is linked to the models provided by the Old Kingdom.

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