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Lynn Meskell: *Private Life in New Kingdom Egypt*

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The Interpretative Framework

We had to clear away the brush, stake our claim, and, like archaeologists approaching a site known to contain riches too great to be systematically explored, settle for excavating a few preliminary trenches.

—GEORGES DUBY, *A History of Private Life: From Pagan Rome to Byzantium*

THE MODERN WORLD has a very specific and well-defined concept of *private life*, although it does not maintain a monopoly on the construct. The constitution of our own private lives has been tacitly set against the discourses of the capitalist marketplace, increasing governmental intervention, new technologies, and the forces of globalism. Apprehending a contextual picture of ancient Egyptian *private life* is thus already inflected with Western constructs and cultural baggage, and yet there are threads of commonality that resonate for the archaeologist and interpreter. Endeavoring to craft such a history of private life is problematic, yet no comparable phrase or set of phrases adequately covers the conceptual territory. Despite the semantic disparities and cultural specificities that separate ancient and modern, perhaps there has always been some notion of the private. I am not suggesting that there is an essentialist construct of private life that binds people seamlessly across spatial and temporal boundaries. Yet there are connections worth exploring. Even in cultures where life is more public than is easily comprehensible in Western society, there are private zones of immunity: social networks (often glossed as family or kin), emotional relationships between individuals, the lived experience of the household (not necessarily a physical environment), responses to death, and so on. One can also acknowledge that the boundaries between social spheres—public or private, and living experience and the realm of death, for example—are overlapping and permeable. Ultimately, I suggest that the concept of private life provides one meaningful framework to access ancient social life. And one useful way to approach the Egyptian material is according to its own coherent template: that of the human life cycle, which forms the structure of this book.

High modernity affords us a very specific perspective on locality, authenticity, and belonging and offers an even greater range of self-conscious

options for the life project of the individual. What social theorists call the *project of the self* is perhaps the most potent demarcator of our age: the reflexive relationship with the inner self, our construction of self-identity, and our fundamental desires for introspection, analysis, and self-development through the various life stages. The iconic sign of that discursive production is ultimately the body, indelibly connected to the workings of the individual's life project and a visible emblem of our sense of individuality, ethnicity, affiliation, sexuality, and so on. Yet these articulations seem so inherently modern that they may appear unconnected to cultures like New Kingdom Egypt (c. 1539–1075), shrouded in their antiquity and cultural specificity. Examining cultural difference is certainly one aim of this book, and I do not wish to conflate ancient and modern constructions and experience. This theme runs parallel with my desire to strip bare some of the preoccupations and misconceptions that frequently haunt our representations of ancient Egypt. It is not unfair to say that the intellectual colonization of Egypt continues.

Another aim is to present the complexity and sophistication of Egyptian society and to dispel the privileged position we have created for ourselves as primary bearers of culture in the age of post-Enlightenment. New Kingdom Egypt bears all the hallmarks of civilization that we immediately claim for ourselves as inheritors of an intricate Western European lineage. I hope to chart some of those features throughout the book: a substantial corpus of existential writing about humanity and the cosmos, complex mythico-religious systems, a highly articulated sense of embodiment and personhood, evocations of romantic love, eroticism, and sexuality, elaborate social relations, and so on. Some forms of data might offer windows into the personal world, whereas much remains silent. But there are certainly points of connection between ancients and moderns, even though our taxonomies, cultural language and expression, experiences, and outcomes are very different.

Many researchers have to face the eternal hermeneutic dilemma of not being within the culture that they study—of being an interloper with a vastly different language, symbolic system, social setting, and worldview. This is true for anthropologists in the present and all writers of history alike: we are all prefigured in our own setting. There is a great risk of missing the cadences and characteristics of that other culture. It is vital to remain aware of this separation and dangerous to assume too great a certainty and familiarity with others from the past. Various studies of ancient Egypt are perhaps guilty of this normalization, making “them” more like “us” through language and sentiment. Yet it is those very differences that make Egyptian society so mesmerizing and endlessly fascinating. With the insights of social constructionism, it is no longer justifiable to write seamless or isomorphic histories, or to ignore our

misunderstandings, the fragmentation, and lacunae (see Foucault 1972). The gaps in the primary evidence are an interpretative space and therefore have a weight of their own in the writing of history.

PRIVATE LIFE AND SOCIAL HISTORY

French historians such as Philippe Ariès, Georges Duby, and others (see Ariès 1962, 1974; Veyne 1987; Duby 1988; Chartier 1989; Prost and Vincent 1991) who pioneered the study of private life from antiquity to modernity have argued succinctly that in all times and places some sense of distinction has been made between the public—that which is open to the community and subject to outside authority—and the private. The private zone, as Duby calls it, is one of relative immunity, where one might relax, take ease, and lie about unshielded. This is where the family thrives, the realm of domesticity; it is also a realm of secrecy and of passions. This private sphere contains our most precious possessions, where we belong only to ourselves. What is divulged here might sometimes be at odds with exterior appearances. In some ways, Egyptian experience does not seem so far from this description. There was a different mode of living within the house or village walls that was at variance with the presentation of the self in formal society or at work. Much of ancient life was probably lived out of doors as well. Textual evidence from the New Kingdom village of Deir el Medina suggests that codes of behavior during work time or outside the village were enacted in ways quite dissimilar from those pertaining to domestic affairs. Levels of tolerance, leniency, and propriety vary greatly across contexts.

Private life is not something given in nature from the beginning of time. It is a historical reality, which different societies have construed in different ways. The boundaries of private life are not laid down once and for all; the division of human activity between public and private spheres is subject to change. (Prost 1991: 3)

For much of pharaonic society the private zone must have been commensurate with the house, and to some degree the village. However, it would be a cultural conflation to render the house a “home” with all its cozy associations. Like the French historians, when discussing the history of dwellings I hope to avoid using anachronistic terms such as “bedrooms” (contra Kemp 1989), in order to deflect speculation about the history of individualism, or worse, of intimacy. Yet the house and the household remain the principal domain of private experience, thus providing a stable and continuous foundation for this study. Every dwelling shelters a group, a complex social organism, within which inequalities and contradictions

present in the larger society are brought to the fore. Throughout this book, I have tried to move across the social demarcations of class and status, attempting to find evidence for nonelite groups, that is, those individuals who made up the bulk of the Egyptian populace. One way of envisaging these designations is to see Egyptian society as crudely divided between those who had servants or “slaves” and those who were in service. I also attempt to unravel the vectors of age and sex to present a range of experiences of social life: there can no longer be nomothetic or broad class treatments for single groups, such as women, children, or foreigners. Clearly, not all individuals in a single category shared commensurate experiences; these would have varied according to rank, status, education, age, stage of life, and a host of other social variables. The new perspectives of feminist theory and ethnic studies have challenged the older reductive and totalizing views, some of which still hold sway in Egyptology and mainstream archaeology.

From New Kingdom Egypt there is more evidence for reconstructing private life than for any other pre-Roman culture, yet little has appeared that exploits this amazingly rich material. The study of Egypt has largely remained impervious to the incursions of theoretical developments in history and the social sciences. Topics such as “finding women’s voices” are now regarded as too simplistic and reductive for the writing of a nuanced ancient history, but they still have a niche in Egyptology. These topics are now of primarily historiographic value in other disciplines. In terms of creating a sophisticated access to the ancient data, the *Annales* school of French historians has led the way, perhaps best illustrated by Paul Veyne’s seminal article on the Roman family (1978), and followed by the four-volume *History of Private Life* series initiated by Ariès and Duby. Their bold endeavor has yet to be surpassed, and no study of those cultures prior to the Greeks has come close to Ariès and Duby’s project. Their encyclopedic scope, empirical rigor, and theoretical sophistication are exemplars of what can be teased out of the ancient materials—although significantly they said nothing about ancient Egypt.

Private life in the classical world has been of interest certainly since the nineteenth century (e.g., Becker 1895; Johnston 1903; McDaniel [1871] 1963); however, the same subject for Egyptian and Near Eastern societies has received much less attention (but see Wilkinson 1841; Erman 1894). This can be explained to some degree by the disciplinary setting for such writing, which was and continues to be predominantly in the field of history rather than archaeology. Moreover, societies such as Greece or Rome have occupied a prominent place in the long history of Western cultural values, whereas the position of Egyptian culture was somewhat ambivalent. Many recent books address in various ways the “daily lives” of the ancient Egyptians with mixed and varied success (e.g., James 1984;

Stead 1986; El Mahdy 1987; Strouhal 1992; Donadoni 1997; Watterson 1997; Wilson 1997; Brewer and Teeter 1999). While some of these books provide very useful and insightful overviews, most fall into the trap of dividing the primary material into discrete Western taxonomies. In this respect they are part of a long tradition of writing about the history of private life but are also part of a genre that was typical of writing in other disciplines in the first half of the twentieth century. It is important to sketch the broader context of such works, as they form the model for these and other books on ancient Egyptian life.

In looking at the historiographical trends in writing about literate, premodern cultures, there is a noticeable progression in thematic focus. This takes into account individual books as well as articles in influential periodicals, such as the *Journal of Family History*, *Journal of Marriage and Family*, and *Journal of Medieval Studies*. Many twentieth-century studies of ancient cultures outside Egypt drew on documentary evidence, concentrating on kinship, family life, and the dichotomous tensions between public and private spheres. Earlier work was polarized by a familiar range of Cartesian dualities such as male:female, nature:culture, inside:outside. The distinction between public and private seems to have been an essential point of departure for studies in the 1960s. In the following decade, French or French-inspired scholars were fascinated by the relationship between public and private and the concept of the *domus*, most famously formulated in Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's *Montaillou* (1980). Also groundbreaking in this tradition was Lawrence Stone's magisterial work *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500–1800* (1977). Stone's view of the family is not simply structurally defined, but also rests on *histoire des sentiments*, or constellations of attitudes about domestic life. His work, along with that of Le Roy Ladurie, is in some ways the model for this undertaking, though there are fundamental areas where one can disagree with both. Both Stone and Le Roy Ladurie realized the potential of a dialogue between domestic space, historical voices (often marginalized ones that were omitted from conventional histories), and imaginative analysis. The 1970s also saw the first nuanced treatments of woman and sexuality, as women's lives became segregated from the overall project of social life, with the rise of feminism (e.g., Mitterauer and Sieder 1982; Atkinson 1983; Hufton 1984; Nicholas 1985; Millard 1986; Gies 1987). To some degree, the analysis of children's positions and experience followed rather later after initial work by Philippe Ariès (1962) and Lloyd DeMause (1974). Their work on the history of childhood paved the way for scholars researching this largely ignored social group (e.g., Nicholas 1985; Geary 1994). As a corollary, studies on aging also came into vogue (Laslett 1995), thus covering both ends of the life cycle's spectrum.

In the past few decades, gender studies have been interpolated into almost every scholarly discipline. It is important to distinguish between work on gender and women's history, since much of the latter masquerades as a more inclusive gender study. Research on marriage had always been linked to prosopographic work and kinship studies, yet the study of women's lives constituted another somewhat different sphere. From the 1980s onward there has been a vast outpouring of books devoted solely to women's lives in which men are absent (e.g., Hufton 1984; Nicholas 1985; Gero and Conkey 1991; Pantel 1992; Cameron and Kuhrt 1993; Fantham et al. 1994; Herlihy 1995; Leyser 1995; Brooten 1996). Many of these were influenced directly or indirectly by Sarah Pomeroy's groundbreaking *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves* (1975). In more synthetic works, traditional areas such as law, demography, inheritance, customs, housing, and religion continued to be foregrounded. Sexuality took center stage in the 1990s after two decades of steadily increasing output (e.g., Boswell 1994; Klingshirn 1994; Brooten 1996). Celibacy, virginity, and religious law have had a long-standing interest for European scholars yet this burgeoning field was closely tied to contemporary sexual politics, the rise of gay activism, and later the development and deployment of queer theory (Lancaster and di Leonardo 1997; Weeks 1997). In the same way, research on medieval marriage was a large part of post-1970s work, suggesting a linkage between Western society's current reconsideration of the institution and its general lack of success. Both of these historiographical trends may reflect European interest in reexamining its own documented history and the possibilities for other ways of constituting relationships. In concert with studies of gender and sexuality, scholarly attention was then directed toward the body, selfhood, self-narration, intimacy, sexual behavior, questions of individuality, and the individual generally (e.g., Duby 1988; Leyser 1995; Nicholas 1985; Sears 1986; Rosenthal 1996).

This necessarily brief survey of private life in Western scholarship shows that a radical shift in subject matter and theoretical approach has occurred in the last two decades. A similar perspective can be gleaned from social anthropology's ethnographic trends in the study of private life. Whereas earlier studies had a clear focus on the family as their foundation, current societal shifts have problematized that particular bedrock. At the heart of this refiguring lies the whole question of what constitutes kin. Anthropologists such as Sylvia Yanagisako and Carol Delaney posit (1995a: 9–10) that in the past “any particular kinship system was thought to be a cultural elaboration of the biological facts of human reproduction, and anthropologists recognized that there were significant differences in how far these genealogical maps extended and how relations in them were classified.” David Schneider famously critiqued the reduction of kinship

to genealogy, arguing that kinship cannot be conflated simply with a biological infrastructure, since the cultural dimension, terms, and practices vary widely from society to society (see Weston 1995: 88). This is also the case when Egyptian ideas of family and household are examined. If it is difficult to refigure kin outside our own Western terminologies, then consider the modern deconstruction of kinship. Euro-American notions of kinship are being challenged by two powerful domains: new reproductive technologies, and changing gender and sexual relationships (Dolgin 1995; McKinnon 1995). Biological relationships are no longer clear-cut since the inception of in-vitro fertilization (Strathern 1992). Moreover, the increased presence of same-sex relationships and the creation of “new families” is a direct challenge to the familial status quo based on bloodlines. Today, we are effectively rewriting kin in social and legal spheres. This underscores the fragility of “natural” domains, since both science and sexuality have begun to impinge upon what many would posit as the most fundamental of human social relationships at the very nexus of private life.

SOURCES AND PROBLEMS OF INTERPRETATION

Accessing private life in a meaningful way is invariably circumscribed by the types of sources available and their fragmentary, resistant natures. Some have likened the task to an archaeology of the past, as did Georges Duby (1987: vii) in his foreword to the first volume of *A History of Private Life*, which is quoted as the epigraph to this chapter.

This book focuses upon four primary data sources for compiling a history of private life in Egypt. Those sources are documentary, iconographic, archaeological, and what one might broadly call anthropological. Each set of data has its own inherent biases and strengths. For the New Kingdom, the first three sources are particularly rich, and it is not an overstatement to claim that we know more about this period than any other in pharaonic history. For the most part the analyses are restricted to this period, introducing cross-temporal analogies only where they were deemed applicable. Many previous studies of aspects of life, from magical practices to funerary traditions, tend to seamlessly amalgamate examples from distinctly diverse historical periods. Clearly, by focusing on trends and similarities we forget the dynamic nature of Egyptian culture, which was always in contact with its neighbors and regularly borrowed, assimilated, and desired numerous foreign commodities, styles, deities, and so on. While the pace of change in pharaonic Egypt may not be comparable to modern society, it remains axiomatic that cultures are not static—certainly not throughout a period so vast as the Bronze Age.

We cannot simply interpolate data from other periods when the New Kingdom sources are meager, nor assume that socio historic developments have little effect on material culture or belief systems even if some aspects of village life might remain superficially similar. The unbroken thread of pharaonic culture is a fantasy created in the West, part of an imaginary constructed out of romantic and colonial narratives about the Orient—now convincingly exposed and undermined (Said 1979; Mitchell 1990; Bahrani 1998; Bowman and Rogan 1999).

Because of Egyptology's disciplinary history, the traditional area of study has always been ancient language—the translation and interpretation of ancient writings, whether in documents, on monuments, or in other media. This remains the most privileged domain of Egyptology and has resulted in a split between scholars who study texts or iconography and those who undertake archaeological investigations (Kemp 1984a; Meskell 1994a). Few individuals command both, and this disciplinary divide has had serious, negative repercussions for the holistic understanding of Egyptian culture. The resultant downplaying of archaeological materials has meant that fewer, less systematic excavations have been carried out, notably on settlement sites where specialists would derive most of their evidence for social life. Such a predicament has not been lost on Egyptian archaeologists (Bietak 1979; O'Connor 1997), although remedying it is not without significant problems, as discussed below.

Given this situation, it is not surprising that most work in Egyptology is directed toward language and documents. The New Kingdom has yielded the greatest number of personal documents and inscriptions of any period before the Graeco-Roman, many from the settlement site of Deir el Medina. These offer unprecedented insights into historical events, village happenings, and personal histories, giving us a firmer footing from which to discuss private life. In fact, much of what a modern interpreter would deem “private” often became public through the bureaucratic recording of arguments, hostilities, scandals, and court cases, and the custom of reading written documents aloud. These daily, sometimes intimate narratives give their interpreters the impression of being able to “know” the people of the New Kingdom, since many of their sentiments, aspirations, and concerns resonate with our own. The very act of translating the Egyptian language involves a process of making “them” more like “us,” using our own familiar words to understand a conceptual system different from our own. The process of translation flattens out difference and diversity, transcribing words and concepts that may have no exact parallel in our own language. The hermeneutic pitfalls of this process are considerable. However, this is not to say that documentary evidence is fatally flawed or unusable—far from it. It provides a connective bridge between the ancient Egyptians and

ourselves and gives the sort of background lacking in so many analyses of prehistoric societies. Egyptologists can, with some measure of accuracy, discuss everything from notions of personhood, to attitudes toward women, to fears about death and beyond, from a culturally specific foundation. Many Egyptologists bemoan that they cannot say more. Yet what they can say remains a great deal more than for scholars working on non-literate societies.

Ancient Egyptian literature is also a central source that allows a specific window onto New Kingdom culture. Didactic texts, poetry, and stories provide vital evidence for many vectors and attributes of society. Unsurprisingly, there is no consensus within Egyptology on the nature of these specific documents. Jan Assmann has frequently characterized such texts as a nonfunctional, residual category where the meaning resides solely in the text rather than its context. Instead he develops the notion of “cultural texts,” so that the *Tale of Sinuhe* is likened to a range of ceremonies, dances, festivals, and images that embody knowledge, tradition, and social identity (1999a: 7). This view has been challenged by Antonio Loprieno (1996), who asserts that autoreflexivity and intertextuality must be considered. He argues that Egyptologists need to consider fictionality—the notion of possible worlds constructed within Egyptian writing. Thus one can think of two symbolic systems: topos and mimesis. The first describes the world as Egyptians thought of it, which specifically pertains to didactic or instructional texts. The second relates to the world of the individual author, and this type of literature is best described as realistic narrative (Moers 1999: 45). These are methodological issues that are not resolved easily, yet there are more serious questions of representation.

With the use of written data come additional problems, such as who has access to literacy, and the politics of recording. Research has shown that probably between 1 and 4 percent of the pharaonic population were literate (Baines 1983, 1988), and they were largely the elite, male, scribal class throughout much of Egyptian history. Education was restricted to those boys who were to be trained for official duties and who would eventually be answerable to the government. This meant that women, middle- and lower-status individuals, those of servile status, and probably most foreigners were excluded from the benefits of literacy. Presumably there was little hope of advancing one’s social position without such skills. Rather than recording their own voices, these people were the *subjects* of the documents, and this has obvious implications for the politics of writing Egyptian history. However, literacy can be seen as a sliding scale, with many individuals in-between literate and illiterate: some who could perhaps make out symbols but could not write, others who could write to a limited degree, and so on. Women and artisans may have constituted a substantial group of such

people. Of the 470 letters from the village of Deir el Medina, only about 14 percent are sent by, or addressed to, women (Sweeney 1993: 525). It was thus possible for women to dictate a letter and have a reply read aloud, which facilitated some level of outside communication. Yet one must reiterate that written histories in all contexts are subjective enterprises. The historian is left only a trace of the original whole and then has to concentrate on specific documents and their lacunae. As with archaeology, there is no total recovery.

Iconography is another major source for New Kingdom life, and it lies at the nexus of textual and archaeological evidence. Word and image were deeply intertwined in Egypt; both were efficacious and could be functionally powerful in this world and the next. Magical texts and images could change an individual's circumstances, and the written name itself was a potent symbol. Yet images had the extra power of being visually evocative. In the case of tomb decoration (the iconographic data set referred to most frequently), this was of special import. The images were the bearers of the owner's identity, personality, and visual likeness and could be called upon as referents in the afterlife. Yet images also had the power to improve upon reality, portraying the tomb owner, for instance, as youthful, beautiful, and without imperfections. We have to remember that these images were created by male artisans specifically for other men, as tomb owners, and were there to serve specific needs (Meskell 1998a: 175–76). They were also there to serve him sexually. Images of young women could also operate as functional pictures to ensure his sexual revivification in the afterlife (as outlined in Chapter 5). The element of male fantasy in the construction of these specific types of female imagery is only now emerging. Too often iconography, especially tomb iconography, has been taken as a literal source of evidence for life experience.

There are other biases inherent in the iconographic evidence. First, a specific world created for the mortuary sphere has only tangential bearing on the experience of daily life. Given the Egyptian aspiration for perfection in the hereafter, funerary art is likely to be skewed toward achieving that goal, rather than being an accurate representation. Second, the images are highly politicized and constructed around the male tomb owner, rather than reflecting the desired reality of those additionally rendered, such as women, children, and workers (Meskell 1998a: 176–78). Even the portrayal of their everyday activities is clouded by the practice of male artisans decorating the tombs and probably having little exposure to the actual details of specific activities (see Samuel 1993). While such scenes are valuable for studying technology and craft, they should not be mistaken for literal recordings of processes that can then be reconstructed step by step. Third, tomb paintings were costly commodities that were only available to

the elite or those who were trained artisans, such as the workmen at Deir el Medina. By default, a limited range of socioeconomic strata is represented, reinforcing the elite bias evident with the production of texts.

A major source of evidence for private life, especially for individuals of the middle and lower strata who composed the majority of the population, is the archaeological data. Throughout the volume I draw heavily on both settlement and mortuary archaeology and use it dialectically with the textual sources. Archaeology offers a counter to the documentary record produced by an all-male elite, in that it can shed light on the silent masses—women, children, foreigners, the nonelite, and individuals of servile status. We have material evidence for household activities and domestic life that were not the subjects of written texts. Moreover, archaeological evidence can hint at more subversive trends that explicitly defy the hegemony of the textual record. For example, official records in the Amarna period would give the impression of a pervasive new religion centered on the Aten, whereas the archaeology of the workmen's village to the north of the site reveals that the inhabitants continued to worship the traditional deities in their homes (Kemp 1987) and in their chapels (Bomann 1991: 74), with little or no regard for Akhenaten's (reg. 1353–1336) new religious program. Recent analysis by Verena Lepper (1998: 58–69) indicates that this pattern may have been even more widespread throughout the city, given the significant number of objects featuring traditional deities. Here material culture is a source for counterevidence and can provide additional strata of information for the complex workings of private life.

The main problem with using archaeological material—apart from the obvious questions of subjectivity and interpretation common to all sources—is the standard of fieldwork done in the last century or so of excavation. Current excavations at Amarna or Memphis will be more reliable than those conducted in the nineteenth century at Gurob for instance. Most of the evidence for domestic life and the funerary sphere stems from Deir el Medina, excavated over the first half of the twentieth century by Bernard Bruyère. Some Egyptologists claim that this material was not excavated to a standard that is readily usable, yet his methodologies were more advanced and less ethnocentric than those of his contemporaries at Amarna. The material from Deir el Medina is clearly substantive and has the potential to yield important insights into living experience and the constitution of inequalities based on age, sex, status, ethnicity, and so on (Meskell 1998b, 1999a, 1999b). For this reason, coupled with the abundant textual evidence, Deir el Medina forms the basis for much of this volume. Egyptologists are generally reticent to do the sort of analysis that archaeology requires or to incorporate this type of work. More seriously, important Egyptian settlement sites like Deir el Medina and the Roman period

town of Karanis have not received due archaeological analysis, since the wealth of documentary data has overshadowed the richness of the nontextual material.

The fourth methodological source is best described as anthropological and cross-cultural. This primarily consists of case studies drawn from a wide temporal and geographical range, utilized so as to accentuate the possibilities for difference in the ancient record. Too often scholars have presumed a seamless extrapolation from our own contexts to the Egyptian situation, which is untenable and misleading. Restoring the cultural difference that Egypt possesses for the Western viewer is an explicit part of the current project. If we make the ancient Egyptians more like us, we circumscribe the richness of their historical specificity. This is intellectually irresponsible and also undermines the *raison d'être* of our own fascination with Egypt.

EGYPTIAN EXPERIENCE

Egyptian history is written from an elite perspective, using the sources generated by pharaohs and their officials. From these predominantly textual sources Egyptologists have constructed the frameworks for a social history. But how does one characterize the specificities of elite culture? As John Baines (1991: 132) remarks:

In most periods, the elite who ran affairs of state were a close-knit group of a few hundred. They were all men, and they were the fathers of the next generation of the elite. Although no rule required that positions be inherited, elite children stood an altogether better chance of reaching high office than others. The core elite with their families numbered two or three thousand people. There were perhaps five thousand more literate people, who with their families would have brought the total ruling and administrative class to fewer than 50,000, of whom perhaps one in eight were literate officeholders. They might have formed 3 to 5 percent of the population, which, in the Old Kingdom was perhaps one to one and a half million.

Their experience was very different from that of the vast majority of the Egyptian populace. By virtue of their wealth and station, the elite constructed monuments that have survived to a greater degree than those of the middle or lower strata. Their aspirations and connections reached levels of society unattainable, perhaps almost unimaginable, for the rest. Elite and non-elite hoped to have many children (Baines 1991: 132; see Chapter 2). This was a necessity if they were to increase or even reproduce themselves, because only a minority of children survived to become adults. Adults could

not look forward with confidence to long careers. Evidence from Roman Egypt suggests a life expectancy at age fourteen of 29.1 years, whereas research at the cemeteries of Gebelen and Asyut suggests 36 for the Dynastic period (Nunn 1996: 22). At birth, average life expectancy must have been much less than 20. These figures may seem startling, but their plausibility for all but the elite is corroborated from a number of sources (Baines 1991: 133; see Chapter 3).

The majority of society lived in relative poverty and simplicity. Agricultural laborers formed the backbone of Egyptian society, yet we know little of their lives other than that they struggled through a life of penury, privation, and toil and died leaving little trace in the world. Such people undoubtedly lived “without the least hope of better days, inexorably chained to the very bottom of the social scale, shackled for life, that was the most distressing circumstance of their tormented existence—but did they ever in the least perceive it?” (Caminos 1997: 28). While these descriptions are vivid, the appropriate terminologies for particular social categories have eluded scholars. Egypt’s agricultural laborers have been referred to as “peasants,” “rural poor,” and the “lower classes,” and yet all terms have problematic European associations. Other diverse professions that were associated with this lower socioeconomic group include soldiers, minor officials, tenant farmers, peasants, and slaves (Trigger et al. 1983: 193–94). A major source for the New Kingdom agricultural economy, the Wilbour Papyrus, documents a large tract of land in Middle Egypt. Here the local rural population consisted of five thousand, and the text indicates that 60 percent were cultivators, while the remaining 40 percent were part-time farmers (O’Connor 1995: 319). There were other groups of workers we might classify as artisans, including higher-status foremen and supervisors and lower-ranking craftsmen and laborers, like those from Deir el Medina. In the New Kingdom, the barriers between the lowest and middle social strata were probably more permeable (Valbelle 1997: 46). As a general rule, professions in Egypt corresponded with specific social groups, and individuals were largely identified with the work they did (Loprieno 1997: 188); this classification offers the most contextually accurate way of discussing social structure. Despite the ambiguities, I have used “elite” to describe officials of high status and “non-elite” for those people who formed the middle and lower strata of society, being more specific when possible. I also tend to use the word “strata” rather than “class” with the recognition that all such terms undoubtedly elide important cultural specificities.

Since the beginning of Egyptology’s emergence as a subject, there have been numerous books that recreate an overarching social history of ancient Egypt, usually portraying daily life in contemporary taxonomic frameworks (e.g., Wilkinson 1841; Osburn 1854; Budge 1891; Erman 1894; Scott 1944; Sameh 1964, James 1984). Scholars tended to dwell upon the elite,

refraining from substantive work on the middle and lower social strata (Meskell 1999a), and very few concentrated on the mortuary record as a possible source for life experience and inequality. Later works focused on macroscopic accounts of Egyptian society, economy, politics, and religion (e.g., Trigger et al. 1983; Kemp 1989; Grimal 1992). Those interested in social issues have tended toward a nomothetic approach, focusing on classes or groups of individuals. For instance, there has been a recent proliferation of books in English devoted to women (e.g., Watterson 1991; Robins 1993a; Tyldesley 1994; Capel and Markoe 1996; Lesko 1999). The majority of such studies (with the exception of Robins) take a simplistic and monolithic approach, thus failing to account for the rich variability in women's lives relating to social class, age, ethnicity, and experience. They also tend to reuse the same set of data, with few new insights. The core of this work remains indebted to P. W. Pestman's 1961 study of marriage and the legal position of women. Issues of gender have hardly been addressed at all: for writers on Egypt, gender is still synonymous with finding women. As a result there have been no studies focusing on men's lives and very few on children (see Janssen and Janssen 1990; Feucht 1995) or minority groups. To date, sexual experience for the pharaonic period has been examined only in one book (Manniche 1987).

Egyptian life experience often tends to be interpreted in these books as a uniform category and ancient life compartmentalized into inherently Western classifications: economics, legal system, love and marriage, the family, dress and adornment, and so on. Methodologically, it is unhelpful to partition Egyptian experience into contemporary categories; it should be seen in relation to the cultural system in which it operated. Such an approach consciously sets out to contextualize the data in ways that would have been meaningful in ancient times. This particular volume, however, is structured according to the dynamics of category and the cycles of life as perceived by the Egyptians themselves, so that the link between life cycle and cyclical time is more clear (see also Meskell 2000a).

Notions of time in Egypt are complex and revolve around several conceptual frameworks. One construction of time, *nbh*, was associated with cyclical time, like the repeated dawning of the new day, which parallels the conceptual cycle of rebirth, in which time is a spiral of patterned repetitions and a coil of countless rebirths. Creation was not a single past event but a series of "first times" of sacred regenerative moments recurring regularly within the sacred space of temples through the media of rituals and architecture (Shafer 1997: 2). Operating in tandem was the concept of *dt*, which we might translate as linear time and which occurs in references to the night and to the ruler of death, Osiris. Together they determine and embody the spatial structure of the created world and constitute its temporal shape (Hornung 1992: 68–69). *Nbh* is often characterized as dynamic

and *dt* as static, connoting “flow” and “duration” of time, respectively. However, they can be used interchangeably, which complicates our desire to categorize them discretely. Divine time is eternal and constituted from two aspects, endless repetition and linear continuity. *Dt* and *nbb* reinforce each other, the former being associated with Osiris and the latter with Re (Bochi 1994: 56).

The Egyptians did not have a general word that can be glossed as *time*. A number of terms denote various units of time. It was primarily divided into human or divine time, what might be called “here-time” and “there-time.” Earthly life could be broken into increments of years (*rnpwt*), months (*3bdw*), days (*brw*), hours (*wmw*), and moments (*3wt*) (Bochi 1994: 56). Two calendars were operative in Egypt. The lunar calendar was religious in function whereas the civil calendar was dominant, being used consistently in daily life (Depuydt 1997: 2). The civil calendar consisted of twelve months of thirty days and five additional days, making a total of 365 days. This was a cycle that simply repeated itself. The cyclical nature of the Nile itself probably played an important role in the creation of the civil calendar: the first season refers to the inundation. Apart from agricultural events, astronomical events such as the heliacal rising of the star Sirius in July in conjunction with the rising Nile also heralded new beginnings (Depuydt 1997: 14). The Egyptian calendar was independent of both sun and moon, and consequently the civil year slowly rotated through the natural year. Days were divided into twenty-four hours, twelve for day and twelve for night, while hours were not divided.

The ancient Egyptians had a concept of the lifetime, called *ḥʿw*, and in many instances measured it with the utmost care (Hornung 1992: 58). The optimum human life span was some one hundred years plus ten or twenty extra years to attain ultimate earthly knowledge and wisdom. Although this was the ideal, the corporeal realities of life were usually very different. Egyptian ideology may have stressed the wonders of the next life, yet the sentiments expressed in didactic texts among others were inflected with fear and dread at the realization of bodily death. Generally, the wisdom texts tend to stress the importance of living a full life, a life of moral worth, pleasure, and material success. The identity of each individual was accumulated through life and was used to determine the deceased’s fate at the pivotal day of judgment. This was marked by the weighing of the heart ceremony: the just individual was allowed to proceed to the next life whereas the unjust was consigned to a second death and ultimate damnation. One’s earthly identity and character were somatic entities or aspects of the individual that persisted after corporeal death and, as such, were part of a cyclical process.

In this book, my intent is to try to uncover the rich strata of private life from the matrix of Egyptian social history, sifting through the

archaeological, historical, textual, and iconographic sources and piecing together the fragments from which one might write narratives. Since the inception of the postmodern there can be no single, unilinear history but rather a mosaic of different narratives based on the context and situatedness of our ancient sources and those individual voices from the past (see Shanks and Tilley 1987a, 1987b; Knapp 1996; Hodder 1999). The foundations of academic authority have been eroded, as can be seen in the writings of “alternative” histories of Egypt: Afrocentric, millenarian, New Age, and even fascist (Montserrat 2000: 108–38). One could argue that while much of the necessary evidence for a social history has been present, the interpretative approach and willingness for interdisciplinary conversation have not been at the forefront of Egyptology. I hope that my own diverse interests—archaeology, anthropology, gender studies, and social theory—will cohere in contributing something new to the study of New Kingdom Egypt. That particular perspective might offer scholars of Egypt new ways of looking at the remarkable material they claim as their own.