

IN THE SHADOW OF TEXTS: ARCHAEOLOGY IN EGYPT

Barry J. Kemp

Two of the leading periodicals in Egyptology are the Journal of Egyptian Archaeology and the Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache (Journal of Egyptian Language).¹ Despite the clear difference in names, anyone leafing through a run of back-numbers of each will not find a marked difference in content. Both set out to do the same thing: to represent the whole discipline of Egyptology as a single coherent subject. Within the usage of the subject there is no great incongruity in the choice of names. Nearly all aspects of Egyptology (including sometimes later prehistory) exist within a framework created by texts and language, and by ancient symbols to be elucidated by texts; 'archaeology' in this context means not just excavation and the kinds of analytical research which flourish in university archaeology departments, the term covers the whole study of the material culture of ancient Egypt whether recently and methodically recovered from the ground, or present since the 19th century in museum collections and of interest primarily for artistic or religious reasons. If we use 'archaeology' in this general and rather innocuous way it overlaps with textual study to create an integrated subject in which, for example, many an archaeological field director receives much of his initial training in philology and related areas such as art history and political history. Language is to be learned, practical archaeology to be picked up.

This was how the subject began. By, say, 1887,² the basic outline of ancient Egyptian history and civilisation was already reasonably well established. Early Egyptologists were greatly assisted in this by the survival of an ancient crib. In the third century BC an Egyptian priest called Manetho had compiled a detailed history, in chronicle form, of his country. Summaries of his king lists, divided into dynasties, had survived and gave historians a good start. Refined and greatly expanded by modern scholarship the succession of, for the most part, securely ordered and dated kings and dynasties provides a firm and continuous backbone for Egyptian history for the entire three thousand years of Pharaonic civilisation. For added convenience modern scholars have introduced broader groupings of dynasties: Old Kingdom, First Intermediate Period, Middle Kingdom, and so on. The three levels of dating -- reign, dynasty, period -- work well for political history and are transferable to the products of elite culture: sculpture, architecture, and so forth.

The founders of modern archaeology in Egypt began their work relatively late, with the chronological and historical guidelines and divisions of knowledge already laid down. Flinders Petrie is a case in point. His first excavation in a career of forty years of field work within Egypt took place in 1884 at Tanis. Outwardly hostile to the

scholarly 'establishment', in practice his work mirrored the established scholarly scheme, accepting implicitly a dependent role for archaeology within the study of an historical civilisation. The theme of Petrie's whole career in Egyptian archaeology was the illustration, by means of tableaux provided by individual sites, of the succession of cultural periods provided by history. The cemetery at Medum illustrated culture of the Fourth Dynasty, the town of Kahun did the same for the Twelfth, Gurob served the New Kingdom, and so on. This tableau approach to archaeology in order to illustrate an historic past, already known in outline, is not peculiar to Egypt. It is one of the functions which archaeology in general performs. Indeed, although those professionally involved may devote a greater share of their time to analysis and manipulation of excavation data, the tableau or snap-shot view will remain the principal result in the minds of most people: public, students, scholars in neighbouring disciplines. Museum displays tend to reinforce it, and it must reflect the way in which the modern human mind structures knowledge of this kind.

Petrie's principal concern, for which he became justly famous, was for the humbler, everyday objects which excavation in Egypt produces in abundance. It is precisely here, however, that the system of reigns, dynasties and periods does not work very well. Changes in types of pots, stone vessels and other artefacts did not remain in step with political change. Such things had a life of their own. It would be possible to develop for Egypt a sequence of cultural periods based on common artefacts with its divisions independent of the dynastic framework, and at times reflecting regional diversity as well (Kemp 1975). Petrie saw no need for this, except with the late prehistoric ('predynastic'), and it is now probably too late to do much about it. Without it Petrie, and everyone since, has been reduced to relying on partitions of dynasties and periods, which become particularly cumbersome at times when more than one dynasty was ruling. It also makes it difficult to handle conveniently the fact that change at the level of common artefacts was not always geographically uniform.

The order of priorities bequeathed by Petrie and his contemporaries is clear: the results of excavation are to be integrated within the cultural framework derived from texts and art/architectural history. Great and striking discoveries may from time to time modify the framework, but for most of the time excavation accumulates details of changing fashions. Petrie was most explicit about this.

The classic illustration of dependence is provided by the site of Deir el-Medina (not one of Petrie's), recently made even more famous by the television series and book Ancient Lives (Romer 1984). The site is a village tucked away in the desert hills of western Thebes where, for around five centuries, a community lived whose task it was to cut and decorate the tombs in the 'Valley of the Kings'. For the last two centuries of its existence the inhabitants, many of whom were literate to some degree, chose for reasons not so easy to comprehend to jot down many of the transactions of everyday life on pieces of broken pot and

flakes of limestone (ostraca) in preference to papyrus. Thousands of these jottings, plus a significant quantity of papyri, have survived to reveal in sometimes remarkable detail many aspects of the villagers' lives (Bierbrier 1982). In so doing, the material also underlines the immense power of written records to communicate directly with scholars and the general public alike. They convey fragments of personal lives sometimes marked by a surprising irreverence towards authority and traditions, including, for example, labour disputes, and the case of a man who refused to accept the verdict of the local divine oracle and went off to try another. From the mass of details we can convincingly reconstruct many aspects of social and economic structure (Janssen 1975). And, as always with ancient Egypt, religion is very well represented indeed. Deir el-Medina lives, in the first instance through its texts and its art. And its archaeology?

Whichever study of the Deir el-Medina community we choose, we will find that the site-archaeology serves as little more than an introduction. It provides the setting, the stage on which the life of the texts is to be recreated, together with a range of props. Here is the plan of the village, these are typical houses, over there are the tombs where the villagers were buried, and beyond are the chapels where they worshipped. As for the artefacts: museums and site storerooms are like dressing-rooms, providing examples of garments, baskets, razors, sandals -- all the props needed for the costume reconstruction of ancient life. The archaeology of Deir el-Medina is an archetypal tableau.

If we are unhappy about this and feel that archaeology has more to offer we can, of course, lay the blame on our predecessors. We owe much of our knowledge of the site itself to the excavator, Bernard Bruyère, who worked there between 1922 and 1951, and cleared it from end to end. Even by the time he had started, it had been much disturbed by illicit digging and by careless early archaeology. Bruyère himself worked by the common standards of his day and produced an impressive series of reports on the village, its chapels and its rich and numerous tombs. They describe, often very briefly, and illustrate the architecture, and list and illustrate the significant finds. Much of the material found was kept in the site storerooms and monograph studies on individual classes of finds are still appearing. But much of the contextual data and the fine detail is forever lost. There is not a great deal more to be done with the material except to compile ever more detailed catalogue studies.

But supposing we could go back and start again: what difference might it make? What did Bruyère miss? The question is not so idle and hypothetical. Around 1350 BC, thus about two centuries into the village's history, a new but short-lived capital city was created elsewhere, with its own new 'Valley of the Kings'. The city was el-Amarna, founded by King Akhenaten. In the desert behind the city a new 'Deir el-Medina' appeared: the Amarna Workmen's Village, complete with its own chapels (Peet and Woolley 1923; Kemp 1984). It is a beautiful site for

archaeology: built and abandoned within a space of maybe twenty to twenty-five years, isolated in a place where no one else has since lived, and offering conditions of preservation that only a desert site can. The people who lived there spattered the area around the village with debris from a variety of activities, and this debris remained undisturbed until early this century. In the 1920s half of the walled village and many of the chapels were excavated (Peet and Woolley 1923), and in the ensuing years some of the site was dug over by robbers, but enough has remained for an excavation project with the aim of recording and studying the full range of human activity at the site. This is a project which, under the auspices of the Egypt Exploration Society, I initiated in 1979, and which, after six seasons of excavation, is nearing completion, with perhaps two more seasons to come. The site does, however, lack one dimension: texts. Apart from hieratic jar labels which probably did not originate within the village, not a single written record of daily life has been found either by ourselves or by our predecessors of the 1920s. The village falls within the period before the use of ostraca began at Deir el-Medina. Our attention is thus not distracted by locally derived written sources. We have only the fruits of excavation and survey, and the knowledge (from Deir el-Medina) of what a community of this kind might have been like. We have, therefore, an unrivalled chance to measure archaeology against texts.

As is general, the main impact of our work is created by the tableaux of site plans which reveal the pattern of use to which the ground was put: central village, discrete groups of chapels which by their distinctive features imply varying traditions of observance by family or other social groups, animal pens, rubbish deposits, a garden area, and a zone apparently set aside for contact between the villagers and the supply trains which brought up water and foodstuffs from the city. This side is beginning to come together nicely (Kemp 1984). In the absence of texts we cannot enthuse about individual lives, but perhaps this is not so great a loss, except at the publicity level. The charm of the Deir el-Medina community lies, after all, in demonstrating once again that people are human, and that Pharaoh's workmen and their families belonged to the same species as ourselves. However, it is still surprising how great the impact of a single find can be which carries an explicit message. On the floor of the Sanctuary of the Main Chapel a painted wooden object was found in 1983 which almost certainly is the top of a standard of the kind carried by contingents of soldiers and police. By itself, it opens a whole new possible chapter in the site's history. In addition to, or perhaps in succession to the tomb makers, was the Village occupied for a while by a police community guarding the tombs and other establishments during the troubled times following the death of Akhenaten? There is no point in looking for weapons left behind. The Egyptians were careful people. We know from Deir el-Medina that metal tools issued to the workmen were weighed beforehand to guard not just against loss but, presumably, against bits being broken off, scrap metal being useful when buying something by barter, as, again, the Deir el-Medina records show. There is little chance that soldiers would have left behind much that was distinctive of

their calling, and the wooden standard remains a haunting pointer to a hypothesis.

Where the site scores well is in evidence of the domestic economy. Animal bones and plant remains are there in fair quantities and in amazingly good condition. By the time we have finished we should know much about diet and related matters, such as the slaughter pattern of pigs, a species bred at the site, and kept within remarkably well preserved pig-sties. This is an area in which archaeology is truly complementary to texts, and is one with a bright future. Outside Deir el-Medina textual data for domestic economy is very slight for this period, as for others, but a huge wealth of organic material lies largely untapped at sites along the full length of the Nile Valley and Delta. A related class of finds is the four thousand pieces of equally well preserved textiles. Although very fragmentary they represent a cross-section of weaving practices, and in some cases can be related to a garment type. Although they cannot compare with the complete garments from Deir el-Medina tombs, in their quantity they offer a more representative picture of cloth quality and details of finish.

At the Amarna Workmen's Village, much of this material comes from rubbish deposits dumped away from houses and other activity areas, so that detailed contextual study has a limited scope. But this is not so for some of the artefactual material, in particular the pottery. A hope is maintained within archaeology that behavioural meaning can be found in the spatial patterning of finds. Of all the kinds of material found on the site the broken pottery offers the greatest scope for such a study. It is present in immense quantities, and from the outset, has been recorded with distributional analysis in mind. The resulting record includes percentage of preserved rim as a guide to how many vessels the mass of sherds actually represents and now comprises many tens of thousands of entries in a form suitable for computer analysis which is well under way. The results so far show that the whole laborious operation is indeed worthwhile. The site contains several zones which are functionally quite distinct, and the pottery from each zone has its own character in terms of the relative proportions of types present. This, one hopes, will be of benefit in the future when other parts of Amarna are excavated in the same manner, and to others working at sites elsewhere in Egypt.

But what do the differences mean? A high proportion of storage jars and of water vessels occurs in the area where we think the supply trains from the city arrived to transfer the goods to the villagers (and the pottery is itself part of the evidence for identifying that this is what occurred). But even here we are drawing heavily on the model of organization supplied by the Deir el-Medina texts. For other differences we are thrown back on intuition -- the combination of analogy educated by the study of better documented communities (including Deir el-Medina) and the analogy provided by our common human consciousness. When we find a concentration of a certain type of vessel in a particular location, we can make an educated guess at what it means. But we should

be deluding ourselves if we thought that the final deductive processes deserve a more elevated name.

A tableau and the earthier aspects of human living: we can offer these in great detail. But this is only the beginning of what we want to know about the society which once dwelt here. It is at this point that the written evidence overshadows the archaeology. Deir el-Medina provides us with a list of specific questions which we must answer if we wish to proceed further in reconstructing the social and economic order of the Amarna Workmen's Village. At Deir el-Medina the community was divided into two 'crews'; it had a certain internal organization with specific officers; it had a close relationship with the local police force; it had channels of communication with higher external authority; it had a degree of internal self-regulation involving an oracle with priests drawn from the ranks of the community; the inhabitants owned property and land outside the village. Were these things the same at Amarna, or did the special circumstances of the times, or the simple fact that the site is somewhat earlier, create differences? And then there are the questions which the texts do not answer: in their economic transactions were the villagers participating in a limited market economy (hotly denied by some)? How far were they supplementing their state ration-income by sale of home manufactured goods (e.g. of linen), and by private work (e.g. in private tombs)? It is hard to see how even the most scrupulous of excavations and analyses could even begin to answer these questions. It does not lie within the capacity of archaeological data so to do. Texts deal with affairs that occupied the minds of people in the past, whereas archaeology tends to be a record of matters that they took for granted.

It would be a distortion of the subject to limit discussion to workmen's villages. They were peripheral elements in the Egyptian state. For most of its history Pharaonic Egypt possessed a widespread provincial life in towns, and an institutional structure which had to find a working compromise between centralisation and provincial assertion. For local life in towns and villages Egyptian written sources provide very limited coverage indeed, and the rate at which excavation yields more is, for most of the Pharaonic period, almost imperceptible. The richness in documentation of Deir el-Medina appears to be unique. Given the preoccupation of previous generations of archaeologists in Egypt with tombs and cemeteries, the scope for archaeology in Egypt is still immense in this key area: of revealing the nature of provincial urban society. The glimpses that excavation does provide reveal settings for life that are sometimes more alien to our expectations, sometimes more squalid than the idealising images which Egyptian art and literature (and museum displays) imply. One vivid case is supplied by the current German excavations at Elephantine near Aswan (Kaiser 1970-84). Town levels and a near-intact shrine from the Old Kingdom (the pyramid age) reveal a provincial life with a cultural tradition of its own, unrepresented in the formal culture emanating from the court and copied in private tombs. Archaeology is here re-shaping our images, and in the long term promises to modify significantly the way we regard Pharaonic

Egypt. We will have a fresh set of tableaux. But, important though this is, we must not confuse these more realistic images with a definition of the society that inhabited them. For that we need to understand the institutions of provincial society and the basis of power.

We know from texts that Elephantine was a frontier town whose officials were responsible for directing trading missions into Nubia. Trade? The trade goods went to the court at faraway Memphis, and Elephantine remained a small provincial town with few outwardly distinctive features or signs of unusual wealth. In order to understand the town's life and economy a much more important set of questions concerns agricultural land in this relatively impoverished area: how much did the town's temples own and at what date were the bequests made; how much was independently owned by a local elite and how much by the king and central institutions? In Egyptian society the ownership and management of land was an essential part of the basis of power, the other essential part being ideological. Trade, by comparison, seems to have been of marginal importance. The Elephantine excavations still have far to go and are as yet published only in preliminary form, but one can predict with some confidence that in this crucial area the contribution of archaeology (unless through the discovery of texts) will remain negligible.

We do already possess a detailed archaeological record for one tract of the Nile Valley: Nubia (Trigger 1976; Adams 1977). In the New Kingdom the Egyptians annexed a large part of it and turned it into an extension of their own society (Kemp 1978). It provides a classic example of colonisation leading to the almost complete submergence of the indigenous culture. The building in modern times of the dams at Aswan has led to a series of intensive archaeological surveys of Nubia which have now reached south of the Third Cataract, and many New Kingdom sites have been excavated. Fieldwork has revealed that the Egyptians invested considerable resources in Nubia through the construction of temple-centred towns which are as distinctive as are Roman forts and towns in Europe. Their evidence is of the tableau-type plus a certain amount of detail on local cultural relationships. In Nubia south of the Dal Cataract, beyond the limits of the reservoir, there remains great scope for more detailed work, including environmental study. From the spacing of the towns, and from considering local environment, one could undoubtedly carry out a valuable set of studies of man-resource relationships. But how would one set the results within the institutional framework, given that New Kingdom Nubia has produced few relevant texts?

Part of the typical New Kingdom temple layout was a huge warehouse-granary block in which were stored grain and other commodities received by the temple from its holdings of land and access to other resources. Some, perhaps all, of the Nubian temples had them -- a complete example is known from Sesebi (Blackman 1937; Fairman 1938). We can thus deduce that the temples built in Nubia received donations of local land and so

formed focal points in local cycles of redistribution. But, having said this, the subject is more or less exhausted. There is no point in seeking to quantify the data in order to construct a more detailed picture of local exploitation. The instrument of defeat is a single text: the Nauri Decree of King Seti I (Griffith 1927; Sæve-Søderbergh 1941), carved on a boulder in the Third Cataract region. It shows that one of the major temples in the Egyptian heartland far from Nubia -- Abydos -- also had extensive Nubian lands and other possessions; so much so that the flotillas of ships bearing the produce northwards were preyed upon by local officials, against whom -- with threats of fearsome punishments -- the decree was directed. One could argue that the very existence of this unique text is itself a sign that this was a unique and perhaps short-lived arrangement. But that is only a guess, and others can be thought up, e.g. that this was only the latest in a long line of such land donations to temples external to Nubia and had been made at the expense of established endowments. Certainly no research strategy can rest on guesses of this magnitude.

The same problem is faced, of course, by scholars working with texts. They also cannot know the background to the Nauri Decree, although they will recognise that it exemplifies a standard pattern of complex and far-flung institutional arrangements involving land and the movement of resources, and that internal administrative tensions of this kind can be traced back to far earlier periods. But philologists tend to be cautious and conservative in their use of sources; to work by an empirical philosophy, and to accept that a fragmented picture made up of hints and individual facts is the best that can be managed.

Mention of the cognitive processes by which we work raises a more general point. I have used 'tableau' to refer to the visual arrays of data -- typically sets of plans -- which are the principal results of most excavations. Herein lies a difficulty that is philosophical in character and reaches to the heart of the nature of knowledge. Modern intellectual culture, particularly as it relates to the humanities, is essentially verbal. Whether it is a work of art, the taste of a wine (or the meaning of a religious symbol) serious appreciation demands definition by explicit verbal language. This is itself a matter of cultural tradition. Modern scholarship struggles, for example, to define and explain ancient Egyptian religion in verbal terms whereas much of the original meaning within Egyptian thinking was conveyed directly by symbols which required only the briefest and most laconic of verbal commentary. Ancient texts feed directly into the modern structure of knowledge, although obviously our understanding is greatly, perhaps crucially, enhanced by learned commentary. We read and we know (or think we know). The results of excavation, on the other hand, come in the first place in visual form, as a symbolic language capable of communicating at its own non-verbal level. Again el-Amarna provides a telling illustration. Three decades of excavation earlier this century (Peet and Woolley 1923; Frankfort and Pendlebury 1933; Pendlebury 1951; Borchardt and Rieke 1980) have produced portions of detailed city plans far greater in extent than is normal in archaeology. Typically they

reveal a complex interlocking network of streets and houses and other buildings, acre after acre. We can describe and measure the houses and perform statistical transformations of the data, and do likewise with the record of pottery and small finds. This will greatly sharpen our perceptions of what is there. But the results remain only a commentary upon an artefact which is, in itself, a symbolic definition of the society that created it, but which we can integrate only poorly and inadequately within the structure of our verbalised knowledge.

No solution to this is likely. Human geography and anthropology, which might offer the most useful guidance, are as committed to the verbal communication of knowledge as is archaeology, and since source material in these subjects has a verbal component that goes much further than descriptive commentary there is no reason to work differently, always assuming that this were possible within our culture. The archaeology which, without suitable texts, seeks to do more than to set out tableaux and to document the earthier sides of human life in great and laudable detail is forced to rely upon an intellectual transformation of data which it is poorly equipped to carry out. To this extent archaeology as an academic subject of broad and ambitious intellectual goals, as distinct from archaeology as a process by which evidence is gathered, is a flawed discipline.

Notes

1. One must allow for the difference of institutional background. The Journal is produced by the Egypt Exploration Society, the principal British agent of excavation in Egypt, and a limited space is thus always devoted to preliminary field reports. Publication of the Zeitschrift, on the other hand, is now the responsibility of the East Berlin Academy which has no regular programme of fieldwork in Egypt. Even so, it publishes field reports, e.g. of the current Czechoslovakian excavations in Egypt.
2. This was the year of publication of Meyer's influential Geschichte des alten Aegyptens.

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