The Reign of King Nyuserre and Its Impact on the Development of the Egyptian State
A Multiplier Effect Period during the Old Kingdom

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“What seems to be a sharp divide in space and time on a larger scale will fall into pieces, into a mosaic of the individual events and stories at a closer look.”

(Sádlo – Pokorný – Hájek – Dreslerová – Cílek 2008)

1 Introduction

The present thesis deals with the reign of Nyuserre, one of great Old Kingdom rulers who ruled in the mid-Fifth Dynasty (2402–2374−25 BC). A transformation of whole society of ancient Egypt came to pass during his reign as a consequence of the events in the late Fourth and early Fifth Dynasties, when the highest posts in the administrative system had passed over from members of the royal family to dignitaries of non-royal origin. This fact had been reflected in whole society and started numerous rivulets of change, which merged in a single river in Nyuserre’s reign.

The gradual transformation of Egyptian society from a kingdom to a state took place during this crucial period, and a number of innovations came about in various spheres (religion, society, administration, tomb architecture, etc.), mirroring a change in the participation in power. This situation was reflected primarily in dignitaries’ tombs dated to the given period, which became indicators of the transformation of society. The research is focused on an analysis more than 100 tombs of high-ranking individuals and their family members, and particularly of their titulary, offering formulae, false doors (the central point of the funerary cult), etc.
2 Methods and goals of the work

Several scholars have indirectly touched the mid-Fifth Dynasty period within their research into various aspects of ancient Egypt under the Fifth Dynasty. Based on their research, it is evident that the reign of Nyuserre represents a landmark in various aspects. Although the scholarly interest in the Old Kingdom society and administration has always been relevant, research into the particular processes which led to the changes and innovations of the system has been missing. Yet, their study is crucial because of the valuable insights they add to our knowledge of the changing Old Kingdom society and other aspects connected with it. So far, no treatise deals with the crucial time of Nyuserre’s reign in a complex way. This subject is of particular interest for Czech Egyptology, because Nyuserre’s pyramid complex, the tombs of his family and of many officials who served him are located at Abusir necropolis, an archaeological site where the Czech Institute of Egyptology, Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague has been excavating since beginning of the 1960s.

An essential prerequisite for a successful solution of this theme in a wider perspective was the creation of an elaborated tool serving as the base for the analyses – a database of non-royal individuals, their titularies, families and other relevant data (offering formulae, architectonic features, etc.), which was instrumental in the processing of a large amount of data. The diverse character of the data requires the general knowledge of the administrative and social structure, the development of non-royal tomb architecture, the decorative programme of the tombs and the religion. Unfortunately, the extent of the present thesis makes it impossible to cover the intricacy of the whole scale of the transformation and capture the character of all changes.

The aim of this thesis is not to present a synthesis of existing historical facts concerning the person of Nyuserre and his reign, but rather to focus on the changes and their possible causes by means of analyses of non-royal tombs bearing testimony of the then period, based especially on officials’ titularies, offering formulae, false doors and other architectonic features related to more than 100 tomb owners and their relatives.
The individual chapters of the present thesis exemplify the most noticeable changes in society. The first opening chapter provides an insight into the subject. The second chapter deals with a new offering pose which represents the king in a kneeling posture for the first time. The third chapter focuses on innovation in the social sphere, and especially on one of the significant features, the royal marriage policy. The fourth chapter concerns the reconstruction of the administration, i.e. of the management of the state. The emphasis is laid on elements that distinctively reflect the transformation of the distribution of power. The fifth chapter focuses on the transfer of professions from father to son, the so-called nepotism, which increased during this period. The sixth chapter deals with the religious sphere, especially with the introduction of the Osirian cult, which indicates a change of the concept of afterlife of high-ranking dignitaries. The seventh, final chapter summarizes the results of the thesis and sets them in a wider developmental framework.

2.1 Maat-base: An instrument for analyses

As mentioned above, an essential prerequisite for the successful solution of this theme in a wider perspective was the creation a database of officials predominantly buried within the Memphite cemetery during the Old Kingdom. This database named Maat-base comprising data of about 3,200 individuals was launched in 2006 by the author of the present thesis and has been running continuously since. While the database spans three Old Kingdom dynasties (from the Fourth to the Sixth), great emphasis has been put on the Fifth Dynasty period and particularly on its middle part. The data have been continuously collected from Old Kingdom artefacts. The database, created in FileMakerPro 13, includes information about the individual persons – gender, provenance, site, tomb code, dating, index number of their personal name (Ranke, Scheele-Schweitzer and Gourdon) and title (Jones), bibliographical references and alternatively an image of a relevant inscription (for loop checking) – as well as their family relations. About 7,000 person-title relational records have been entered into the database, representing the ties and attributes of the people, among whom the identities of over 2,000 men, 500 women and almost 2,000 families have been reconstructed.
The selected personal cards of 215 individuals who lived during the Fifth Dynasty and have been analysed in depth within this thesis are arranged according to the hieroglyphic alphabet in the Appendix. The personal cards with basic information represent a database output.

3 Conclusions

The manifold changes corresponding with the reign of Nyuserre in the mid-Fifth Dynasty might at first glance lead to a hasty conclusion that this ruler made a whole range of reforms. A thoroughgoing examination based primarily on an analysis of Fifth Dynasty non-royal tombs reveals that changes taking place during the reign of Nyuserre represented an outcome of transformation which had started at the turn of the Fourth and Fifth Dynasties, when non-royal individuals started to be engaged in the administration of the land to a large extent. One by one, efficient, capable and loyal non-royal officials penetrated high administrative posts (see e.g. Strudwick 1985; Bárta 2013a). Their families gradually consolidated their positions in the administration of the land and in the relation to the king. In this respect, their participation in the power system was a crucial moment in the development of ancient Egyptian society.

This work uses representative cases from social, administrative and religious areas to illustrate the innovativeness of the period of Nyuserre’s reign and the climate in which the concatenation of many changes came to pass, in order to provide a framework for better understanding of the changes, innovations and processes which took place. The subject has been studied through the prism of non-royal tombs, and the analyses are primarily based on data from these dwellings of eternity. An essential prerequisite for a successful solution of this topic in a broader perspective was the creation a database of non-royal individuals, their titularies, families and other relevant data, which has been instrumental in the processing of a large amount of data. This database called Maat-base includes data on about 3,200 individuals who lived during the Old Kingdom.

A special method has been developed for an analysis of the transfer of professions from father to son, the so-called nepotism, within interdisciplinary cooperation with the mathematician Radek Mařík. The so-called family titles
determining family relations were used to build families. The assessment of nepotism is focused on administrative and priestly titles, and alternatively on other professional functions. All the titles have been arranged according to their categories, ordered and assigned colour codes in order to simplify further analysis. Then the categories were assigned two-letter shortcuts and mapped to colours in graphical visualization. The categorization of the titles is still in process. Colour codes were primarily assigned to the principal departments of the Old Kingdom administration. In this way, the titles in the titulary of each individual in a family tree have been coded, coloured and arranged in the following order: rank titles, family relation (only in the case of the eldest child), administrative titles (the vizier’s title and the titles connected with the five pillars of the administration – see the scheme in Fig. 4.1), priestly titles and other titles according to the affiliation to the field of activity. Uncategorised titles are placed at the end of the titulary. Nepotism is detected as an anomaly. Radek Mařík derived an index we used for the assessment of nepotism. It is expressed as a number measuring the occurrences of a given title in the selected family. This index is defined using the principles used in association rule mining (for details about the defined entities and the used methods, see Dulíková – Mařík forthcoming). The work was automated using a script written in the programming language Python. The script can assert nepotism with regard to the hierarchy of an office or a profession (i.e. for example overseer, inspector, director, under-supervisor); it also generates all images and graph presentations, although the graphs presented in this thesis have been adjusted manually in order to make them more readable and compact (Dulíková – Mařík forthcoming).

In view of the changes in society, which were primarily connected with high-ranking officials, a redefinition of their participation in power, the marriage policy of the royal family, the occurrence of Osiris, etc. can be explained by an all-embracing transformation of society.

What went wrong? Although Paul John Frandsen merely touched the Old Kingdom period in his inspiring contribution “Aspects of Kingship in Ancient Egypt”, he generally outlined the prospect of salvation in connection with the decentralization\(^1\) of political and economic power in the third millennium BC

\(^1\) The expression “decentralization” is not suitable, because the king represented the distributor of power throughout Egypt.
When elaborated, Frandsen’s idea perfectly fits the time span of the early Fifth Dynasty and epitomizes the nature of the changes. Non-royal individuals participated in the administration of the state by performing duties for the king, thus becoming responsible for maintaining *maat*, and the king endowed them with *maat* (cf. Frandsen 2012: 57). In this way, these individuals formed the backbone of the Fifth Dynasty administration. Judging from the written sources, such integration into the mechanism of the maintenance of order started in the mid-Fifth Dynasty or slightly earlier, when the title *hem-netjer* of goddess Maat was added to the titulary of persons who were employed in high administrative positions, most frequently as viziers, or whose activity was connected with the department of justice (cf. Fig. 4.1, Tables 4.2 and 6.5). This development entailed wider implications, new prospects of resurrection for these individuals, *i.e.* an afterlife adequate to their work activities in life.

The emergence of Osiris corresponds with a new conception of afterlife in non-royal tombs of the elite. Sources from non-royal tombs indicate that the concept of the Osirian cult was formed exclusively in the capital. Based on the current state of knowledge, it is obvious that the cult of Osiris started to spread initially precisely among the privileged individuals who held the highest posts in the administration and/or worked in the close proximity of the king. An analysis of non-royal tombs shows that the name of Osiris is attested in preserved funerary monuments of 60 individuals who lived during the Fifth Dynasty period, more precisely from the reign of Nyuserre to the end of this dynasty (see Table 6.1). The chronological distribution shows that at first, in the mid-Fifth Dynasty, Osiris occurred within the offering formulae (*ḥtp dꜣ*), and later also within the epithets of the deceased (*imẖw ḫr Wšr*, revered with Osiris, sometimes with an addition). In the course of the late Fifth Dynasty, a relatively rapid increase is noticeable in the offering formulae as well as, and particularly, in the epithets (cf. Table 6.2). Concerning the spatial distribution of the references to Osiris, Saqqara has the highest number of attestations, altogether 40 individuals during the Fifth Dynasty.

As Ann Macy Roth proved, the spatial distribution of officials’ tombs mirrored to a certain extent the administrative and social pattern of living in a given period. The earliest such arrangement of tombs of high-ranking officials (including a vizier) is situated around the pyramid complex of Nyuserre at
Abusir (Roth 1988: 210). The increasing size and costliness of the tombs of high-ranking dignitaries buried in the Memphite cemetery also correspond with this development in the mid-Fifth Dynasty (cf. Kanawati 1977: 35 graph I), whereas the tombs of low-ranking officials grew markedly smaller (Kanawati 1977: 36–37, graphs II–IV). According to Kanawati’s research, a new category of officials – middle officials – emerged in the early Fifth Dynasty in reaction to the changes at the turn of Fourth a Fifth Dynasties, while the financial resources of higher officials were gradually increasing at that time. The situation changed in the mid-Fifth Dynasty: the resources of middle and lower officials started to decline in the reign of Nyuserre, and this trend continued until the end of the Old Kingdom (Kanawati 1977: 38–40).

The importance of several men and their families was reinforced through marriages to “king’s daughters” (see Tables 3.3 and 3.4). The social and political position of these men strengthened and they became more privileged. The matrimony of royal daughters evidenced this new type of social ties. Each such marriage can be considered a proof of social ties between the king and the dignitary. The development reflected a conspicuous transformation of the distribution of power. Marriage was used as a method of forging alliances between the king and powerful families of non-royal blood (the elite).

The families of officials gradually consolidated their positions in the administration of the land and in relation to the king. The comparison of the number of families and the spheres in which the nepotistic system occurred makes it evident that the mid-Fifth Dynasty was a crucial time for the rise of this social phenomenon and its subsequent development in ancient Egypt. During the mid-Fifth Dynasty, transfer of professions occurred not only in all significant departments of the administration but also in the important positions of the individuals who served the king in the sphere of body care, entertainment or care for royal personal adornment. Their offspring were even able to achieve higher offices within the administration. With regard to the vizier’s office, the inheritance of this post between relatives is attested from the reigns of Menkauhor or Djedkare Isesi. The significance of family ties mirrored the appearance of a new type of tomb, the so-called family tomb (Bárta 2005: 114–116).
The changes manifested themselves also in the bureaucratic system. The five titles symbolizing, along with the title of vizier, the so-called six pillars of the administration became constituent of the vizierial titulary from the mid-Fifth Dynasty onwards. In general, the number of administrative titles and their stratification increased. Epithets expressing the king’s favour and variants of the title ḫḥr₃-sš₃₃ were added to the titularies of high-ranking officials.

The department of ḫḥm₃w₃, “overseer of Upper Egypt”, was established in the capital as a part of a reconstruction of the administrative structure. The creation of the office ḫḥm₃w₃, which was included in the agenda of viziers, was obviously the expression of an effort to administer Upper Egypt more sophisticatedly and, at the same time, to establish an integrated platform in order to exploit the raw material, vegetable, animal and human resources as much as possible. Put simply, all that this part of the land could offer was to be exploited. Intensifying royal activity in provincial temples in the mid-Fifth Dynasty was a consequence of the king’s interest in the territory of Upper Egypt. Moreover, these institutions served as communication channels between the royal residence and the individual areas of Upper Egypt; the local elites associated with provincial temples represented an interface between the capital and the provincial sphere. According to Richard Bussmann, there was a symbiotic relationship between the capital and the provinces, i.e. between the interests of the Memphite court and the needs of the provincial milieu (Bussmann 2010: 5, 9). In order to increase effectiveness, consequently, important officials who administered nomes began to be buried in the provinces during the reign of Djedkare Isesi. The earliest tombs of this type were built between the 9th and the 20th nomes, where the most productive area of Egypt was to be found (cf. Kanawati 1980: 6–7, 128).

In general, other titles of officials were also associated with the exploitation of vegetable and animal resources of the land. For example, the titularies of Ty and Nykare contain several such titles.
Based on detailed analyses, Nyuserre’s reign undoubtedly represents a landmark which fundamentally affected the subsequent development of the ancient Egyptian realm (cf. Fig. 1). His successors to the throne followed in his concept of newly defined conditions in the state based on the responsibility for maintaining maat and, closely connected to it, the distribution of power within the Fifth Dynasty society. The Osirian cult was refined; during several decades from the Sixth Dynasty onwards, it spread throughout Egypt and through all social classes. Nyuserre’s policy of marrying royal women to high-ranking officials from important families heralded a subsequent practice of kings, while the administration of Upper Egypt intensified. The practice of matrimonial alliances between the king and the dignitaries including nomarchs became a common social and political feature and later, in the New Kingdom, the marriages of princesses became an object of cross-border diplomatic alliances.

The findings presented in this thesis, based on thoroughgoing analyses, are in harmony with Miroslav Bártə’s designation of Nyuserre’s reign as one of the five Multiplier Effect Periods during the Old Kingdom. He drew inspiration from the concept of the “punctuated equilibria” theory formulated in evolutionary biology, based on the assumption that “major developmental changes tend to happen in certain discrete periods of time divided by rather
uneventful periods of stasis when no significant development takes place” (Bárta 2015b: 12). From this point of view, Bárta considers ancient Egyptian history as a punctuated trajectory within which he identified five Multiplier Effect Periods during the Old Kingdom time, namely the reigns of Netjerikhet, Snofru, Shepseskaf, Nyuserre and Djedkare (Bárta 2015b: 12).

The ongoing research will undoubtedly bring more tombs from under the sand to give testimony to the mid-Fifth Dynasty, a period characteristic of a multitude of changes in many areas connected with the world of the living and the afterlife alike. However, processes or causal links between events can be detected and better understood not only through discoveries in the sense of uncovering of ancient Egyptian monuments but also using new research approaches applied to the data and already known pieces of knowledge, such as the method of Complex Network Analysis. The author of this thesis is a member of an Egyptological and cybernetic interdisciplinary team currently investigating Project No. 16-07210S, “Complex network methods applied to ancient Egypt data in the Old Kingdom (2700–2180 BC)” for the Czech Science Foundation aimed at extending and generalizing the proposed method in order to enable the assessment of more complex combinations of artefacts including, for example, tomb locations, tomb relations and temporal (dynamic) aspects of the data.
Selected bibliography


