The Old Kingdom (ca. 2600–2200 BCE) was the first major florescence of the Egyptian state. This period is often defined in both scholarship and the popular imagination as a time when powerful, pyramid-building pharaohs controlled Egypt and dictated social, religious, and economic affairs. The role of the general population in forming and supporting the Old Kingdom state is often overlooked, with one scholar even referring to the population simply as “the undifferentiated masses.” It is true that the Old Kingdom population—estimated at roughly 2 million people—was largely non-elite and rural. However, the non-elite were not simply servants of the pharaoh.

One reason that pharaohs dominate our understanding of power in the Old Kingdom is that the period tends to be reconstructed based on tombs, such as the pyramids. The king and his elite administrators built large, enduring mortuary monuments because they had great wealth. Non-elite people were not buried in great tombs. They did, however, leave evidence for us through their houses and the objects they used in life.

When one includes non-elite evidence in an analysis of Old Kingdom society, it becomes evident that power cannot be simplified to a top-down pyramid model. Rather,
complex processes of state and local administration, kinship ties, and patronage created webs of power. Power networks can be very broadly divided into two separate, though interconnected, spheres: the royal and the private, whose interaction is clear in settlement and landscape organization, the religious system, social relationships, and the economy.

Settlements and Landscape

During the Old Kingdom, Egyptians inhabited settlements scattered from the Nile Delta to Aswan. Old Kingdom settlements are also attested in the oases. Texts tell us that the Egyptians identified their settlements in terms of size, using words like niwt, “city,” dmi, “village,” even pr, “house.” Settlements were organized within natural depressions in the Nile Valley’s landscape, called basins. Mark Lehner has shown that these features, which held water, forced regional interaction and organization so that communities might manage the Nile’s floodwaters for successful irrigation. Accordingly, some settlements existed before the founding of the Egyptian state and the creation of pharaonic power.

One example of such a settlement is Elephantine Island, excavated by the German Archaeological Institute. Elephantine is an island at Egypt’s southern border and an important point for Nilotic trade. The original town was founded in the 4th millennium BCE. Upon the establishment of a central government in the Early Dynastic Period (ca. 3100–2600 BCE), the state built a fort at the site that took advantage of the island’s geography, using it as a point from which to control trade or movement into Egypt. However, the construction of the fort disregarded the needs of the resident population, blocking access to their local shrine.

By the Old Kingdom, the fort was defunct. The community built houses over the enclosure, reclaiming the land. The state would build at Elephantine during the later Old Kingdom, creating an administrative center and small pyramid at the site. However, the new state installation was to the east of the older town, built on virgin ground: the state perhaps had learned to respect local, private territory. The state administration and the population of Elephantine would seem to be two separate communities that interacted, but nonetheless had distinctly different objectives.

The town at Ayn Asil in the Dakhleh oasis, excavated by the French Institute of Oriental Archaeology, also shows complex interaction of state and local populations. Unlike Elephantine, the state founded Ayn Asil to serve as a trade outpost. A mudbrick enclosure wall established the limits of the town and the administration of the city appointed by the state. By the late Old Kingdom, however, the population—or perhaps the local administration—had established some degree of regional autonomy while continuing their relationship with the central administration. Ceramic production was entirely local and not fully current to the trends of the Nile Valley. Artistic production, too, seems to have been local, suggesting that the population was not reliant upon the state for goods or services. Local networks existed side by side with state structures, despite Ayn Asil’s status as a state foundation.

A Diverse Religious System

Religious practice and access seem to have had royal and private manifestations, though practice appears to have occurred along a spectrum rather than within rigidly defined or controlled boundaries. A specific subset of
gods was associated with kingship and the state, including Re (god of the sun), Horus (god of kingship), and Hathor (wife/protector of Horus). State worship of these deities is evident in much of the art of the royal house, such as the triads of Menkaure. Pyramids were symbols of solar power and the sun god Re, mimicking the ben-ben stone—probably a meteorite—sacred to his cult. Temples to Hathor were located throughout the country, perhaps serving as one node of connection between the capital and distant settlements. There is no reason to assume that the pharaoh worshipped only these gods, and indeed many other gods are attested through royal text and art. Yet while not illustrative of the full scale of belief, the focus on and monumentality of the cults of these three deities illustrate the priorities of the state sphere.

Divine cults within the private sphere predictably differed in scale from the royal. Old Kingdom provincial temples were typically small and of variable form. Provincial people worshipped deities specific to their settlement: for Elephantine, for example, this meant worship of the goddess Satet—a divinity related to the Nile’s floodwaters—in a small, cramped, natural space. As a local deity, Satet would have been closely linked to the needs and desires of her resident community. The local faithful worshipped her in part by offering her votive statuettes made of faience that appear crude in comparison to royal art. Egyptians in the settlement of Ayn Asil had access to shrines of their local governors. If later periods of Egyptian history serve as any indication, it is likely that private worship also occurred at home. By the late Old Kingdom the pharaoh also made occasional offerings in Satet’s temple, suggesting that while state and local religious interests were different, they did not operate in isolation.

**Differentiation and Relationships**

The Old Kingdom population was largely ethnically Egyptian, with other cultures living at or beyond Egypt’s borders. Nubians are especially well known at Elephantine, where Dietrich Raue has shown that Nubians and Egyptians
lived side by side. People from the Levant are attested in royal reliefs as well as at sites such as Tell Ibrahim Awad in the Nile Delta, where Manfred Beitak suggests they built temples. Nubians and Levantine peoples probably lived at other Egyptian sites as well. Thus, members of these three cultures must have interacted in some of Egypt’s towns, opening up the likelihood that the country was not a culturally homogenous whole but rather incorporated regional identities based on a hybridization of cultures.

Even within ethnically Egyptian society there were different classes, of which the royal house and the high elite were the most important members of the state sphere. Placing the other occupations—craftsmen, farmers, local and sub-elite, priests, traders, and peasants—into a formal class hierarchy is problematic. Individuals could hold many offices or positions; this is certainly true of the elite and sub-elite. It seems plausible that farmers and craftsmen did not partake of only one responsibility year-round, especially as their professions would have been dependent on the flood patterns of the Nile. Many positions, particularly farmer and craftsperson, could be tied to either royal or elite institutions, or could operate independently.

The hierarchy, then, was not one that was homogenous or rigidly top-down. Rather, the pharaoh and his elite existed in one sphere and the remainder of society operated in a different, flexible, private/rural sphere. As suggested by John Baines, the elite provided one point of connection between the two spheres. The elite lived in Memphis and worked under the pharaoh while still maintaining rural estates and employing provincial individuals to work their land. The elite themselves were then of both spheres: the royal as pharaoh’s administrators and the private as farmers, estate owners, and heads of household.
An Agricultural Economy

Wealth, like power, seems to have been far more dispersed than a top-down model requires. Wealth in the Old Kingdom was not measured in money. Indeed, Egyptians did not use coinage. Rather, wealth was agriculturally based and measured in grain. Basic units of exchange for labor were bread and beer, blurring the ideas of “rations” and “wages.” The movement of bread and beer wages can be traced through the archaeological remains of pottery bread molds and beer jars. These vessels were locally made and exchanged, reinforcing the fact that wealth was regionally created and dispensed.

The pottery, together with the few scenes of market exchange, shows that exchange and value of goods were reliant upon face-to-face relationships and bartering. Value was not standardized. Wealth distribution in the private sector would have flowed through individually defined networks essentially outside of state control. The economy was not dictated by a statewide redistributive government, but rather seems to have been a mixed economy where the royal and private sectors both had their own “purses.”

Kinship seems to have been important in structuring the agricultural economy. Egyptians stressed familial relationships in their art and texts. Such a focus on the family forces us to think about how kinship can act as a hub of power. Households encompassed not one nuclear family, but several generations. Additionally, a household included dependents unrelated by blood, such as servants and perhaps even tenant farmers. The household had the potential to be an autonomously functioning unit. The market conditions prevailing in the
private sector allowed households and villages to operate with some independence from the state. A wealthy household then had the opportunity to act as patron for other local individuals, creating one line in the network of private power.

How, then, did the state accrue wealth? The state, like private people, owned land. This land was connected to the palace and to religious institutions and managed through agricultural estates (ḫwmt). The produce of those lands supported state institutions and state employees. With a fully functioning private sector, there was no need for the state to support individuals outside of state employ. However, the royal house certainly needed access to these individuals as agricultural labor to work state land. To this end, the state could tax the labor of the population, bringing them into a corvée—a state-dictated labor force—to farm, mine, or build monuments for the state. The corvée served as one node of connection between the royal and private economies, with individuals bringing their wages from corvée labor back into the private sphere.

**Power in Ancient Egypt**

Power in ancient Egypt came from more than just kings and gods and should not be treated as monolithic or uncontested. As a living society, Egypt, like all cultures, contained complex systems and networks of intersecting power and authority. The invisibility of the non-elite in the monumental record cannot be equated to their complete disenfranchisement in the past. Royal, elite, and non-elite people all had power. Power was not a monolithic whole but was fragmented into different spheres with some overlap. The average Egyptian, therefore, would likely have identified with royal institutions largely in the abstract. The land, local gods, and social relationships offered power and identity to the Egyptian population.

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FOR FURTHER READING


