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VILLAGE
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VILLAGE

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Juan Carlos Moreno García

Dorf

Village

Villages were the backbone of rural organization in Pharaonic Egypt. Inner solidarity and family ties are recorded in literary texts as well as by the use of certain terms, which highlight their “clanic” structure, at least from the New Kingdom on. The relations between villages, royal administration, and institutional centers like the temples or the domains of the crown enabled the rural elite to enhance their status and wealth, thus preserving inequalities while providing paths to social elevation. But specific village values centered on solidarity, the praise of fellow citizens, and the celebration of prominent local ancestors served to strengthen the communal ties of its members.

كانت القرى بمثابة العمود الفقري للمنظمة الريفية في مصر الفرعونية، فيلاحظ مدى تضامن الروابط والعلاقات الأسرية المسجلة في النصوص الأدبية، والتي لوحظت من خلال بعض المصطلحات التي تلقي الضوء على هيكل نظام العشيرة في القرى على الأقل بدءاً من عصر الدولة الحديثة. إن العلاقات بين القرى والإدارة الملكية والمؤسسات المركزية مثل المعابد أو المناطق الخاضعة لحكم الملك مكنت الطبقة العليا من الريفيين تعزيز مكانتهم واثرواتهم وبالتالي الحفاظ على عدم المساواة والنهوض بالطبقة الاجتماعية، ولكن ساهمت كل من القيم الريفية المحددة - والتي تركز على التضامن والاحترام المتبادل بين المواطنين، إضافة إلى الاحتفال بالأسلاف المحليين ساهمت في تقوية العلاقات الطائفية بين أفرادها.



villages are a rather elusive element of the Egyptian landscape. Usually regarded as the backbone of the rural organization of the country and its settlement structure, they remain nevertheless almost invisible in the archaeological record (Moreno García 2004: 77 - 106; 2006: 30 - 39). The vocabulary is not exempt from ambiguities, and terms like *njw*t, *dmj*(t), *why*t, *tmj*, and others may be translated as “village” even if they cover a rather large but often imprecise array of meanings, from the more general (“locality,” even “toponym”) to the more specific (“town,” “city,” “village”), as in the case of *njw*t. The scarcity of extensive archaeological surveys represents a further

difficulty since it has greatly hindered a thorough understanding of its settlement and landscape organization, its regional variability, and its transformations over time—a gap that only recent research is beginning to fill (Parcak 2007, 2008). Finally, the few villages extensively studied (the “workers’ village” at el-Amarna or Deir el-Medina being the best known) were in fact rather atypical in that they were highly specialized communities devoted to specific tasks at the service of the state and not true rural communities.

Physical Setting and Landscape Layout

Evaluating the number and geographical distribution of villages in ancient Egypt is a

highly problematic task: administrative sources are scarce and no general census has survived. Nevertheless, sporadic evidence as well as parallels from later periods suggest that about 178 small “cities” and 1125 large villages could have existed during the Pharaonic period (Butzer 1976: 57 - 80; Lehner 2000: 292 - 293). As for the territory under their control, it is not surprising that a great variability is discernible from the data preserved, even between centers of a similar status located in the same area: thus, for instance, the cultivated area of the Ptolemaic villages of Kerkeosiris (in 116 - 115 BCE) and Tebtunis (in 240 BCE), both in the Fayum, were, respectively, 1179.25 and 2182.69 arouras (about 3.25 and 6 km²; Monson 2007a: 12).

Recent archaeological research gives a glimpse into the historical and geographical setting of villages for specific periods in Egyptian history. At Hierakonpolis, for example, the gradual growth of the city in Predynastic times was concomitant with the disappearance of many of the villages in its hinterland (Hoffmann et al. 1986), thus suggesting that large sections of the peasant population were concentrated in a single urban center. The area of Aswan reveals a quite similar phenomenon: the emergence of Elephantine as the focus of Pharaonic power on its southernmost frontier was contemporaneous with the abandonment of the villages south of the city, which were reoccupied after the collapse of the central authority at the end of the Old Kingdom (Seidlmayer 1996: 112 - 115). In other cases, villages flourished in areas relevant to their strategic or economic importance. The easternmost branch of the Nile in Lower Egypt was one of them, and the turn of the 4th millennium saw the emergence and the expansion of many localities around it, a development not paralleled in the western Delta and related to the consolidation of a united monarchy with significant commercial interests in the southern Levant (van den Brink and Levy 2002). But in the absence of archaeological research, it is impossible to assert what the features and the structure of a

“typical” Egyptian village were; the orthogonal plans of “institutional villages” such as el-Lahun and the “workers’ village” at el-Amarna or Deir el-Medina are probably not representative at all, whereas the idea that the hieroglyph for *njw*t represents the basic structure of a village (a crossroad of two main streets) is highly speculative.

Administrative documents and titles provide some information about the historical rural landscape and the role the villages played. Thus, the titles of Metjen, a 4th Dynasty official with numerous territorial responsibilities, show that former supra-territorial units called *pr* (“house, domain”), each encompassing several villages (*njw*t), were being replaced by a different administrative model, when royal foundations (usually *hwt-ꜥt*, “great *hwt*,” but also *hwt*) became the focus of these districts (Sethe *Urk. I*: 1 - 7). The echoes of such a system can be found in the slightly later Gebelein papyri, from the reign of Menkaura, where several villages constituted a domain (*pr-dt*) presumably granted to an official (Posener-Kriéger and Demichelis 2004); in Heqanakht’s letters from the early second millennium, the area called *Pr-hꜣꜣ/hwt-hꜣꜣ*, “the domain/royal foundation of the descending (water),” also included several localities (Allen 2002: 122 - 124). When the royal centers, *hwt*, became widely spread all over Egypt, from the end of the 5th Dynasty on, funerary phraseology echoed their growing importance by means of a pair of terms, *hwt* and *njw*t, thus evoking the most conspicuous elements of the Egyptian countryside: the royal foundations, on the one hand, and the “organic” towns and villages on the other (Bussmann 2004; Moreno García 2007). The “*hwwt* and *njwwt*” formula survived until the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods, even if *hwwt* were no longer founded after the beginning of the 12th Dynasty (Moreno García 1999: 266 - 270). The two terms were so inextricably connected that the expression “you are like a town/village (*njw*t) without its governor (*hqꜣ hwt*)” conveyed the notion of chaos in the *Tale of the Eloquent Peasant* (Parkinson 1997: 67). By the beginning of the Middle Kingdom, a new formula arose, *njw*t,

“town, village,” being opposed to *šḥt*, “marshland, field,” in literary and administrative sources; in the New Kingdom, the counterpart of *njwṯ* or *dmj(t)* was *w*, “district” (Moreno García 1999: 131 - 149).

Terminology: From Njwṯ to Dmj

In spite of the ambiguities of Egyptian terminology, a close examination of the sources reveals important changes over time in both the organization of the rural landscape and in the way villages were named. *Njwṯ* appears already in the oldest records to refer to both large and small centers of population, from cities to hamlets, and its hieroglyph also accompanied the names of regions and toponyms. But with the advent of the New Kingdom, an important change took place: terms like *dmj(t)* and *whyṯ* began to be employed to denote villages, while *njwṯ* was usually restricted to metropoleis and religious capital cities. The first term, *dmj(t)*, formerly meant “port,” “landing stage,” while the second, *whyṯ*, appears in Middle Kingdom texts with the basic meaning of “clan,” “tribe.” The reasons underlying such a change are difficult to ascertain, but one can speculate that *dmj(t)* could be related to the fact that mooring posts became centers of fiscal and economic importance during the New Kingdom (Eyre 1998; Janssen 2004: 42 - 63; Kruchten 1981: 110 - 114). As for *whyṯ*, its frequency in New Kingdom and later texts suggests that kinship and a strong sense of communal identity were recognized as the framework of village social structure. A particularly well documented example is the famous 19th Dynasty Saqqara tomb inscription of Mose, which shows that the inhabitants of a *whyṯ* were linked by family ties and claimed to be the descendants of a soldier (Gaballa 1977). The popularity of the two terms is apparent in New Kingdom and later phraseology, when they were evoked alongside *njwṯ* as the three main types of settlement in Egypt (Davies 1908: pl. 27[11]; Sethe *Urk. IV*: 1231, 7; Tresson 1935 - 1938: 821). Another well-known document, the Wilbour Papyrus, provides a unique overview of the countryside in an area of Middle Egypt,

as it mentions 51 mounds (*jst*), 37 houses (*ṯ*), 29 villages (*whyṯ*), 17 “villas” (*bḥn*), and 7 towers (*sgz*) among its main settlements. As Kemp observes, these centers were not evenly spread out within the area covered by this document: *bḥn* and *sgz* cluster in zones marked by larger towns (hardly surprising as *bḥn* was an official’s residence), whereas *ṯ* tend to be more numerous in zones where there were fewer larger towns (Kemp 1991: 312). Other late New Kingdom and Third Intermediate Period sources confirm this picture as they list together *bḥn*, *whyṯ*, *pr*, and *ṯ* (Gardiner 1947: 205* - 206*). Finally, during the 1st millennium, villages were usually referred to by the term *tmj* (Agut-Labordère *fc.-a*).

Activities and Occupations

Leaving aside such “institutional” communities as Deir el-Medina or the pyramid towns, which relied directly on the Pharaonic administration, agriculture and herding were the main productive activities of Egyptian villages (Eyre 1999; Moreno García 2004: 77 - 106). It is probable that fishing and extensive herding led to the development of specific kinds of settlements and temporary encampments in particularly favored areas like the Fayum or the Delta. The 8th Dynasty inscription of Henqu of Deir el-Gabrawi, for instance, opposes two kinds of landscape, one formerly inhabited by fowlers, fishermen, and extensive herders, but subsequently settled by people and provided with flocks (Moreno García 2010a; Sethe *Urk. I*: 78 - 79). The Gebelein papyri, from the end of the 4th Dynasty, contain a detailed list of the (presumable) heads of the households of several localities. Many villagers were *ḥm nswt*, “serf of the king,” or *jst*, “member of a team of workers,” and were probably peasants, but others were involved in activities such as herding, hunting, collecting honey, or fishing, and even some *ḥrj-šꜥ*, “nomad” (lit. dweller of the sand), are cited. Moreover, other people worked as millers and ship’s carpenters, whereas the scribes and agents of the crown must have formed the local elite alongside the chiefs of the villages (Posener-Kriéger and

Demichelis 2004). Thus, these documents provide an invaluable glimpse into the occupations and economic activities of some villages. Commercial activities are rarely documented, but marketplaces put the villagers in contact with other producers, traders, and institutions (Eyre 1998). Several New Kingdom papyri record ships in the service of temples, which collected goods from many localities, and some data suggest that private trade was also conducted during these journeys (Eyre 1998; Janssen 2004). It is possible that the growing importance of *dmj(t)* (“town, village,” but formerly “moorings, port”) in New Kingdom sources might be related to the growing importance of trade and river connections in the organization of the landscape. Finally, the tomb robbery papyri of the late New Kingdom reveal that private trade linked villagers and merchants, with precious metals fuelling non-institutional economic circuits where gold and silver were exchanged for plots of land, animals, and goods (Moreno García 2001a: 435 - 436).

Differences in wealth were obviously mirrored in the economy of villagers. Thus, for instance, yokes and ploughs, and probably donkeys too, were only accessible to rich peasants, whereas common villagers seem to have practiced intensive horticulture in small gardens (Moreno García 2006: 50 - 66, 2009). Archaeozoological research is providing increasing evidence of the importance of small-scale animal husbandry (pigs, sheep, and goats) in humble domestic contexts (Hauschteck 2004; Moreno García 2003, 2006: 56 - 66), and fish appears to have been an important component of poor people’s diets, sometimes imported from distant places thanks to private commercial circuits (Cagle 2003: 128 - 130). Regional patterns of production and processing of food (i.e., barley at Abydos as opposed to emmer in Giza and Memphis), seasonal activities, the importance of fodder provision, the social patterns of differentiated consumption, etc. reveal a village economy less static and rather more complex than previously assumed, which was also subject to changes over time (Murray 2009). Consequently, social hierarchy and

wealth inequalities were reinforced by the risks inherent to agriculture as well as by indebtedness or heritage divisions, thus fostering clientelism and servitude and reinforcing the power of local leaders whose status was further enhanced by their connections with temples, regional potentates, and the agents of the crown.

Internal Hierarchy

The often assumed image of villages as egalitarian paradises must be discarded, with no traces of communal property within them. Instead, the most ancient sources reveal that they were characterized by internal hierarchies and inequalities of wealth (Moreno García 2004: 77 - 106). Village governors are their best documented members, frequently evoked in administrative records because of their role as intermediaries between the authorities and the mass of villagers (Eyre 2000). Such a strategic position procured them some advantages: they acted as informal agents of the crown in the countryside, and their collaboration was essential for delivering taxes and manpower to the state. In some instances, their position was symbolically enhanced by the possession of prestige items usually restricted to the palatial and administrative elite of the kingdom (Moreno García 2001b). Old Kingdom sources refer to them as *hq3 njwt*, “governor of a locality,” but later they are commonly called *h3tj-ꜥ*, “mayor” (*n3 h3tjw-ꜥ n3 dmjw whywt*, “the mayors of the towns and villages”: Gardiner 1947: 31*). Other members of the village elite were the priests and scribes; in the case of the household (*pr.s*, “her house”) of the lady Tepi, quoted in the Gebelein papyri, it was made up of a scribe, a letter carrier (*jrj mꜥ3t*), and a “property manager” (*jrj jht*; Posener-Kriéger and Demichelis 2004: pl. 16H). In other cases, wealthy peasants appear in charge of the property of the temples, delivering taxes in gold or possessing enough resources to rent extensive tracts of land, like some *jhtjw* of the New Kingdom and some *nmhw* in the 1st millennium BCE. One such New Kingdom *jhtj*, Horiherneferher, was one of the notables (*rmꜥ 3*, “great people”) of his village

in the famous lawsuit of Mose. In general, archaeology reveals the existence of such social differences through the goods buried in private tombs, and the information it provides confirms the picture shown by administrative documents (Cooney 2007; Grajetzki 2006: 149 - 151; Richards 2005; Wada 2007). Finally, local priestly offices (especially low ranking functions like *wꜥb*) not only conferred prestige and served to visualize and consolidate social hierarchies, but could also be used as a means of self-promotion thanks to the contacts, patronage links, and income they procured (Agut-Labordère *fc.-a*, *fc.-b*; Moreno García 2010b). Local notables are referred to as *rmt* ⲙⲧ, “great people,” from the late New Kingdom on.

Villages and the Royal Administration

The relations of the villages with the royal administration are the best documented aspect of their existence. The most ancient records state that villages could be granted to high officials and members of the royal family as a reward for their services (Sethe *Urk. I*: 14 - 15, 216; Strudwick 2005: 314); in fact, the papyri of Gebelein deal with some villages, which formed one part of such rewards, the *pr-dt*, “house of the body,” of an unknown official in the late 4th Dynasty (Posener-Krieger and Demichelis 2004). Nevertheless, these papyri also reveal that the villagers had obligations to many contributions to the royal administration, including working on architectural projects. Later documents such as the Horemheb or the Nauri decrees show that royal agents could make requisitions of manpower in villages and force their governors to deliver goods at the mooring posts (Kruchten 1981: 58, 96), to cultivate the land of the pharaoh, or to accomplish *corvée* services for the temples. Other deliveries included cloth, animals, and gold, as the “taxation scene” in the 18th Dynasty Theban tomb of Rekhmira, the Amarna Period *talatat*, or the Ramesside administrative documents show (Janssen 2004: 50; Moreno García 2006: 119); villages could also be taxed with specific supplies for a cult (Tresson 1935 - 1938).

Nevertheless, the main contribution of villages was manpower (Moreno García 2004: 77 - 106). Old Kingdom sources evoke many administrative bureaus, which could request workers from Upper Egypt and which kept lists of men liable to be conscripted. The Gebelein papyri are a good example of such lists, while the decrees of Coptos (Sethe *Urk. I*: 289 - 295) suggest that villagers were recruited to work at a local estate of the temple of Min. The stone marks in the mastaba of Khentika at Balat also show a system whereby people from different localities successively carried the blocks to be used in the monument (Castel et al. 2001: 147 - 149). Texts of the Middle Kingdom, like the Reisner and Lahun papyri, the stone marks in the pyramids of the kings, or the Hammamat inscriptions describe in detail the local organization of teams of workers, their conscription, and the role played by the governors of the villages in their recruitment (Arnold 1990; Moreno García 2006: 113 - 119).

Unfortunately, it is nearly impossible to determine the impact of such requisitions on the local economy and the domestic life cycle (partial dependence of villagers on the ration system, manpower diverted to the administration demands, obligation to produce specific crops and goods, incorporation of poor people into the “state sector,” etc.), not to mention on village society (reinforcement of the power of the local elite, opportunities for ambitious individuals, increase of inequalities). The crisis of the central authority at the end of the Old Kingdom, for example, was followed by an increase of wealth in private provincial tombs, a fact that could be linked to less fiscal pressure but also to the “reinvestment” of resources in the local sphere. Perhaps the mentions of uncultivated land and extensive cattle breeding in the contemporaneous el-Moalla and Deir el-Gabrawi inscriptions (Sethe *Urk. I*: 77; Vandier 1950: 163 - 164) point to an alternative model of production, less dependent on intensive agriculture and only possible when the fiscal impact of the state weakened or simply vanished.

Culture and Values

In spite of the official bias of the bulk of our sources, some references reveal that the village was an important element in the construction of social identities. Late 3rd millennium texts, for example, introduce for the first time epithets and titles stressing links with the town and the village. In a period of armed conflicts, individual members of the local militia were called *nh n njwt*, “soldier,” the expression *s n njwt*, “a man of the town,” began to refer to “citizens,” and the very concept of *ntr njwt*, “local god,” became popular in private monuments. But it is in the realm of the private inscriptions where the importance of the praise and approval of the citizens, of acting in favor of one’s locality, appear for the first time as proof of personal prestige and distinction, to the point that epithets like *mry n njwt.f*, “one beloved of his town,” or *hzy n njwt.f*, “praised by his town,” figure prominently in the autobiographies and monuments of this period (Moreno García 1997). Later teachings and sapiential literature assert the importance of the village as a cohesive and protective social network for its members, linked not only by endogamy but also by solidarity and mutual obligation ties

controlled by the local notables. A discernible self-awareness of belonging to a community appears as a highly esteemed value, whilst the village temple and the local cult centers become basic pillars of collective identity (Agut-Labordère *fc.-a*). Nevertheless, archaeology also shows that popular, private religion relied extensively on magic and cults of natural forces, while ancestor cults and collective burials were foci of family memory and identity (Moreno García 2010c). In this respect, finds from New Kingdom Kom el-Rabia, a suburb of Memphis, are probably quite representative of the conditions prevailing in the countryside, as they reveal a duality of cultic forms linked to social status, with figurines and amulets being widely spread among commoners while small stelae were reserved for low rank priests living in the neighborhood (Giddy 1999: 299 - 301). In any case, it is quite probable that the local priesthood was reserved for the wealthiest villagers and local notables, the same social sectors who could sometimes afford for themselves the type of prestige items (statues, decorated sarcophagi, inscribed objects, etc.) usually restricted to the administrative elite, thus enhancing their status inside the communities they ruled.

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Few attempts have been made to study the distribution and historical evolution of villages in ancient Egypt (Butzer 1976; Lehner 2000; Rathbone 1990). The recent publication of the Gebelein papyri opens up the possibility of analyzing the social, fiscal, and occupational setting of some Upper Egyptian villages (Posener-Kriéger and Demichelis 2004); these aspects are better known for Ptolemaic and Roman communities, thus opening the way to comparative research with earlier periods (Monson 2007a, 2007b). However, occasional archaeozoological and archaeobotanical evidence provides invaluable information about the productive activities of Egyptian villages (Cagle 2003; Hauschteck 2004; Moreno García 2006: 11 - 78; Murray 2009). The social and cultural values of villagers, as expressed in written sources, have received some attention (Agut-Labordère *fc.-a*; Eyre 2004; Moreno García 1997), but can be better understood thanks to the increasing archaeological evidence (Cooney 2007; Wada 2007).

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