

The Fall of the Egyptian Old Kingdom

By Professor Fekri Hassan



Professor Hassan discovers the true cause behind the collapse of the Egyptian Old Kingdom.

Professor Fekri Hassan examining ancient hieroglyphs which tell of appalling suffering. A third of the population died and the most ordered of empires was brought to chaos.

End of a dynasty

'Nothing prepared Egypt for the eclipse of royal power and poverty that came after Pepy II.'

Nothing prepared Egypt for the eclipse of royal power and poverty that came after Pepy II (Neferkare). He had ruled for more than 90 years (2246 - 2152 BC) as the fourth king of the 6th Dynasty of the Old Kingdom. Within the span of 20 years, fragmentary records indicate that no less than 18 kings and possibly one queen ascended the throne with nominal control over the country. This was the entire length of the 7th and 8th Dynasties (2150 - 2134 BC). In the last few years of the 6th Dynasty, the erosion of power of the centralized state was offset by that of provincial governors and officials who became hereditary holders of their posts and treated their regions as their own property.

Egypt, to be sure, survived the disastrous collapse of the monarchy. Within a century, Egyptians had re-invented centralized government. They refurbished the image of kings so that they were not merely rulers by virtue of their divine descent but more importantly had to uphold order and justice, care for the dispossessed and show mercy and compassion. The crisis that shook Egyptian society thus heralded the most dramatic transformation in the royal institution, which was destined never to be separated from this social function.

The crisis not only reformed the monarchy but also instilled the spirit of social justice and laid the foundation for mercy and compassion as fundamental virtues. It was these concepts that were later to infuse Christianity and Islam. It was these same concepts that eventually led to the overthrowing of monarchs who repeatedly usurped their powers and denied people their religious rights.

Fragmented rule

'...even imbeciles and children could rule with no threat to the royal institution'

Some Egyptologists attribute the sudden collapse of the Old Kingdom to the long reign of Pepy II. However, a reign which lasted for more than 90 years suggests, if anything, stability and strength. Even if the collapse

was due to Pepy II's long reign, the struggle for power among the sons of Pepy II at the end of his rule is not a reason for the dissolution of the monarchy. Moreover, it is misleading to speak of his successors as being 'weak' kings without giving any reasons as to how such divine rulers of absolute power could have become so. Under such conditions, even imbeciles and children could rule with no threat to the royal institution.

Historically, this has always been the case because kingship is less about the king in person than the institution whose beneficiaries - the royal court, nobles, regional governors and priests - gain from its presence. They suffer to lose everything if the institution is compromised or handed over to another royal personage. For this reason, the principle of divine kingship was maintained even when the king was replaced by rulers drawn from outside the family of the enthroned king.



Inscription in the tomb of local Governor, Ankhtifi, who lived during the time of the collapse of the Old Kingdom.

We have no indication at the end of the 6th Dynasty that there was a bid for power by the local governors. It is only after the initial breakdown that power was wielded by the kings of a province in Middle Egypt, later called Herakleopolis. The capital was approximately 15 km west of Beni Suef on the right bank of Bahr Yusuf. According to Manetho, Herakleopolis became the capital of Egypt during the 9th and 10th Dynasties and the town played a major role after the end of the Old Kingdom. Evidence for this account comes from inscriptions in the tombs of a vassal prince at Asyut. These reveal that war broke out between the kings of Herakleopolis and Theban kings. The war lasted for several years and ended when the Theban king Mentuhotep II Nebhepetre (2061 - 2010 BC) defeated Herakleopolis before re-unifying the country.

Contrary to what some Egyptologists claim, the stability of the long reign of Pepy II was most likely due to the decentralization of the government. This is one of the most successful strategies in managing complex organizations. The ambitions of local governors in such a system are primarily curtailed by the economic and defence rewards of being a vassal. In addition, there is the strong likelihood of failure in staging an uprising because the king can count on many more loyalists. Only when the monarchy is undermined by some unforeseen cause, would charismatic and ambitious provincial governors seek to become kings. In this situation, they stand to gain from restoring the monarchy in their name, thus counting on the support of others who, in the absence of a powerful king, would rally behind them.

Despair and collapse



Aftermath of the drought and sandstorms which destroyed the Egyptian Old Kingdom around 2200 BC (animation reconstruction)

What was the factor that weakened the monarchy and allowed provincial governors to assume royal power over their regions? One possibility is an invasion by Asiatics. However, there is no evidence that Asiatics invaded Egypt at the end of the Old Kingdom. Alternatively, the initial breakdown of the Old Kingdom was caused by a sudden, unanticipated, catastrophic reduction in the Nile floods over two or three decades. This was so severe that famine gripped the country and paralysed the political institutions. People were forced to commit unheard of atrocities such as eating their own children and violating the sacred sanctity of the royal dead. The Egyptian sage Ipuwer gives a graphic description of the horrendous events of that time.

Lo, the desert claims the land
Towns are ravaged, Upper Egypt became a wasteland
Lo, everyone's hair [has fallen out]
Lo, great and small say, 'I wish I were dead'
Lo, children of nobles are dashed against walls
Infants are put on high ground
Food is lacking
Wearers of fine linen are beaten with [sticks]
Ladies suffer like maidservants
Lo, those who were entombed are cast on high grounds
Men stir up strife unopposed
Groaning is throughout the land, mingled with laments
See now the land deprived of kingship
What the pyramid hid is empty [The] People are diminished.

Egyptologists concede that there can be no doubt that these texts relate to fact. There is incontrovertible evidence that this terrible famine was caused by the reduction of the Nile floods.

Climactic change



The Pyramids at Giza: One of the greatest legacies of the Egyptian Old Kingdom

The scale of the failure of the floods is shown by the fact that the Faiyum, a lake of some 65 metres deep, dried up. This means that the lake actually evaporated over time. These low floods were related to global climatic cooling which reduced the amount of rainfall in Ethiopia and East Africa. In Iceland, researchers have detected a transition from birch and grassland vegetation to arctic conditions in about 2150 BC. This correlates with a shift to drier climate in south-eastern Europe c.2200 - 2100 BC. Also, the reappearance of oak at White Moss, UK, suggests fluctuating wetness in around 2190 - 1891 BC. In Italy, drier conditions are found around 2200-1900 BC in Lake Castiglione. Dry spells have also been detected as far away as Western Tibet at Lake Sumxi.

'... the Nile can be considered as the force which destroyed the civilization that it had nurtured.'

The most tantalizing recent discovery, however, was made when scientists made a high-resolution study of dust deposition from Kajemarum Oasis in north-eastern Nigeria. The study conclusively revealed that a pronounced shift in atmospheric circulation occurred in around 2150 BC. This data indicates that an abrupt, short-lived event of cold climate led to less rainfall and a reduction of water flow in a vast area extending from Tibet to Italy. This had catastrophic effects on such early state societies as the Egyptian Old Kingdom.

Long-term variations in Nile floods are beyond the perceptions of people. The Nile, today and during the prosperous times of the Old Kingdom, is regarded unquestionably as the source of life in Egypt. Therefore, the Nile can be considered as the force which destroyed the civilization that it had nurtured. Inconceivable as it might be, the Nile is a temperamental river. The volume of flood discharge varies wildly in episodes which

range from decades to hundreds of years. Furthermore, there is the impact of freak years where the floods can be disastrously low or high.

Grip of famine



The Sphinx and the Pyramids during the peak of the Egyptian Old Kingdom

The impact of a series of low floods, even if they occur over a few years, can cause distress, famine, plague and civil unrest in Egypt. For example, in AD 967, a low flood caused a severe famine that left 600,000 people dead in and around Fustat, the-then capital of Egypt. The famine lasted for two years and it was not until AD 971-2 that plentiful harvests returned. Once again, in 1201, low Nile floods followed by another low flood in 1202 caused a catastrophic famine.

This eyewitness account comes from Abdel-Latif Al-Baghdadi, a physician/scholar from Baghdad who was in Egypt from 1194 to AD 1200. He reported that people emigrated in crowds and that those who remained habitually ate human flesh; parents even ate their own children. Graves were ransacked for food, assassinations and robbery reigned unchecked and noblewomen implored to be bought as slaves. Al-Baghdadi's account is almost an exact copy of that recorded by Ankhtifi, more than 3000 years earlier.

All Upper Egypt was dying of hunger, to such an extent that everyone has come to eating his children ... The entire country had become starved like a starved grasshopper, with people going to the north and to the south (in search of grain). (Al-Baghdadi, a physician / scholar from Baghdad)

The low Nile episode that devastated the Old Kingdom was, however, of greater magnitude and duration than that of 967 or AD 1201.

Return to power

It was the Herakleopolitan kings from Bahr Yusuf who restored order and stability as the Nile floods allowed the return of plentiful harvests. This was perhaps after 20-30 years of low floods. In the meantime, the Theban rulers began to position themselves to appropriate and resurrect the tattered monarchy. They were on a collision course with the Herakleopolitan kings who, as texts reveal, lost to their southern rivals. However, the Herakleopolitan legacy of that period which emphasised notions of justice, mercy, and social services were never extinguished. Some of the treatise detailing these notions became Egyptian classics. They include the instructions attributed to Herakleopolitan King Khety to his son Merikare. In these instructions, the king stressed the social obligations of the king and advised the heir to the throne to remember that god created godly rulers to fortify the backbones of the weak and counteract the blows of fate.

Within the context of the Herakleopolitan society of the early 12th Dynasty, *The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant*, was certainly disseminated as a piece of official wisdom. It is clearly a bill of rights of ordinary citizens and the responsibility of state officials towards the poor and powerless. The tale regards the ruler as a father to the orphan, husband to the widow, brother to she who is divorced, a garment to the motherless, a just ruler who comes to the voice of those who call him.

'The end of the Old Kingdom was not the end of Egyptian civilization.'

There are four successive episodes during this upheaval of Egyptian civilisation. First came the initial episode of shock, upheaval and fragmentation which were caused by low floods. This lasted from the end of the 6th Dynasty to the end of the 8th (perhaps as early as 2100 and certainly by 2155 - 2134 BC). Then came the second episode of rehabilitation and re-development of regional polities which commenced c.2134 BC. This encompassed the first two generations after the end of the 8th Dynasty (the 9th in Herakleopolis) and the first part of the 10th in Thebes. This was followed by the struggle between Thebes and Herakleopolis during the reign of Antef I who succeeded in re-establishing order during his 50-year reign. This incidentally did not lead to any weak successors. Finally occurred the consolidation of national unity by Mentuhotepe II and his immediate successors after c.2020 BC.

The end of the Old Kingdom was not the end of Egyptian civilization. The so-called 'First Intermediate' period was not a Dark Age. The calamity triggered by low Nile floods was the impetus to radical social changes and a reformulation of the notion of kingship. The legacy of this period is still with us today.

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The Pyramids by Alberto Siliotti (Weidenfeld & Nicolson)

The Complete Pyramids by Mark Lehner (Thames and Hudson)

The Illustrated Guide to Ancient Egypt by DP Silverman (Oxford University Press, 1997)

A History of Ancient Egypt by N Grimal (Blackwell, 1992)

The River Nile: Geology, Hydrology and Utilization by R Said (Pergamon Press, 1993)

The Literature of Ancient Egypt by WK Simpson (Yale University Press, 1972)

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