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Essays in Honor of David B. O'Connor

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Droughts, Famine and the Collapse of the Old Kingdom: Re-Reading Ipuwer

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Preface

Egyptology has benefited immensely from David O’Connor’s commitment to an anthropological approach to ancient Egypt. Instead of an overemphasis on the complexities of deciphering texts that are luckily pursued by most Egyptologists, he has ventured into the domain of trying to make sense of the results of such decipherments using anthropological insights. I first came across this when I was asked to review a book in which he had come up with a novel approach to population and population growth in Ancient Egypt. Our paths crossed again when I began to investigate the probable causes of the collapse of the Old Kingdom. Combining archaeological research, not just as a means of digging for texts, with his anthropological perspective, O’Connor refuted traditional, ad hoc views on the end of the Old Kingdom in favor of a scenario that invoked an environmental disaster. I am pleased that this contribution lends support to his position.

His ongoing work on the beginnings of Egyptian civilization at Abydos is already showing the fruits of systematic archaeological excavations and an anthropologically-informed approach to ancient Egypt.

David O’Connor has also been active in promoting a cultural heritage approach to Egyptian archaeological resources, and is, indeed, one of a handful of Egyptologists and archaeologists who take this profoundly important matter seriously.

Introduction

For close to 500 years, and after the initial trials of founding a state society, Egypt went through a phase of grandiose state-building, best exemplified by the monumental pyramids that extend over a stretch of 60 kilometers. The period was extremely dynamic with great achievements in state-craft involving the emergence of dedicated state functionaries, and bureaucrats. The sudden and abrupt demise of the centralized government that had developed during the Old Kingdom by the end of the reign of King Pepy II has been one of the most intriguing puzzles in the history of
ancient Egypt. Gardiner noted that the inscriptions from the First Intermediate Period (FIP), the term collectively given to a span of time from c. 2185 to 2020 BCE, "constantly harp upon the lack of grain, a lack which was due as much to the impossibility of undisturbed agriculture as to a succession of low Niles. It may be here noted that the deplorable state of Upper Egypt is clearly reflected in the clumsiness of its artistic efforts; evidently Egyptian civilization was at its lowest ebb" (GARDINER 1962: 111). It became common to refer to this period as a "dark age."

Recently, Franke (2001) traced the reference to the FIP as a "dark period" to Heinrich Brugsch. Franke acknowledges the breakdown of centralized administration during the First Intermediate Period, and notes that there are indeed texts that mention famine and the loss of royal authority in tombs from Akhmim, el-Hagarsa and Hawawish. Nevertheless, he takes the view that conditions were not as bad as texts tell us. Texts, he argues, were ideologically biased. This is hardly justified since earlier texts do not refer to famine and loss of royal authority. One source of the confusion is that the term FIP lumps together three stages; an initial stage of loss of royal authority and a collapse of centralized government which was short lived (20–30 years), followed by a phase of struggle by various provincial leaders to re-establish order and claim royal authority. This phase entailed wars with "Asiatics" and internal war between contenders for the throne, which culminated in a final phase of re-establishing unity, leading to the emergence of the Middle Kingdom. The last two phases lasted for almost 180 years. The FIP was hardly a period of endless chaos, disorder, famine, and trouble, and it is important to restrict the term "dark age," if we must use it, to the first 20–30 years of this period. The events of internal warfare, more in the spirit of the 100-year war in Europe, were not particularly bright. Nevertheless, that led to innovative technological achievements as well as novel systems of governance, state policies, ethics and legitimizing agenda. The unsettling political conditions are indicated, according to O'Connor (1974), by a six-fold increase in mortality in the Qau-Matmar region. In addition, excavations at Nag ed-Deir (from 1901 to 1904 and again in 1912, 1913, and 1923) provide evidence for the "unsettled political situation" reflected in the presence of bows and other weapons. There is also gruesome evidence of warfare from the excavations at Deir el Bahari in 1911–1931 (WINLOCK 1942: 123–127).

In exploring the collapse of the Old Kingdom, it has become almost customary to speak about the impoverishment of the resources of king Pepy II (SMITH 1962: 53) on account of immense constructions undertaken at royal expense and the innumerable funerary endowments exempt from taxation. However, such an account is based on no more than an intuitive speculation and generalization from a few pieces of information.

On this topic and other "social" explanations, O’Connor (1974: 17) remarked that the pyramids of the 4th Dynasty were in a sense an "aberration" that was never returned to even by the strong kings of the 12th Dynasty. Those who adhere to the view that the collapse of the Old Kingdom was precipitated by the actions of ambitious local governors forget that after the initial period of anarchy, it was hitherto insignificant centers such as Herakleopolis and later Thebes that became politically dominant rather than the earlier provincial power centers, the dominance of which might be expected to have been enhanced if the end of the Old Kingdom was caused by the efforts of officials from these power centers (O’CONNOR 1974: 16). Recent excavations by Richards (2001) at Abydos have revealed how, in fact, the tombs of the king’s high officials at Abydos were desecrated, robbed, and vandalized. We also lack concrete evidence for the presumed claim that larger temples emerged as strong competitors for power, as claimed by Butzer (1997: 258), nor do we have evidence that the marriage of one of Pepy’s daughters to a prominent family in Upper Egypt was "a misguided effort to counterbalance the excessive power of the high official bureaucracy in the capital."
O'Connor (1974) dismisses the assertion that the political decentralization of the First Intermediate Period resulted from a decline in the supernatural authority of the kingship, the increasing political power of provincial officials and a "gradual equalization of wealth" strengthening the economic base of a nobility developing out of the secular and religious administration of the provinces. He argues that the exclusion of royal relatives from high offices after the 4th Dynasty was a royal initiative and does not imply a loss of royal control. Moreover, the economic redistribution in the later part of the Old Kingdom need not have weakened royal control, especially since large private estates appear not to have developed. He adds that the comparatively insignificant remains of the provincial temples during the Old Kingdom and the Middle Kingdom indicate their subordination to royal funerary and other cults favored by the state. He also suggests that the official emphasis on the solar cult in the 5th Dynasty increased, rather than reduced, royal political flexibility.

What then was the cause of the collapse? According to O'Connor (1974: 16), "greater weight should be given to the possibility that the politically uncontrollable factor of consistently lower inundations and persistent famine ...was critical in precipitating the political collapse of the I.I.P" [I.I.P is the 1st Intermediate Period]. This is also the view of Grimal as well as Kemp. According to Grimal (1992: 139), the shortage of food as a result of low floods was exacerbated by the decline in centralized administration. The nomarchs would have kept their irrigation canals in a good state of repair. He rightly notes that the chaotic phase lasted no longer than one or two generations, but that the violence it engendered did not immediately die out (GRIMAL 1992: 139).

Kemp (1983: 181) observed that the decline of court culture after the 6th Dynasty occurred close in time to freak low Nile levels and famine. He assumes that the low floods imposed further strain on the balance between competing demands for surplus, particularly if it also came at a time of diminishing returns from a period of increasingly agrarian exploitation.

There is at present plentiful evidence for extremely low flood conditions that lasted for more than a generation, more than what was available when Bell (1971) concluded that the end of the Old Kingdom was caused by droughts as a part of a climatic event of global dimension, and more than what was available when I first wrote in support of this (HASSAN 1997). The focus of this contribution precludes a detailed discussion of the scientific argument for low floods as a result of a global climatic event c. 2200–2150 BCE (subject to the precision of dating methods). Nevertheless, I give here a brief account of current evidence before presenting my discussion of the social dynamics of the disintegration of royal authority and centralized government. The main objective of this contribution is to provide a re-reading of the text by an Egyptian "sage," Ipuwer (GARDINER 1909; LICHTHEIM 1973), which in the opinion of the writer provides an exceptional exposition and an analysis of the catastrophic end of the Old Kingdom.

According to Egyptologist Seidlmayer (2000: 129), "There can be no doubt that these texts [those by Ipuwer and others] relate to fact." This view is also asserted by Assmann: "With these (and numerous similar) texts as sources as clues and traces of real events, we can only conclude that there must have been famines and food shortages in Egypt at that time" (ASSMANN 2002: 102).

In addition to clues to famines and low floods in Ipuwer and other texts from the Middle Kingdom, Ipuwer's contribution is exceptional in as much as it proffers a coherent explanation, albeit not a linear narrative of the breakdown of the Old Kingdom. This aspect of his text has been overlooked by Egyptologists who opted for a literary reading of this work, and who even doubted its historical veracity. I offer here a new reading and a re-evaluation of one of the world's first works of cultural analysis. The reading of the text in this manner was inspired by the reading of
the texts by Al-Baghdadi (reissued 1964) and Al-Maqrizi (reissued 1854, translated by ALLOUCHE 1994) on medieval famines and social conditions in Egypt from the 9th to the 14th century. These texts served as a "control" and a historical reference to the events of the FIP. The categories of social consequences of catastrophically low Nile floods mentioned by the medieval Arab scholars are remarkably similar to those recalled by Ipuwer (with the exception of inflation).

The timing of the collapse of the Old Kingdom has been estimated between 2190 and 2170 BCE (KITCEN 1991; HAYES 1970; SCHENKEL 1965; STOCK 1949; WARD 1992) with an average of 2185 BCE.

Evidence for Low Nile Level in Egypt and the 2200 BCE Global Climatic Event

In a recent study of the Delta, sediments obtained from drilling the subsurface sediments of the Delta revealed a distinctly thin layer of reddish-brown silt dating to 2250-2050 BCE. This layer indicates that the delta floodplain dried up for a long period of time, allowing iron reddish-brown iron oxides to accumulate at the surface (KROM ET AL. 2002). There is also compelling evidence from the ongoing drilling program at Memphis of dry conditions represented by the encroaching desert sand that began to engulf the Old Kingdom settlement during the First Intermediate Period (GIDDY and JEFFREYS 1991: 2). The desert sand extended as a massive sheet of windblown sand over a distance of at least half a kilometer from the edge of the escarpment. It remained a prominent feature of the landscape until medieval times (GIDDY and JEFFREYS 1991: 2; JEFFREYS 1997: 3-4). The intensification of sand storms and the encroachment of sand on Old Kingdom settlements is also evident outside the Delta. Investigations at `Ayn Asil in Dakhla Oasis reveal a progressive sanding-up of the site by the end of the Old Kingdom. Over four meters of wind-blown sand were deposited before the site was finally abandoned (SMITH and GIDDY 1985).

The reduction of Nile discharge coincided with low rainfall in the source areas of the Nile, where a dry climatic phase is detected at the same time as the low Nile floods in Egypt c. 2200-2100 BCE (JOLLY and BONNEFILLE 1992; TAYLOR 1993; GASSE and VAN CAMPO 1994). Droughts are also evident synchronously in the Sahel. An investigation of the lake Kajemarum Oasis and dune deposits in northeastern Nigeria, at the border and Sahel, sensitive to climatic oscillations, revealed that a marked deterioration of climate and vegetation commenced at c. 2150 BCE, leading to the formation of the present day semiarid landscape due to a pronounced shift in atmospheric circulation with significant degradation of terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems (HOLMES ET AL. 1998). Also, investigations at Lake Bosumtwi in Ghana reveal that the level of the lake fell at c. 2150 BCE in response to arid conditions (TALBOT ET AL. 1984). Droughts were also experienced outside Africa. In the eastern Mediterranean a massive reduction of 20–30% in rainfall at c. 2200 BCE is indicated by a high-resolution study of deposits at Soreq Cave (BAR-MATHEWS ET AL. 1999). In addition, high-resolution study of the sediments of the Gulf of Oman discloses a sharp spike of dust that had blown in from Mesopotamia at c. 2200 BCE (CULLEN ET AL. 2000).

Farther afield, dry conditions were observed in a record from Lake Sumxi in Western Tibet at 2200 BCE (GASSE and VAN CAMPO 1994). In addition, in South America a definite transition to a variable late Holocene climate occurred at c. 2100 BCE as revealed by marine sediments off the southern coast of Chile (LAMY ET AL. 2000). There is also good evidence for a severe centennial-scale drought in mid-continental North America 4200 years ago with apparent global linkages (BOOTH ET AL. 2005).

These diverse regional responses in different parts of the world were most likely due to a weak circulation over the Atlantic as revealed in ice cores from Greenland, as well as a transition from birch and grassland vegetation to arctic conditions in Iceland at 2150 BCE (ROSE ET AL. 1997).
The Medieval Parallel
Well after the end of Pharaonic civilization, a famine caused by a low Nile flood in 963 CE, during the rule of the Kafur al-Ikhshidi, led initially to a many-fold increase in the price of wheat. "Distress prevailed and disorder undermined the pursuit of ordinary life. Estates and storerooms were pillaged. People rioted because of the inflation" reported the medieval historian Al-Maqrizi (ALLOUCHE 1994). As soon as Kafur died, violence and riots mounted with a civil war among the soldiers and the princely rulers which cost many lives. The markets were looted and many neighbourhoods were set on fire. People were frightened and became distrustful of others. Some of the army officials contacted Al-Mu’iz li-din-Illah Al-Fatimi in the Maghreb (Northwest Africa). His general Al-Qa’id Gawhar entered Egypt at the head of his army in 953, ending the rule of the Ikhshids and setting the stage for a new dynastic rule under the Fatimids.

The medieval famines indirectly affected almost all crafts. Craft specialists and artisans depend on barter for their livelihood, and are not food producers. Being at a distinct disadvantage, their numbers are likely to dwindle fast. Al-Baghdadi reported that during the 1200-1202 CE famines, of the nine hundred weavers in Cairo, no more than nineteen were left alive at the end. Death, impoverishment, and illness among the craftsmen would have definitely undermined Egyptian economy and the ability to recover immediately (AL-BAGHDADI 1964).

Reading Ipuwer
Parkinson (1997) regards the text as a dialogue, which led him to re-entitle it "The dialogue of Ipuwer and the Lord of All" (the creator). He guesses that his description of social woes and laments were not addressed to a particular king, but to a generalized representative of authority. He seems to regard it as primarily a work of "forceful elegy for the life-in-death that humanity is forced to lead" (PARKINSON 1997: 167) and a call for action to reform social conditions, followed by a dialogue between Ipuwer and the Lord [of all]. In this dialogue the Lord seems to suggest that the problems of the land is of the Egyptians’ own doing and not the fault of the creator. Ipuwer replies by mocking the Lord’s speech and refuting his argument. The end is lost, but Parkinson hypothesizes that it might have ended with reconciliation, as the final Lord’s reply “will have won the sage over to a stoic acceptance of the imperfection of the world” (PARKINSON 1997: 169).

Nothing perhaps would have been a negation of the whole work such as this "ending." The overall tenor of the work, in my opinion, is the validation of order and perfection—notions that are widely accepted as at the core of the Egyptian world-view. The ending suggested by Parkinson is inconsistent with the rest of the work. Moreover, many texts from the First Intermediate Period and the Middle Kingdom underscore what the person has achieved by his “arm.” The First Intermediate Period, if anything, empowered officials to act. Good speech was not a substitute for action, as may be gathered from the following line from the stela of Treasurer Iti of Imyotru (LICHTHEIM 1973: 89):

I was a citizen who acted with his arm (3)

And this one from the so-called “Instructions addressed to King Merikare” (LICHTHEIM 1973: 105):

Don’t say, “it is trouble,” don’t slacken your hands (110, 22)

The suggestion of a certain ending, however, is perhaps an over-reading of the text. Undoubtedly, all readings involve a dynamic intercourse between reader and text, where words
generate currents and eddies between one imagined social world and another imagined world. This is well captured in "autopiscografia" by the Portuguese Poet Fernando Pessoa (HONIG and BROWN 1986) where he explores the relationship between the poetic experience and truth simultaneously with the relationship between the poet and the reader, and is the subject of a great deal of current approaches to literature.

Certainly there can be an infinite number of readings of the same text, including several by the same reader depending on the context and purpose of the reading. In the present context, I am concerned with the historical and sociocultural significance of the work—a subject that may benefit from the sociocultural approaches to literature engendered by the French Revolution (BARBERIS 2002). Parkinson does recognize that "literature was a culturally central artifact in the Middle Kingdom" and proposes that the texts affirmed loyalist values, and that many of them were didactic (PARKINSON 1997: 14). But, the main question is how does this literature differ from that of Old Kingdom writings and why? Ipuwer's poem should perhaps be considered as the French literary works after the revolution of 1789. The French needed literary works that celebrated new values and reflected upon the new realities of society and of individual ambitions. Authors examined their own lives and suffered the pain of the imperfections that fell short from the ideals. Writing became reflective and persuasive. To understand the literature of this period, Germaine de Staël, writing in the 19th century, called for a theory of the particularity of the text within the social and historical context of its motives, objectives, and consequences (BARBERIS 1987). Ipuwer, like Balzac, wrote in the light of what he believed to be two pillars of society; kingship and religion, but the texts of both of them could not be reduced to a conservative reflection by royalists. Their texts were imbued with historically constituted ideals and events, but their words had the seeds of a new future.

From a sociocultural perspective, whether Ipuwer's text was addressed to a certain king or to a generalized representative of authority is irrelevant because his work denounces disorder and calls for stability and order through actions. In this respect, the search by T. S. Eliot for stability and stillness though traditionalism (MAXWELL 1961: 208–212) is revealing. His Waste Land may stand for Ipuwer's own. Eliot reaches for spiritual salvation, Ipuwer calls for action. But although he called for "restoration," his text was far richer, thicker, and more diversified to be merely a loyalist treatise. His dissent, scepticism, and courage reveal that his "poetry" was not a means to transform an imperfect world into perfect speech (PARKINSON 1997: 17), but to transform an imperfect world by perfect speech.

Ipuwer's Text: A Literary History
The analysis of an ancient text is a daunting exercise (ASSMANN and BLUMENTHAL 1999; LICHTHEIM 1988, 1996; LOPRIENO 1996; PARKINSON 1991, 1996, 1997, 2002; QUIRKE 1996). Ipuwer's text is especially difficult perhaps because it is complex, thick with details and generalizations with shifting modalities and expressions. The titles and appellations given to by Egyptologists as "admonitions," "lamentations," or "loyalist propaganda" (LICHTHEIM 1973) have distracted both from its manifold literary merits and its universal [trans-cultural and trans-temporal] appeal that makes it such compelling and gripping reading. Moreover, treating this exceptional work as no more than a literary fiction has led some renowned Egyptologists to negate its historical value. The correspondence between descriptions by Al-Baghdadi of the events associated with the famine of 1200–1202 CE and Ipuwer, separated by a huge span of time and from different cultures and social position, leaves little doubt that Ipuwer was either an eyewitness to the famine or that he had first hand access to historical material on which he based his work in the same way that
Al-Maqrizi writing in 1405 CE used the information from Al-Baghdadi and others in his opus on famine and economy in medieval Egypt (Allouche 1994).

Even if Ipuwer lived at the end of the 12th Dynasty, c. 1900–1800 BCE (Parkinson 1997: 166), the famine would have occurred 260–370 years earlier compared with 200 years separating Al-Maqrizi from Al-Baghdadi. The similarity is interesting because the impact of the famine described by Al-Baghdadi was so severe that the information he provided was preserved by later historians and commentators on medieval Egypt. As Al-Maqrizi depended on written historical accounts, Ipuwer's work, if it were written much later than the events it described, would have also depended on earlier sources sufficiently close to the event to allow him to give such a detailed and, by analogy with medieval famines, fairly accurate depiction. Surely the severity of the famine and its consequences made the events of the First Intermediate Period memorable. The recurrence of occasional famines during the early part of the Middle Kingdom would have sustained the memory of the great famine. Similarly, Al-Maqrizi's account was prompted by famines in his own lifetime. Moreover, Al-Maqrizi's work was not a dispassionate historical anecdote. Al-Maqrizi aimed to deliver a message concerning the importance of good government when people are hit by famine. He was concerned with greed, corruption, inflation of prices, and the debasement of the currency as complicating factors. Likewise, Ipuwer might have had his political motives.

Ipuwer's work has been considered of the same genre as that of Neferty (Lichtheim 1973: 149), to whom we referred when we dealt with Ankhtifi's reference to famine before. Neferty's work is a straightforward piece of political writing. It is shorter and direct, which led Lichtheim to suggest that Ipuwer's longer and more repetitive work was a "late comer" in the genre of "national distress" and of purely literary inspiration. This is hardly justifiable since there is no rule for dating texts sequentially on the basis of their length and repetitiveness. In addition, we do not know the original form of the texts—both Neferty's and Ipuwer's texts survive as copies from the New Kingdom, the 18th and 19th Dynasty respectively.

In rejecting the historical content of Ipuwer's work, Lichtheim relied on an analysis by the Russian historian S. Luria (1929), whose aim was to provide an historical analysis of the mythic and mental [cognitive] structure of the work.

Ipuwer's richness in the details of famine and physical suffering compared with Neferty's and Ankhu's greater emphasis on reversal of fortune, social upheaval and moral crisis in my opinion places Ipuwer closer to the beginning of the 12th Dynasty if not earlier. Later derivative works had the benefit of his rich opus to create shorter versions with a single specific objective.

According to Ward (1999), Ipuwer's work belongs to the late Old Kingdom. He rejects the assertion by J. van Seters (1964), who suggested a late 13th Dynasty date, by pointing out that the text is a copy made during the New Kingdom and it is most likely that copyists could slip into using current words for more archaic or disused words. They could also do that in editing texts for contemporary audiences, which would make the text appear much later than its original copy (Van de Walle 1948; Donadoni 1968). However, Franke, Parkinson, and Quirke tend to assign Ipuwer's work to the late Middle Kingdom (Franke 2001; Parkinson 1997: 166, Quirke: personal communication 2003) on the basis of various internal criteria such as institutions and titles cited in the text. However, this might have been a feature of a late Middle Kingdom copy of the original (see below).

Ipuwer was perhaps a young man by the end of Pepy II's reign; if he was 20 years old at that time, he would have been 45 by the beginning of the 9th Dynasty, having lived through the terrible events of the 7th and 8th Dynasties and witnessed the tragic collapse [from his own point
of view) of Memphite rulers. Depending on how long he lived, he would have lived through the early years of the Herakleopolitan rule. If he died at the age of 65, he would have lived through the first 20 years of that period, but if he lived to a ripe old age of 90 years he would have 45 years, dying c. 2115 within less than 10 years from the 11th Dynasty. If, on the other hand, he was 6-10 years old when famine struck, he might very well have lived up to the beginning of the 11th Dynasty, but certainly his writing would have been done at age 50-55, during the Herakleopolitan period.

The wealth of information on the famine and its devastating consequences, confirmed but by no means excelled by any other writer, gives the distinct impression, especially with the kind of emotional impact it had on Ipuwer, that he could have been an eyewitness who lived to tell the story, perhaps writing in his fifties under the more stable conditions of the Herakleopolitan kings. If so, his work was thus not a loyalist pretext for Amenemhet I, as that by Neferty, but the work of a royalist who decried the weakness of the last kings of the Memphite Period (7th and 8th) because they could not hold the throne and charge their responsibilities. Ipuwer, in his old age, would have thus expressed his faith in the efforts of Khety I (or perhaps Khety II), exhorting him to expel the Asiatics from the eastern Delta, and to consolidate the realm by crushing any rebellion. He also advised the king to restore the temples to their old glory, and to venerate the gods (but perhaps with a shift from the god who went to sleep oblivious to the chaos that engulfed Egypt).

If this assessment of the dating of Ipuwer's composition is wrong, then an explanation has to be given for the detailed and particular themes cited in this work, as well as for his motives for writing this at some time in the late Middle Kingdom. Although it appears that the royal family by the end of the 12th Dynasty was dying out and that there was a rapid succession of kings during the 13th Dynasty, there was no loss of stability or prosperity. Moreover, Egypt lost none of its prestige or power at home or abroad (BAINES and MALEK 1980: 40-41).

But suppose that the text was written in the 10th/11th Dynasties, and later copied and recopied during the Middle Kingdom for over 400 years, wouldn't reference to some words, institutions and titles common at that time have been added or substituted? The Middle Kingdom version, as many others from that period, became a classic (WILDUNG 2003) to eventually survive in a 19th Dynasty tattered copy. This will require an approach to texts that considers their epigenesis—the transformations in vocabulary, structure, and format. It is well known that there are “unavoidable” errors that may even escape editorial reading. For example, there are about 20 errors in all current editions of Salambo by Flaubert (de BIASI 1990).

If Ipuwer were a contemporary of the Herakleopolitan kings, he might not have just been a sage, or a great essayist and poet, but might have been also a key historical figure in the re-birth of Egypt and in drafting a new monarchical charter that redefined monarchy not as a divine right, but as an institution predicated upon responsibility and action. Though perhaps a loyalist, Ipuwer does in fact castigate the king and spells out for him his responsibilities. It might be that Ipuwer's work was a Charta that spelled out the primary duties and responsibilities of the king—to fight the enemies of Egypt, to destroy rebellion, and to keep the religious rituals, as a work that extolled the importance of kingship.

Ipuwer's message would have transcended time, reverberating across the ages by rulers who used his work as a political platform to justify their actions against political rivals and to legitimize the role of the king as the keeper of law and order. It might have also survived as a great literary work because of its forceful evocation of the death and chaos that linger on the edge of life and perfect order. His creative and imaginative power has molded a dreadful historical experience into a gripping existential encounter with self, society, sovereign and the gods. Ipuwer

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expressed his view of life and has since injected his text into life. Although, as philosopher Karl Jaspers realized, no one can escape his historical position; within the limits and conditions of each world-view “Being” itself is encountered (SEIDLMAYER 2000: 127-8).

**Ipuwer’s Annals**

The deep philosophical aspects of Ipuwer’s work and his yearning for stability under a strong monarch do not, however, detract from his detailed account of the processes that led to the demise of kingship and the loss of central authority. The key factor in the collapse of the monarchy was the loss of revenues from the provinces as famine became widespread because of persistently low Nile floods. Conditions worsened as peasants died in large numbers thus reducing the size of the labour force. Even when good floods returned, agricultural productivity was low. The control of the Memphite rulers was minimal. Their strongholds in the provinces also collapsed as famine and despair led peasants to riot, loot, and murder. Tombs and temples were violated. Tax records and government documents were destroyed. As riots and violence spread, the administrative structure of the country was ruined. This further undermined the possibility of collecting and delivering revenues to the royal household. In places, thugs took charge of towns and cities. Enmity, greed, and aggression extended even to family members. The Memphite kings, weakened and impoverished, were unable to repel the encroachment of Bedouins in the eastern Delta. In almost two decades it appeared that all was lost. Peasants, who survived, were demoralized and dilapidated. They had no protection against those who managed to accumulate power and fortune in those tumultuous times. The noblemen lost their power-base and their fortunes—some were reduced to abject poverty and degraded beyond their imagination. The restoration of kingship as a means to re-establish order, stability and peace became a tantalizing dream, and for some even a necessity for survival.

The reading of Ipuwer’s text as a literary work of little historical factuality robs the reader of appreciating the analytical framework used by Ipuwer to explain the collapse of the Old Kingdom. This collapse of the government of the Old Kingdom was not a result of a social revolution. It was a period of breakdown of control and chaos. The following phase of reclaiming order and re-instituting the monarchy entailed a religious reformation and a re-interpretation and re-packaging of “divine” kingship. The outcome was “revolutionary” in its consequences, but it was neither due to an organized peasant revolution, nor the result of a political movement that aimed to overthrow the ruling kings of Memphis by power-hungry nomarchs. Egyptologist Stephan Seidlmayer is specifically clear on this point (SEIDLMAYER 2000: 127-8):

> It is important to realize... that the end of the Old Kingdom was not brought about by the increasing power of the great families of monarchs. In fact, a new line of local magnates appeared during the First Intermediate Period.

The situation during the initial phase of famine, plunder, violence and breakdown in governmental control was aggravated by an increasing presence of Asiatic marauders from the desert lands east of Egypt, who became well established at a time when the ruling kings had neither the economic means to raise an army nor the political structure to mobilize conscripts from a country torn by famine, internal fighting, and a breakdown in the lines of command.

Ipuwer portrays the destruction of the monarchy as follows (LICHTHEIM 1973: 149–163):

> See, one buried as hawk/ falcon is .../devoid of biers/ (7,2)
> What the pyramid hid is empty. (7,2)
See now, the land is deprived of kingship By a few people who ignore custom. (7,2-3)
[Stolen is the crown] of Re,
who pacifies the Two Lands/makes the two lands contend/. (7,3-4)
See, the secret of the land, its limits are unknown {no known borders}, (7,4)
See, Egypt has fallen to pouring /of/ water,(7,4-5)
He who poured water on the ground seizes the mighty in misery. (7,5)
See, the Serpent is taken from its hole, (7,5)
See, the Serpent --- the dead, (7,7-8)

Ipuwer paints this scenario of the loss of royal power as follows:

Loss of revenues and taxes:
/Indeed, Elephantine and 'Thinis' {are in the series} of Upper Egypt, (but) without paying taxes/. Lo, Yebo, <this> --- are not taxed because of strife. (3,10-11)
What good is a treasury without its revenues? Happy is the heart of the king when gifts come to him. (3,12)
The grain of Egypt is/common property/ "I go-get-it." (6,9)
and the whole palace is without its revenues. (10,4)
The king’s storehouse is "I go-get-it," for everyone, (10,3)
It should have emmer, barley, fowl, and fish; it should have white cloth, fine linen, copper, and oil. It should have carpet and mat ---, all good woven products..... (10,4)
/If the..., it in the palace were delayed, men would be devoid of...(10,5)
See, the residence is fearful from want, (7,6)

Ipuwer realizes that the survival of the crown depended on the steady flow of taxes and revenues, and thus proclaims a political "law":

If the residence is stripped, it will collapse in a moment. (7,4)

Economic slump:
Lacking are <grain>, charcoal, iirtyu, m3'-wood, nwt-wood, brushwood. (3,11)
The output of craftsmen is lacking --- ...are the profits of the palace. (3,11)
See, all the craftsmen, they do not work,
The land’s foes have despoiled its craftsmen. (9,6)

Attack by mobs and rebels:
See now, things are done that never were before, (7,1)
The king has been robbed/deposed by beggars/rabble. (7,1-2)
See now, men rebel against the /Uraeus/ Serpent, (7,3)

The disintegration of the country through fighting:
See now, fire has leaped high, (7,1)
Its flame will attack the land’s foes! (7,1)
Men stir up strife unopposed. (7,6)
See, the land is tied up in gangs/confederates/,(7,7)
The coward is emboldened to seize his goods. (7,7)
Mystique of kingship divulged:

Lo, those who were entombed are cast on high ground, (4,4=6,14)
Embalmers' secrets are thrown away. (4,4)
Lo, those who were entombed are cast on high ground, (4,4=6,14)
Embalmers' secrets are thrown away. (4,4=6,14)
The secrets in it are laid bare. (6,6)
Lo, magic spells are divulged, Spells are made worthless through being repeated by people. (6,6-7)
Lo, the beggar comes to the place of the Nine Gods, (6,11)
The /erstwhile/ procedure of the House of Thirty is laid bare/divulged. (6,11)
Lo, the great council chamber is invaded, (6,12)
Beggars come and go in the great mansions. (6,12)
The secrets of Egypt's kings are bared/divulged/. (7,5-6)

The collapse of the Old Kingdom was to a great extent a result of breakdown of specific administrative mechanisms and functions listed by Ipuwer as follows:

Destruction of Records:

Lo, the private/council/ chamber, its books/writings are stolen, (6,5)
Lo, offices are opened, (6,7)
Their records stolen, (6,7)
Lo, [scribes] are slain, (6,8)
Their writings stolen, (6,8)
Lo, the scribes of the land-register, Their books are destroyed, (6,9)
[See, he who recorded] the harvest knows nothing about it (9,7),

Destruction of administrative structure:

Every town says, "Let us expel our rulers."/Let us suppress the powerful among us. (2,7–8)
Lo, the ship of the South founders/broken up, (2,11) Towns are ravaged/destroyed, Upper Egypt became wasteland. (2,11)
The nomes are destroyed, (3,1)
Those who were in the god's bark are yoked [to it]. (3,6)
Lo, the whole Delta cannot be seen, (4,6)
Lower Egypt puts trust in trodden roads. (4,6)
<See>, the chiefs of the land flee, They have no purpose because of want --- (8,14)
See, all the ranks, they are not in their place, Like a herd that roams without a herdsman. (9,2)
See, cattle stray with none to bring them back, Everyone fetches for himself and brands with his name. (9,2–3)
He who was a <magnate> does his own errands. See, the mighty of the land are not reported to, (9,5–6)

Breakdown of law and order:

Lo, the laws of the chamber are thrown out, (6,9–10)
Men walk on them in the streets, (6,10)
Beggars/poor men/ tear them up in the alleys. (6,10–11)
Lo, --- throughout the land, The strong man sends to everyone (5,10),

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Corruption:

Lo, [Right] is the land in name, Standing on it one does wrong (5,3)
See, the serfs eat beef/ Behold, ‘priests’ transgress with the cattle of the poor, The paupers ---- (8,11)
See, the serfs eat geese/Behold, ‘priests’ transgress with geese, Offered <to> the gods in place of cattle. (8,12)

The collapse of the Old Kingdom entailed much more than a changeover of a political regime. The collapse was aggravated by the emergence of dilapidating, antisocial attitudes. Fortunately, Ipuwer provides us with a perspective on the disruptive anti-social attitudes bred by the deterioration in living conditions; the violence, the countless deaths, civil disorder, and loss of fortunes. These anomic social disorders included enmity, greed, aggression, and dissolution of family values and bonds.

Enmity:
A man regards his son as his enemy. (1,5)
Hostility ---- another. (1,6)
The children of magnates are ejected into the street, (6,12) (see also LICHTHEIM 1973, p. 155)
He who puts his brother in the ground is everywhere. (2,13–14)
The great do not mingle with their people [<when they rejoice>]. (2,5)

Greed:
Lo, men’s slaves, their hearts are greedy [sad] (2,5)

Aggression:
Lo, hearts are violent, (2,5)

Dissolution of Family Morality:
A man strikes his maternal brother. (5,11)
See, a man is slain by the side of his brother, who abandons him to save himself. (9,3)

From an intellectual point of view Ipuwer regards as one of the main ills of society the lack of guidance by wise men, whose words are no longer heeded:

there is no man of yesterday. (2,2)<The word of the wise has fled without delay>. (2,14)

The breakdown in the moral fabric of society and the heart-wrenching horrors witnessed by those who lived were traumatic as one may gather from Ipuwer’s account. The combination of antisocial attitudes and the emotional disorders ranging from sadness to utter despondency contributed significantly to the worsening of conditions as people became listless. Many remained “silent” as killing, corruption, and destruction raged across the country.

The brewers ----- sad. (1,5–6) The man of character [the virtuous man] walks in mourning on account of the state of the land. (1,8)
Lo, the face is pale ----- (1,9)
Lo, the face is pale, (2,2)
Lo, merriment /laughter/ has ceased, is made no more, (3,13–14)
Groaning is throughout the land, mingled with laments. (3,14)
Lo, all beasts, their hearts weep. Cattle bemoan the state of the land. (5,5)
One says, “Don’t walk here, there’s a net.” People flap like fish, (42c) The scared does not
discern it in his fright. (2,12–13)
Lo, terror kills; (5,7)
the frightened says..... (5,7)
Lo, great and small <say>, “I wish I were dead,” Little children say, “He should not have made
me live!” (4,2–3)

Ipuwer masterfully interweaves specific details and figurative metaphors with overall gen­eralizations, leading us back and forth from the microscopic view of events, from the emotive
images, to a bird’s eye view of the country as a whole and of the spirit of the time, what the
Germans call Zeitgeist—the overall condition of Egypt and its state of mind. Egypt was injured, its
fortunes overturned, people no longer guided by their past, confused and distraught, subdivided,
and weak. All is ruin.

(<The land is injured>, (2,12)
Lo, all beasts, their hearts weep, Cattle bemoan the state of the land. (5,5)
Lo, <one is numb> from noise/because of noise, noise is not [...] in years of noise, and
there is no end of noise, No <voice is straight> in years of shouting, No <end of shouting>. (4,1–2)
Lo, gone is what yesterday was seen, (4,5)
The land is left to its weakness like a cutting of flax (4,5)
All say, “We don’t know what has happened in the land.” (2,3)
The affairs of the people have gone to ruin/All is ruin! (3,13 = 9,5–6)

The disastrous events and the array of mishaps from starvation to social anarchy with all
the sorrows and emotional anguish they created, led to different responses. We can detect these
responses by analyzing the words of Ipuwer and related works in which the disaster of the First
Intermediate Period was the main subject. We can do this by attempting to uncover the funda­mental mental “formula,” or [cognitive] schema, that inspired and structured the generation of
the various statements in the work. By looking at the major “themes,” we can detect three core
issues that capture the overall content of the work. These themes (regardless of how they appear
in text) may be expressed as follows:

(I) Ruination [leads to]
(II) Distress [demands action]
(III) Action [by king leading to] restoration of order.

We may thus abbreviate Ipuwer’s long work into the following lines:

(I) All say, “We don’t know what has happened in the land.” (2,3)
The affairs of the people have gone to ruin/All is ruin! (9,5–6)
(II) The man of character [the virtuous man] walks in mourning on account of the state of the

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land. (1.8)
That is our fortune/fate/ (3.13)
What shall/can we do about it? (3.13)

(III) [Destroy the foes of] that noble [residence], rich in offices. Lo, ----- (10.7–8). There are plenty of fighters to repel the Bowmen. Is it Libyans? Then we will turn them back (14, 13–14).
Remember the erecting of flagstaffs, the carving of offering stones; the priest cleansing the chapels, the temple whitewashed like milk; sweetening the fragrance of the sanctuary, setting up the bread-offerings (11.3–4).

By comparison, Neferty’s work could be rendered in the same manner as follows (LICHTHEIM 1973: 139–144):

(I) The land is quite perished, no one is left (1.24)
(II) Bewail this land from which you have sprung! (20)
Rise against that what is before you (22)
(III) A king will come from the South (57–58)
Rebels [will fall] to his wrath (64)
Asiatics will fall to his sword (63)
Then order will return to its seat (68)

Neferty’s work belongs to the same “schema” as Ipuwer’s and his response to the chaos and distress is to prophesize the coming of a king who will take the action called for by Ipuwer. However, a variant of that schema does not call for action, and Part III of the schema is no more than an expression of impotence against the arrows of fate, as in the work by Khakheperre-Sonb, called Ankhu, dated to Sesostris II or shortly thereafter. It survives in a copy from the middle of the 18th Dynasty (LICHTHEIM 1973: 145–149):

(I) The land breaks up, is destroyed
Becomes [a wasteland] (rt 10)
(II) There is mourning everywhere
The whole land is in great distress (rt 11)
(III) The sufferer lacks strength to save himself (vs. 4)

In yet another version, the “Dispute between a Man and His Ba” dating from the 12th Dynasty Part III expresses the view that death is preferable to life under evil conditions (LICHTHEIM 1973: 163–169):

(I) Goodness is cast to the ground everywhere (109)
The land is left to evildoers (122–123)
(II) Death is before me today <like> a sick man’s recovery (130–131)
(III) Truly, he who is yonder will be a living god,
Punishing the evildoer’s crime (142–143).

In simplifying the texts to these “formulae” we can immediately detect the range of mental attitudes and responses to the catastrophe, regardless of the range and number of characteristics of the state of ruin (e.g., starvation, pestilence, death, depopulation, crime, reversal of fortunes,
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collapse of monarchy, etc.) as well as in the literary form by which any element of a schema is expressed.

Undoubtedly many Egyptians felt the same way as Khakheperrre-Sonb, or the Man who talked to his Ba, opting for forfeiting the present by giving up hope or relinquishing their own responsibility for action to the gods; the latter to become a major element in the religions of subjugated peoples at a much later time, succinctly expressed in the biblical apocalypse.

Ipuwer's formula called for action. He recognized what has been translated as "fate," but he clearly thought that fate is not destiny!

That is our fortune/fate/ (3,13)
What shall/can we do about it? (3,13)

Perhaps fate was for him no more than a premonition:
What the ancestors foretold has happened. (1,11)

Ipuwer's text takes us into the mind of an Egyptian and exposes in front of our own eyes the innermost thoughts and feelings that help us in bridging the gap of time and cultural differences to gain a personal perspective on how an Egyptian responded to the catastrophe.

If only this were the end of man, No more conceiving, no births (7,1)
But since giving birth is desired, grief has come and misery is everywhere.
So it is and will not pass, while these gods are in their midst (12,3–4).

Ipuwer also candidly expresses his private doubts and uncertainty. How could God allow such a state of affairs to happen? Why did not he, all knowing and omnipotent, prevent this devastating calamity? This is almost like a soliloquy that might have also made his audience confront their own doubts. The sway of religion, which was paramount in the minds of the Egyptian elite, is allowed to play itself out as individuals take the matter in their hand—after all, it is God's plan!

Lo, the hot-tempered says: "If I knew where god is I would serve him." (5,3)
Lo, why does he seek to fashion <men>, when the timid is not distinguished from the violent? (11,12–13)
If only he had perceived their nature in the first generation! Then he would have smitten the evil/ have imposed obstacles/, stretched out his arm against it/them/, would have destroyed their seed and their heirs! their herds and heritage. (12,2–3)
But since giving birth is desired, grief has come and misery is everywhere. So it is and will not pass, while these gods are in their midst. (12,3–4)
Where is he today? Is he asleep? Lo, his power is not seen! (12,5–6)

Ipuwer's work reveals that perhaps he was himself one of those who urged the rulers of Herakleopolis to take action and save the country from total ruin, or it tells the story of those who did just that. Ipuwer, mincing no words, addresses the king, reminding him of his responsibility and, in fact, making him responsible for the political strife:

If we had been <fed>, I would not have found you, one would not have summoned me ....

---- ----
Authority, Knowledge and Truth are with you - turmoil is what you let happen in the land, and the noise of strife. Lo, one man assaults another, and one transgresses what you commanded. When three men travel on the road, only two are found. For the greater number kills the lesser. Is there a herdsman who loves death? Then you could order it done. It means the replacement of love: one man hates another. It means reducing their numbers everywhere. Is it your doing that brought this about? Do you speak falsely? The land is a weed that kills people. One does not expect to live. All these years there is strife. A man is killed on his roof. He must keep watch in his gatehouse. If he is brave he may save himself. Such is his life!

(12,6–13,3)

When a <servant> is sent to citizens, he walks on the road until he sees the flood. If the road is washed out, he halts distressed. Then he is robbed, attacked with blows of the stick, and criminally slain. If only you would taste a little of these miseries! Then you would say -----. (13,3–6).

Now the course of action is clear, the king must destroy his foes at home:

Destroy the foes of the noble residence, resplendent in courtiers, -----. The mayor of the city goes unescorted.

[Destroy the foes of] the noble residence, rich in laws, -----. Destroy the foes of that [noble] residence -----. /none can stand/ (10,10)

The king must destroy the traditional enemies of Egypt: the Asiatics, the Nubians and the Libyans:

--- in their [midst] like Asiatics -----. None are found who would stand up to protect them. 
----- Every man fights for his sisters and protects himself. Is it Nubians? Then we will protect ourselves. There are plenty of fighters to repel the Bowmen. Is it Libyans? Then we will turn them back. The Medjai are content with Egypt. How then does every man kill his brother? The troops we raised for ourselves have become Bowmen bent on destroying! What has come from it is to let the Asiatics know the state of the land. Yet every foreigner fears it. The experience of the people is that they say: “Egypt will not be given over <to> sand!” -----. -----. 

The king must finally restore the land uphold the rituals of divine kingship:

Remember..., fumigating with incense, libating from a jar at dawn. (10,13–11,1)  
Remember <bringing> fat ro-geese, terep-geese, set-geese, and making divine offerings to the gods. (11,1–2)  
Remember chewing natron, preparing white bread, <as done> by a man on the day of ... (11,2)  
Remember the erecting of flagstaffs, the carving of offering stones; the priest cleansing the chapels, the temple whitewashed like milk; sweetening the fragrance of the sanctuary, setting up the bread-offerings. (11,3–4)  
Remember the observing of rules, the adjusting of dates, removing one who enters the priestly service unclean’ for to do this is wrong, ... (11,4–5) /it is destruction of the heart. The day which precedes eternity, the months... years are known---. (11,5–6)
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Remember the slaughtering of oxen -----. (11,6)
Remember going out -----/purged/ who calls to you (11,6-7)
----- /to open the jar, (11,7)
/the shore of the waters ... of women/ (11,8)
Clothing ...to give praise in order to appease you. (11,9-10)
/., lack of people; come...Re who commands...worshipping him.. West until...
are diminished.------. (11,11-12)

Ipuwer was a shrewd politician, if not just a great literary figure. His message to the king must gain the support of noblemen who will have to fight against armed gangs and rebuild the country. In closing his work he tempts the noblemen with the dividends of peace. I recalled as I read his words, the tempters in Murder in the Cathedral by T. S. Eliot, who came to tempt the Archbishop of Canterbury by revealing his own thoughts:

Your Lordship won't forget that evening on the river,
Fluting in the meadows, viol in the hall
Laughter and apple-blossom floating on the water,
Singing at nightfall, whispering on the water,
Fires devouring the winter seasons,
Eating up the darkness, with wit, wine and wisdom!

T. S. Eliot, Murder in the Cathedral

It is perhaps not coincidental that the play which was set in the context of the struggle between the power of the king and the power of the Church as well as in the political conflicts between king and barons, that another tempter appeals both to lofty social ideals, fortune and authority, as Ipuwer did:

The Chancellor. King and Chancellor
King commands. Chancellor richly rules
This is a sentence not taught in schools.
Beneath the throne of God can man do more?
To set down the great, protect the poor,
Disarm the ruffian, strengthen the laws,
Rule for the good of the better cause
Dispensing justice, make all even
Is to thrive on earth, and perhaps in heaven.

For Ipuwer, nobles can have it all; by bolstering kingship they can thrive both in heaven and on earth. They will have tombs that will not be violated and they will have funerary rituals that will ensure that they will be cared for in Heaven. On earth, they will garner the rewards of peace and the pleasures of the good life; when a man is happy eating his food, clothed in clean robes, and his bed made ready:

God ordains it for whom he favors. (---)
[It is however] good when ships sail upstream,----- -----.It is however good ----- . It is however good when the net is drawn in

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And the birds are tied up ------.  
It is however good -----, And the roads are /passable/ made for walking.  
It is however good when men's hands build tombs/pyramids/,  
When ponds are dug  
and orchards made for the gods.

It is however good when mouths shout for joy,  
When the nome-lords watch the shouting from their houses,  
Lo, a man is happy eating his food. Consume your goods in gladness, while there is none to  
hinder you.  
It is good for a man to eat his food.  
When one is clothed in clean robes ...  
/cleansed in front and  
well provided within/  
It is however good when beds are readied,  
The masters' headrests safely secured;  
When every man's need is filled  
by a mat in the shade,  
And a door shut on him who slept in the bushes.  
It is however good when fine linen is spread on New Year's Day,------ fine linen is spread,  
robes are laid out. ------ (13,10–14, 5)

It is however good when people get drunk, When they drink miyet with happy hearts (13.13–14).

Ipuwer was clearly a good Egyptian who loved life and had no wish either to give up hope or buckle under. He is the protagonist who prepares the stage for the heroes of the First Intermediate Period. But before we explore the deeds of those great men who resurrected Egypt, we owe Ipuwer a final evaluation of his text.

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