# Political Systems and Archaeological Data in Egypt: 2600-1780 B.C.

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The historical periods discussed in this essay are the Old and Middle Kingdoms and a shorter intervening phase, the First Intermediate Period (O.K.: Dynasties IV–VI, c. 2613–2181 B.C.; I.I.P.: Dynasties VII to earlier XI, c. 2181–2040 B.C.; M.K.: later Dynasty XI and Dynasty XII, c. 2040–1786 B.C. For the absolute chronology, cf. *The Cambridge Ancient History* I³, 1: 173–93; Edwards 1970; Michael and Ralph 1970: 109–20). The better documented aspects of the political systems then prevailing in Egypt are well-known and need not be described in detail here. During the O.K. and M.K., the political system was of the so-called 'Oriental Despotism' type (Balandier 1970: 144–5), highly centralized and headed by a politically effective king enjoying a qualified supernatural authority (Posener 1960). The government was based on a literate, hierarchically organized bureaucracy, recruited on the basis of ability. It enjoyed a substantial permanent income, exacted substantial compulsory services and virtually monopolized certain vital materials and imported luxuries. In return, the government enhanced the subsistence and surplus-producing capabilities of the country, provided an (ideally) impartial system of administration and arbitration, expanded Egyptian control over foreign peoples for economic and ideological reasons, and maintained an elaborate ritual and economic system to ensure the continued benevolence of the gods and deceased kings, upon which the social and natural orders depended (*C.A.H.* I³, 2: 145ff., 495ff.; Helck 1954; 1958).

This 'despotism' was not a static system. There were internal dynastic feuds; there may have been an institutional check on royal power (Anthes 1959: 180) and there were fluctuations in power between the kings and the central government (Hayes 1972: 148). As elsewhere (Balandier 1970: 138–40), a critically important problem was ensuring effective control of the provincial governments, which in the later O.K. showed strong feudal (in the broader sense of that term; 1970: 95–8) characteristics. In the I.I.P., national centralization collapsed and was replaced throughout Egypt by independent and semi-independent political units, centralization being effective only on a local level. Even after formal reunification under a unique royal house had been achieved, the complete suppression of local and regional independence was a gradual process, not completed until perhaps c. 1870 B.C. (*C.A.H.* I³, 2: 464–95, 505–6).

The textual and archaeological data upon which the above reconstruction is based are fragmentary and heavily biased. Most come from the cemeteries of Middle and

Upper Egypt, while well-excavated settlement sites and administrative and economic
records are extremely rare (Butzer 1961; 1966; O'Connor 1972a: 78–81). These evi-
dential problems create significant gaps in documenting the prevailing political systems
and an ambiguity which leads to different interpretations of the same data. Many im-
portant aspects of the social, economic and religious organizations which are part of the
'political system' (Balandier 1970) are poorly known. This includes, for example, the
degree to which national support for a political system was voluntary as well as coerced
(cf. an apparently weak O.K. police/military power, Faulkner 1953: 32–6), the sources
of wealth and status (not always directly governmental, cf. Jaquet-Gordon 1962: 14–15),
and the varying size of an always present private economic sector involving land owner-
ship, industry and investment (Helck 1956a: 65ff.; Baer 1962: 25, 33; 1963: 9–12;
*C.A.H.* I³, 2: 506).

Problems of interpretation are particularly evident with regard to the origin and
nature of the political decentralization of the I.I.P. Some scholars see this as a largely
political phenomenon, resulting 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 in the provinces (Helck 1968: 62–92; *C.A.H.* I³, 2: 195).
The ambiguous evidence, however, does not justify too dogmatic a conclusion. The
exclusion of royal relatives from high office after Dynasty IV (*C.A.H.* I³, 2: 166, 187)
and the administrative rationalization of the later O.K. (Baer 1960: 296–302; Fischer
1968: 3–14, 65–77) were presumably royal initiatives, not intended to reduce royal
power, and the feudal-like aspects of late O.K. provincial administration were not in-
compatible with effective royal control (Balandier 1970: 96–7). The economic redistribu-
tion evident in the later O.K. need not have weakened royal control, especially as large
private estates appear not to have developed (Baer 1963: 12–13) and secular and re-
ligious administrations were kept separate in the provinces (Fischer 1968: 18–21).
The apparent diminution of royal status as a result of official emphasis on the sun-cult
in Dynasty V may on the contrary have increased royal political flexibility and power
(Anthes 1959: 180). In these circumstances, greater weight should be given to the
possibility that the politically uncontrollable factor of consistently lower inundations
and persistent famine (see below) was critical in precipitating the political collapse of
the I.I.P. After the initial period of anarchy, it was hitherto insignificant centres (Thebes,
Heracleopolis) which became politically dominant rather than the earlier provincial
power centres (Schenkel 1964: 264), the dominance of which might be expected to have
survived if the process was a purely political one.

Archaeological data (architectural remains, art-forms and artefacts mainly from
funerary contexts) from these periods have already been used in rather generalized ways,
some of which are discussed below, for the reconstruction of the political system and
the writer intends to suggest further extensions of this generalized use. For reasons of
space and the variable quality of the data, discussion here must be limited to selected
examples of the interrelationship between textual and archaeological data in recon-
structing important aspects of Egyptian political systems. These should be sufficient to
show that the two data-sets are essentially complementary; the archaeological record
contains historical information only faintly reflected in the textual, and vice versa. The

interpretation of each is frequently corrected and amplified by reference to the other.

The most conspicuous features of the archaeological landscape during the O.K. and M.K. are the royal funerary complexes, which are marked off from contemporary non-royal examples by their unique typology and (comparatively) much larger size. It is only during the decentralized and disturbed I.I.P. that many of these royal tombs become so small and probably, due to the shortness of reigns, incomplete, that they have not been recovered by excavation. The pyramidal structure of an O.K.–M.K. royal tomb was clearly intended for a single burial (although, confusingly, there are instances of a king who had two or more large pyramids built! Edwards 1961: 110–15, 229–35; cf. also a pyramidal (?) cenotaph, 1961: 235) and is *almost* restricted to royal burials. Queens and separate burials of royal entrails sometimes had small pyramids near that of the appropriate king (1961: 103–4, 133–4, 163, 205–8) and rare small pyramid-like structures of uncertain significance have been found scattered throughout Egypt (1961: 87–9). The mortuary and 'valley' temples of the royal funerary complexes are much more elaborate in plan than the funerary chapels of non-royal individuals and are decorated with reliefs showing the pyramid's owner, distinguished from his subjects by a greater scale of depiction, a unique regalia and his subjects' evident respect before him. Without the accompanying texts, and the repetition of royal features and regalia, it would be less easy to distinguish the king from numerous partially or wholly anthropomorphized deities shown on the same scale and on terms of great intimacy with the king (for typical examples, cf. Jéquier 1938; 1940).

The great economic effort called forth by the status of the king is indicated partly by the labour and technology involved in the construction of the pyramid complexes (Edwards 1961: 254ff.) as well as the amount and, in some cases, rarity of materials used. However, the decreasing size of these complexes after Dynasty IV need not (except clearly, in the I.I.P.) be regarded as an index to declining royal power. As an admittedly crude comparison of the area covered by each pyramid shows, it is the Dynasty IV pyramids that are an aberration which was never returned to, even by the undoubtedly strong kings of Dynasty XII. The smaller size and cheaper (i.e. more economic!) internal construction of the post-Dynasty IV pyramids (1961: 175, 224, 226–7, 232) indicates a rational use of resources which is also reflected in the political organization of the late O.K. and M.K. and it was only the removal of the fine stone casing by later plunderers that destroyed an aesthetically pleasing effect.

Of equal, if not greater, economic significance were the large royal funerary estates, well documented in the texts (cf. for the O.K., Jaquet-Gordon 1962). These were set up to maintain a perpetual offering cult, with appropriate priests and administrators, for each king. Archaeologically, the size and duration (in some cases, over several hundred years) of these endowments is only hinted at by the size of the monuments and the continuing use or later renovation of royal funerary temples (e.g. Reisner 1931: 30–3; Fakhry 1961: 3–94). The 'pyramid cities', which lay in or near the necropolis area and housed the staffs of these cults (Helck 1954: 120–30; 1957; Kemp 1972b: 667 n. 20), would probably document the relative importance and duration of individual cults if they were better known, although disconcertingly the best documented example appears to have had other functions as well (Kemp 1972b: 662).

The explicitly political importance of the owners of the pyramid-complexes could be

only inferred from their unique status and resources if it were not for the more explicit texts, and it remains obscure to what degree their position was due to voluntary national support or to coercion (Balandier 1970: 38–41). To extrapolate political information from changes in the architectural form of these essentially cult structures is a most difficult exercise. The plans of royal mortuary temples may, indeed, reflect varying emphases over time on rites (documented textually) representing Lower (the Delta) and Upper Egypt, but this frequently referred to division was, for the periods discussed here, of symbolic and bureaucratic rather than political significance. In any case, the most elaborate analysis of this data (Ricke and Schott 1950, conveniently summarized in Vandier 1954: 141–7) bases some of its more important conclusions upon a mistaken interpretation of archaeological data (Kemp 1968: 151–3). The attention shown the sun-cult during Dynasty V is often seen as politically significant, and an interesting and fluctuating interrelationship between the plans of Dynasty V royal funerary complexes and contemporary sun-temples has been demonstrated (Kaiser 1956: 114–15); but the suggestion that this reflects an effort to 'divert' the influence of the sun-cult from that of the kings (1956: 115) must take into account the possibility of royal manipulation of the sun-cult. The size and ostentation of two excavated Dynasty V sun-temples reflects the importance of the cult during this period, although even here a careful analysis of the textual and archaeological data has shown that the importance of sun-temple endowments varied greatly according to the predilections or resources of individual kings (*ibid.*). By contrast, the comparatively insignificant remains of the provincial temples during the O.K.–M.K. indicate their subordination to royal funerary and other cults favoured by the state (Kemp 1972b: 661). Even here, however, the vagaries of exploration and the archaeologically 'invisible' factor of endowed estates and exemptions from certain state taxes and services (Baer 1963: 13; Goedicke 1967) must be kept in mind.

More explicitly political in its implications is the evolution of the royal tombs of Dynasty XI, based on Thebes. The earliest kings, descended from a line of increasingly powerful local governors, had tombs virtually indistinguishable in size and type from those of their highest officials, but as royal power increased the king's tomb became larger and more complex, culminating after the reunification of Egypt in large and imposing (in intent, if not always in completion) monuments of unique type (Arnold 1968: 34–7; Smith 1958: 88–90). The peculiarly regional character of the political system under Dynasty XI, which retained Thebes as capital and assigned the highest offices of state to Thebans even after Heracleopolis was defeated and Egypt reunified (*C.A.H.* I³, 2: 481–5), is clear in the archaeological record. The classic O.K. royal pyramid form was apparently not used (Arnold 1968: 36–7; Arnold and Settgast 1970: 8) and the sophisticated court style of Dynasty XI royal art is based on the essentially regional 'Intermediate Style' (Smith 1946: 234) until O.K. styles were revived after the reunification of Egypt under Nebhepetre-Mentuhotep.

In studying an ancient centralized state, determining the locations of the capital and any sub-capitals is important, since the areas most remote from these are likely to be under less close control and liable to be the source of important changes in the political system, as was already the case with southern Egypt during the later O.K. (Fischer 1968: 68–9). The location of capitals and sub-capitals during the periods studied here (capitals:

Memphis, O.K.; Thebes and Heracleopolis, I.I.P.; Thebes, later Dynasty XI; *Itj-Towy* [Lisht?], M.K.; sub-capitals: This, O.K.; Thebes, M.K.) has been established by means of epigraphic and topographical rather than archaeological field work, while the locations of the royal burial grounds and of the cemeteries of relatives and officials usually accompanying them have proved to be uncertain indicators of the exact location of these political centres. That Memphis had become a national capital before Dynasty IV is shown by tradition, and the development of important official (Dynasty I) and royal (Dynasties II? and III) cemeteries at nearby Saqqara, but during Dynasty IV the royal tombs are scattered over an 80-km. long stretch. The reasons for this are uncertain, but there is no reason to suppose that the capital shifted from reign to reign (the 'pyramid cities' did not function as capitals, Helck 1954: 129) and, in fact, the continuing importance of Memphis is shown by the concentration of Dynasty V and VI pyramids at nearby Abusir and Saqqara. The royal burials of the I.I.P. were concentrated at Western Thebes and, probably, Heracleopolis, but during the strongly centralized Dynasty XII the pyramids are again diffused over a wide area, despite the continuous location of the capital near Lisht. In certain circumstances, the distance between royal cemetery and capital could be even greater; Memphis may already have been the national capital in Dynasty I, when the kings were placed in the traditional burial ground of Abydos (Kemp 1966) and later the rulers of Dynasties XIX–XX were buried at Thebes, although they resided at and ruled from the northern towns of Memphis and Pi-ramesses (fig. 5).

The sometimes extensive cemeteries that surround royal funerary complexes have been shown by inscriptions to be occupied by royal relatives, courtiers and officials (usually of the central government) of various ranks. It has been noted that these cemeteries reflect the centralization of the O.K. and M.K. and strong tendencies towards centralization even during the I.I.P. A fuller understanding of the political significance of these 'Residenzfriedhöfe' depends upon a complex comparison of textual and archaeological data, best illustrated by the comparatively well-documented cemeteries surrounding the pyramid of Khufu (Dynasty IV) at Giza.

Visually, variations in the size, elaboration and location of individual graves within these cemeteries immediately suggest a 'ranked' pattern, but their interpretation is complicated by their chronological development over several centuries. The chronology of the cemeteries has been established by means of dated inscriptions associated with a small, but substantial, portion of the tombs, analyses of the relative and dynastic chronology of art styles and tomb- and artefact-types, and rather less reliable factors, such as a supposed preference for physically 'eminent' ground, particularly well-suited for building large structures, for high-status graves (Reisner 1942: 14–15, 66ff., but note the qualifying remarks on Reisner's dynastic chronology, Junker 1955: 17, 19–23, and a partial defence, Reisner and Smith 1955: 54–7). The initial cemeteries were developed under Khufu and his immediate successors, and were characterized by large mastabas (rectangular mud-brick or stone superstructures) carefully laid out along a gridiron of 'streets' (cf. fig. 6a). Towards the end of Dynasty IV this regularity was already beginning to break down, and during Dynasties V and VI further large mastabas were built in a less regular fashion in the large empty areas flanking the cemeteries and in the 'Respektraum' originally separating Khufu's pyramid from the west cemetery, which
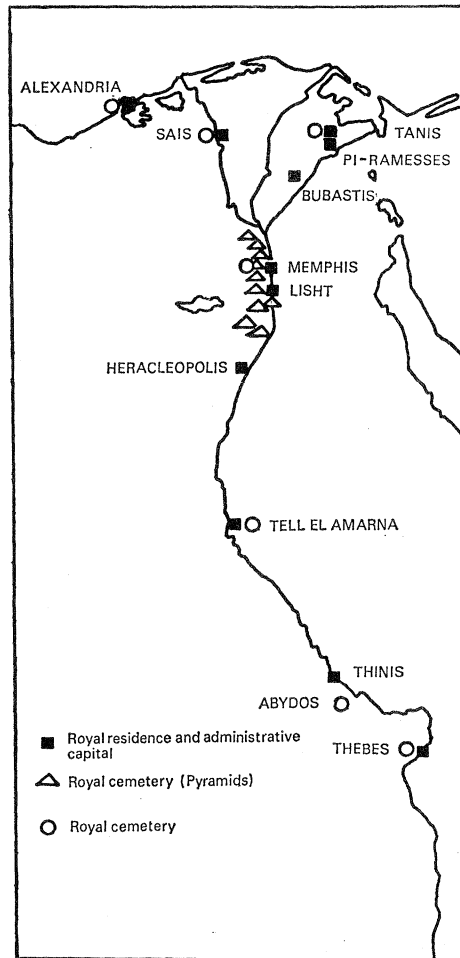
*Figure 5* Royal burial grounds of ancient Egypt

was occupied mainly by officials. During the same dynasties, a virtual cloud of smaller mastabas came to intersperse and surround the larger tombs, the final impression being one of extreme congestion (Junker 1955: 23–4). The collapse of the O.K. political structure virtually ended the Giza cemeteries' importance, although Saqqara and other sites nearer the main centre of Memphis continued to have important cemeteries throughout the I.I.P. and M.K.

The surviving inscriptions show that, while the identities and functions of those buried in the Khufu cemeteries over the centuries reflected the prevailing political system, they did so in ways which significantly differed from period to period. This reflection was most direct under Khufu and his immediate successors, who continued to favour these cemeteries (although smaller ones developed near the relevant pyramids) because of family ties, the presence of largely completed, but unoccupied mastabas, and other factors (1955: 16–18). The extremely large mastabas characteristic of the east cemetery, and occurring sporadically in the west, belonged to royal relatives who were in some cases also the highest officers of state; while the large tombs of the west cemetery
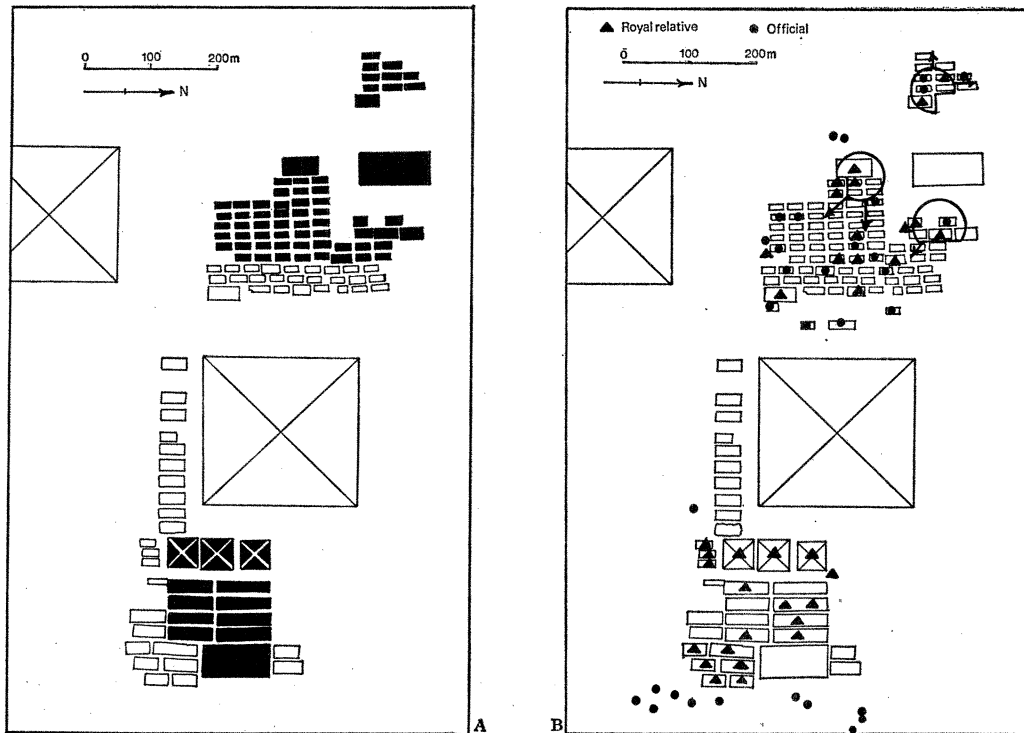
*Figure 6* The early development of the Khufu pyramid cemeteries; structures later than Dynasty IV are not shown. A: The black mastabas are those dated by Reisner to Khufu's reign, and white those of later Dynasty IV. B: The circled areas indicate the 'nucleus' groups of graves

were assigned rarely to royal relatives and usually to high officials and courtiers. Those of less importance occupied smaller tombs on the fringes of the main cemeteries, especially on the east (fig. 6b). Reisner, a deservedly famous authority on the Giza cemeteries, tried to unravel the implied political structure; he argued that the west cemetery had developed out of several 'nucleus' areas, each occupied by burials of the children of one of Khufu's wives and their supporters, 'a party of adherents animated by blood relationship and ambition', and that this had serious political implications in terms of future feuding (Reisner 1942: 28, 77-8). Later, however, Helck pointed out that the royal relatives and non-royal officials making up these 'nuclear' groups were linked together by common administrative functions (Helck 1956b: 62–5) and reflected bureaucratic organization rather than potential political schism. It has also been suggested that not all the high officials of Khufu and his successors can have been buried at Giza and some may even have been buried in the provinces (Junker 1955: 19).

During Dynasties V and VI, new 'Residenzfriedhöfe' developed near the relevant pyramids at Abusir and Saqqara, but large tombs continued to be occupied at Giza during Dynasty V by descendants of the Dynasty IV royal family, who enjoyed high status and substantial income from the large funerary endowments created by their ancestors, but who were of no direct political significance until perhaps the latter part of Dynasty V (Jaquet-Gordon 1962: 15, 17); and by the priests and officials of the

Dynasty IV funerary cults. Some Dynasty V princes (?) and high officials of both Dynasties V and VI were also attracted to Giza by its sanctity and their particular functions (Junker 1955: 24–5), but the decreasing importance of the cemeteries and their economic support is reflected by the increasing numbers of small tombs of funerary priests and officials that intruded into hitherto respected areas during the later O.K.

An interesting provincial comparison with the Giza cemeteries is cemetery 500–900 at Nag-ed-Der (fig. 7), dated by Reisner to Dynasties II–VI (Reisner 1932: 163f.). Details of this dating have been questioned (Brunton 1937: 104), but Reisner appears
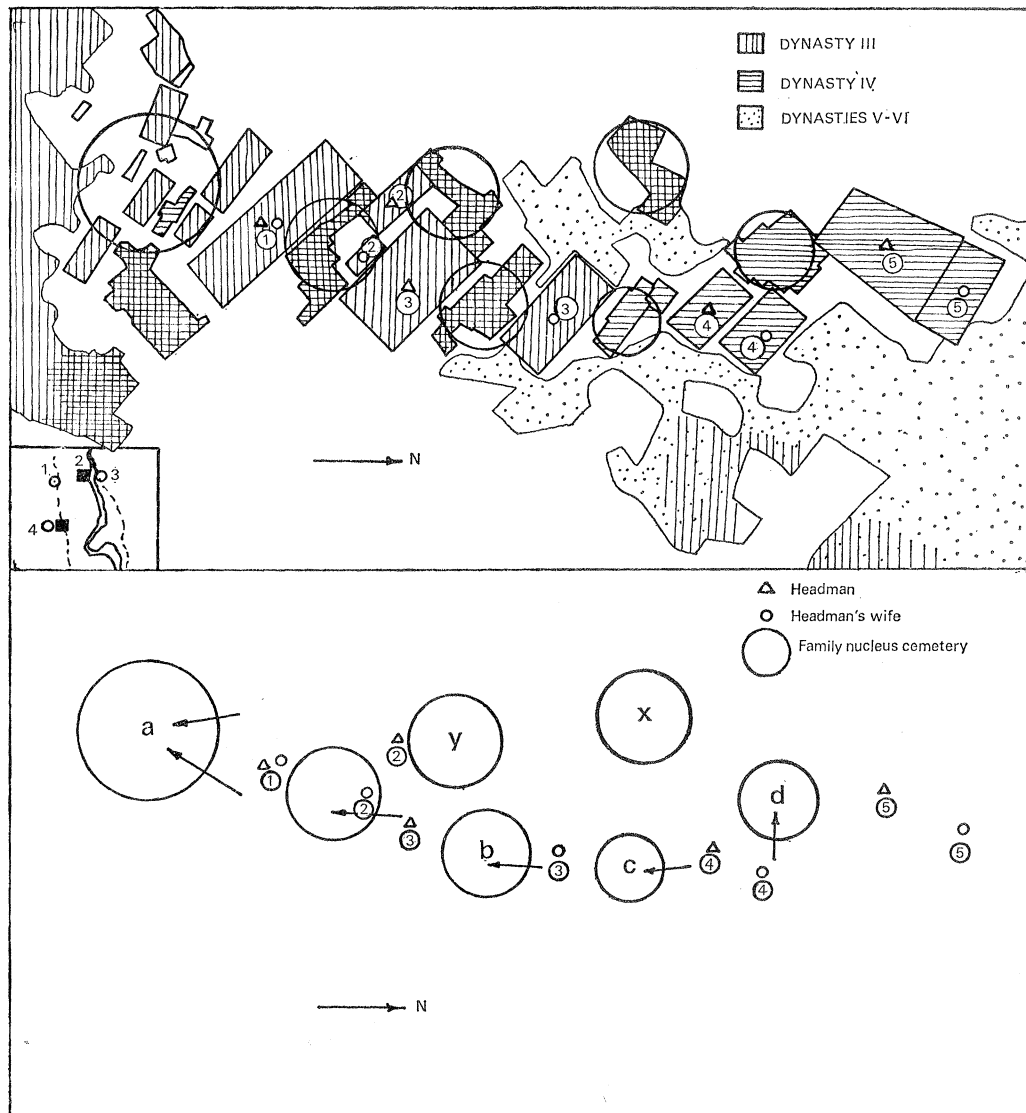


*Figure 7* The central zone of cemetery 500–900 at Nag-ed-Der. The circled areas indicate the subsidiary 'nucleus' cemeteries and the arrows their supposed relationship to the main mastabas. In the inset: 2. This, 3. Nag-ed-Der, 4. Abydos

to have been correct in dating a central zone of conspicuously large mastabas (the largest approach in size the average size of the large mastabas at Giza) to Dynasties III (late) and IV. Reisner made an ingenious attempt to relate the formal pattern and the growth (as shown by the relative and dynastic chronology of tomb- and artefact-types) of this central zone to the local political and social structure. He argued that the largest mastabas represented the burials of five successive 'headmen' and their wives (fig. 7), all assumed to belong to the same family. The smallness of the tomb of 'headman' no. 2 was attributed to a short term of office. Each large tomb was the nucleus of a group of smaller tombs for the relatives and descendants over several generations of the relevant 'headman' or his wife (Reisner 1932: 171f. and esp. 186–9).

That some kind of provincial administration existed during Dynasty IV is certain, but it is not well-documented (Fischer 1968: 9–13) and, since there was no inscriptional and little reliable anatomical evidence from cemetery 500–900 to support Reisner's theory, valid alternatives can be suggested that fit equally well with his chronological conclusions. The hereditary nature of the 'headmen's' office is pure supposition, while the 'wives' ' tombs may be those of another two or three 'headmen' or of male relatives who may have held other offices (as, for example, later at Dendereh, Fischer 1968: compare map with pp. 99–100, 110 [*T3wti* A]). The pattern noted at Giza by Helck (cf. above, page 21) suggests that the subsidiary tombs may be those of officials instead of, or as well as, relatives.

Because their growth patterns were less complex, the provincial cemeteries, in general, illustrate even more vividly than those of the capital a marked socio-economic dysymmetry which, despite significant variations over time, appears to have been characteristic of Egyptian society; for example, one can compare the great rock-cut tombs of the ruling families of Beni Hasan with the comparatively wealthy, but unimposing tombs of their officials below the cliffs (Garstang 1907), or the local governors' tombs of Hemmamiyeh/Qau with the well-documented middle- and lower-class cemeteries at the same sites (cf. below, pages 24–9). This dysymmetry, no doubt, created tensions strengthening the desire for orderly government and was reinforced by it (Balandier 1970: 37–8), since wealth and status came mainly from participation in government. The provinces also reflected major changes in political structure. The increasing importance of the late O.K. provincial governors is manifest not only in texts, but in their large, well-decorated tombs in the provinces (in Dynasty IV, these officials usually governed several provinces in turn and were usually buried near Memphis; Fischer 1968: 12), which in turn reflect their growing local interests and economic strength. The latter is illustrated by the self-contained estates depicted on the walls of their funerary chapels (for typical examples, cf. Porter and Moss 1934: 141f., 177f., 247f.). This pattern of comparatively ostentatious provincial tombs for chief officials persisted long into the M.K., a major indication of the gradual nature of the recentralizing process (*C.A.H.* I³, 2: 505–6).

Changing architectural and art styles in the provinces were further indices to political change. The form and decoration of important provincial tombs throughout the O.K. showed, for the most part, a basic uniformity derived from technological and stylistic developments in the residence cemeteries near Memphis. As centralized control disintegrated, provincial tombs became more varied in form and were decorated in a stylistically

vivid, if technically inferior, 'Intermediate Style', the product of provincial artisans cut off from the models and craftsmen of the Memphite area. Provincial styles in funerary art became strongly entrenched, persisting long into Dynasty XII, even though a 'court style' based on O.K. models had been re-established and occurred in monumental buildings constructed by the central government throughout the country (Smith 1946: 214–43; Terrace 1968: 42–52).

The cemeteries of the provincial nobility tend strongly to occur in a narrowly defined area within each province (*nome*) throughout the O.K.–M.K. because (as textual data reveal) they were normally close to the relevant provincial capital (fig. 8), of which there were approximately thirty-eight by the end of the O.K. The cemeteries are, in fact, a much clearer indication of the presence of a political centre than the destroyed or overbuilt mounds of these towns, the locations of which have been determined by epigraphic and topographical studies rather than by archaeological field work. The distribution of the Middle and Upper Egyptian centres reveals a strikingly uniform pattern; with the exception of a few anomalous towns, the provincial capitals between Memphis and the fourteenth Upper Egyptian province are, on the average, 37·9 km. apart by river (the main communication route); between the fourteenth and the fourth 49·5; and from the fourth to the first 68·3. Some explanations for this patterning might be found in an application of Central Place Theory, adjusted to include both economic and administrative factors (Wheatley 1972: 618) and the peculiar geography of Egypt. To some degree the distribution pattern may reflect variations in agricultural fertility and total population (Wilson 1955: 209–31), as in the contrast between the scattered centres of southern Egypt and the denser pattern elsewhere. However, the comparative closeness of the centres closest to Memphis (twenty-second to fourteenth provinces), in a region less fertile and less densely populated than that defined by the fourteenth and fourth, may be linked to the administrative structure. It was, in fact, in the areas of greater internal resources and a less tightly-knit system of administrative centres that clear signs of political divergence first became evident (Fischer 1968: 65–77; Balandier 1970: 138–40).

On a more detailed level, a series of O.K. and I.I.P. cemeteries, exhaustively excavated between the modern villages of Matmar and Qau (on the east bank of the tenth Upper Egyptian province), is of special interest, for it provided a unique record of several middle and lower class communities once scattered along the 35 km. of adjoining alluvial plain (Brunton 1927; 1937; 1948). An initial important problem of these cemeteries is their chronology, for Brunton's elaborate analysis of their relative chronology was not adequately documented (Brunton 1927, I: 5–7). However, a reanalysis by the writer of the association patterns within each individual grave (fig. 9) and distribution patterns within specific cemeteries of types of pottery, a prevalent artefact, confirms the correctness of Brunton's conclusions. For purposes of general discussion, the graves (with the exception of some 33% which could not, for various reasons, be dated by reference to pottery types) can be grouped into three phases: I defined by types A–E, II by types E–I, and III by types I–K, types E and I being strongly transitional types (fig. 9). Brunton's evidence on the dynastic/absolute dates of his material was weak (Brunton 1927, I: 7–8), but data subsequently published show that phase I is dated roughly to Dynasties V and VI, through numerous parallels with the dynastically well-
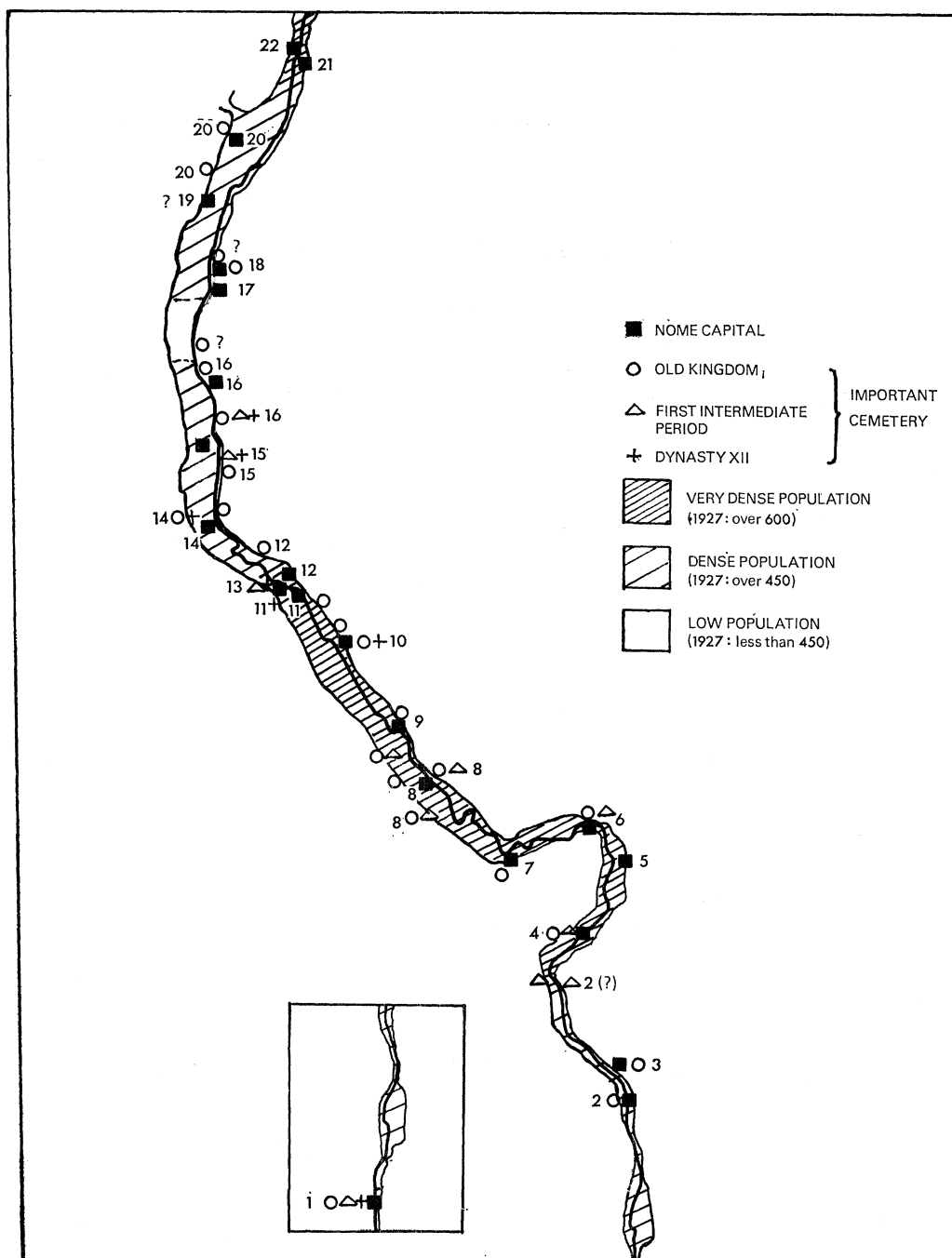
*Figure 8* Provincial capitals and important cemeteries of Middle and Upper Egypt, O.K.–M.K. The numerals identify each province, while the population figures (A.D. 1927) are expressed in terms of square kilometres
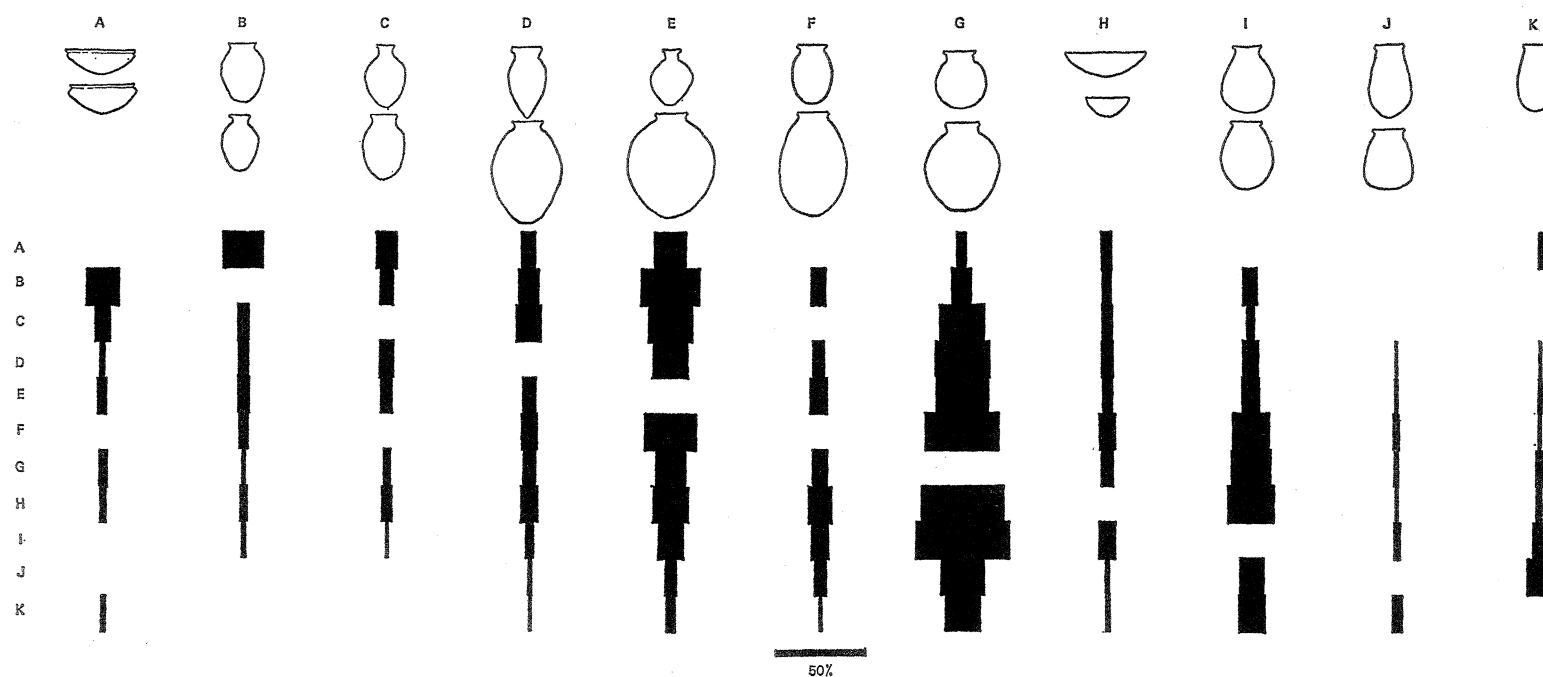
*Figure 9* The association pattern in individual graves of frequent pottery-types at Qau and Badari. The diagram represents percentages, and reads from left to right. Thus the A line reads: of the total sample of A, 21·7% was associated with B, 10·9% with C, 6·5% with D, 17·4% with E etc.

dated Giza corpus (Reisner and Smith 1955: compare fig. 9, A with Giza C XXXII; B, C, D with AIIb, IIc, VI; for E see Bruyère *et al.* 1937: 41f. and plates 20-1 [Dyn. VI]), while the characteristic types of III are paralleled in well-dated material of early Dynasty XI (compare fig. 9, I, J, K, with Arnold 1972, Abb. 3.7). Phase II, therefore, falls between these dynastic dates, and each approximates respectively to 300, 50 and 100 years.

Seen in its correct chronological framework, much of the material from these cemeteries is of direct or indirect political significance. The cultural significance of cemetery material is admittedly complex (Ucko 1969), but despite the long noted fact that O.K. grave offerings often seem poorer than warranted by the probable economic level of many tomb owners (Reisner 1932: 89, 104–5), there does seem to be a slight rise in the economic level of the population in the I.I.P. This is reflected in an increasing incidence of gold objects (Brunton 1927, I: 76; 1937: 106–7) and of the number of grave goods and coffins (Brunton 1937: 105). This economic trend is reflected in exaggerated form in contemporary texts (cf. esp. Simpson 1972: 210–29) which link it to the collapse of the political order. And, in fact, the well-documented conflicts and insecurity of the period are hinted at archaeologically by an unusually high proportion of real and model weapons in I.I.P. – early M.K. graves (Brunton 1927, I: 75; 1937: 108–9; 1948: 52), paralleling scenes of civil war in the tombs and the frequent depiction of armed men on stelae from some areas, although in this last instance there are indications of regional variations (Fischer 1964: 58–9).

Economic data are also politically significant. Since some materials entered Egypt mainly as a result of governmental activity, it is notable that turquoise (Sinai), lapis (Afghanistan via the Levant) and ivory (Sudan) occur in O.K. graves, but are rarer or absent in those of I.I.P. (Brunton 1927, II: 20), reflecting the breakdown of centralization. Copper (Sinai) becomes rarer, and is used in the I.I.P. for utilitarian tools and weapons, rather than the wasteful mirrors of the O.K. (Brunton 1927, I: 61–2). The weakening of an internal distribution system is also evident. Unusual items such as imported oil (Reisner and Smith 1955: 74; Brunton 1948: 45) and stone vases bearing royal names, perhaps indications of royal efforts to maintain provincial support, are absent in the I.I.P. graves, while the mundane pottery is economically even more significant. An analysis of the necked, round-based jars (numerically the commonest jar type) from pottery samples of wide geographical and chronological range reveals an interesting pattern (fig. 10). During the O.K. high-shouldered examples (fig. 10: 1) are found commonly throughout much of Egypt, with a tendency to greater broadness in the south (fig. 10: 2), a uniformity arising perhaps from the existence of a few major pottery-producing centres (Reisner 1923: 320–2) or, more probably, from the widespread use of pottery as containers in the transportation of foods and liquids. Uniformity implies a national system of distribution which clearly was disrupted by the political collapse at the end of the O.K., for in the I.I.P. at least two distinct pottery regions emerge. One, defined by Sedment and Beni Hasan, was characterized by narrow shouldered to oval types (fig. 10: 3) well into Dynasty XI, while another stretching southwards from Matmar was characterized by broader oval and globular, later bag-shaped, jars (fig. 10: 4–7; Brunton 1927, I: 75; Arnold 1972: 44–5). This corresponds to a documented political division (*C.A.H.* I³, 2: 464–81). Economic exchange between these
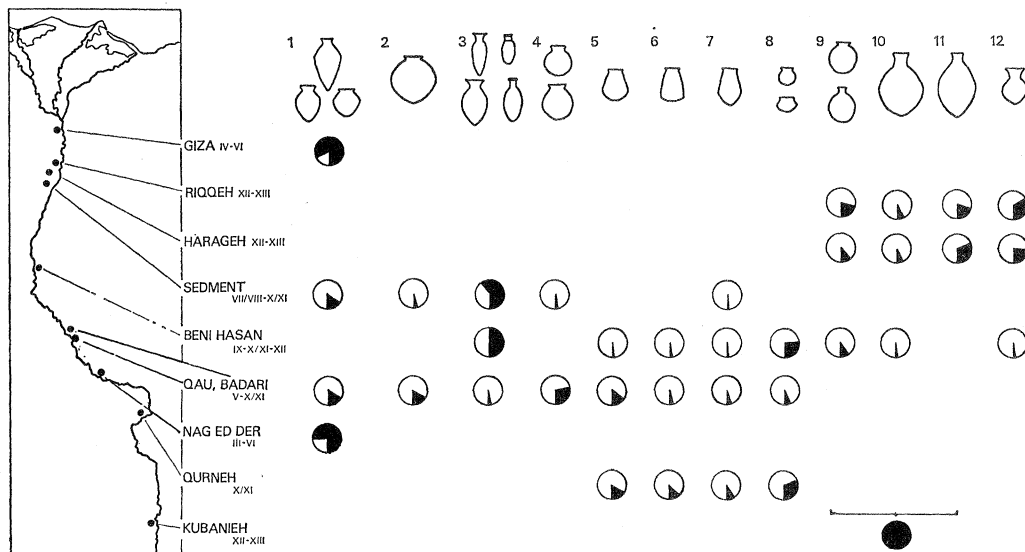
*Figure 10* Geographical and chronological range of certain types of necked, round-based jars; each circle represents the total sample of these at each site, while each blackened area represents the percentage each specific type is of each total sample. The samples were drawn from the following sources: Giza, Reisner and Smith 1955; Riqqeh, Engelbach 1915; Harageh, Engelbach 1923; Sedment, Petrie and Brunton 1924; Beni Hasan, Garstang 1907; Qau and Badari, Brunton 1927; Nag-ed-Der, Reisner 1932; Qurneh, Petrie 1909; Kubanieh, Junker 1920.

regions, at least of material transported in pots, was of low frequency until late Dynasty XI and Dynasty XII. From then on a marked degree of uniformity returns (fig. 10: 8–11; cf. Arnold 1972: 45) as centralization provided the security and machinery necessary for a national distribution system.

Most directly political in its implications is the history and distribution of the local population during the O.K.–M.K. (O'Connor 1972a). The tombs of the governors of the tenth nome mark the location of its capital (later Tjebu near modern Qau) in Dynasty V, but no similar tombs are known for Dynasty VI (was the province controlled by another?; cf. e.g. *C.A.H.* I³, 2: 194) or for the I.I.P. Nevertheless, Tjebu appears to have been the population centre throughout both periods (fig. 11), in the O.K. presumably because of its administrative and economic importance and in the I.I.P. perhaps because it had become a fortified refuge of a type referred to, or depicted in, contemporary texts (Fischer 1968: 140) and scenes, and archaeologically documented at Edfu (O'Connor 1972b: 696 n. 11) and perhaps by the earliest Dynasty XII fortresses in Nubia (Kemp 1972a: 655). The other cemeteries suggest an appended hierarchy of settlements, decreasing in economic importance (Brunton 1937: 109; 1948: 40) and size as their distance from the capital increases (for a later, perhaps comparable, situation, O'Connor 1972b: 690–6). Only the most remote, at Matmar, gains a sudden and ephemeral importance (for defensive reasons?) in the I.I.P. Ostentatious tombs of governors reappear near Tjebu in Dynasty XII. The earliest perhaps expressed an intention of redeveloping an impoverished province, for the M.K. population appears to have remained extremely low for some time (*contra* Brunton 1948: 54).
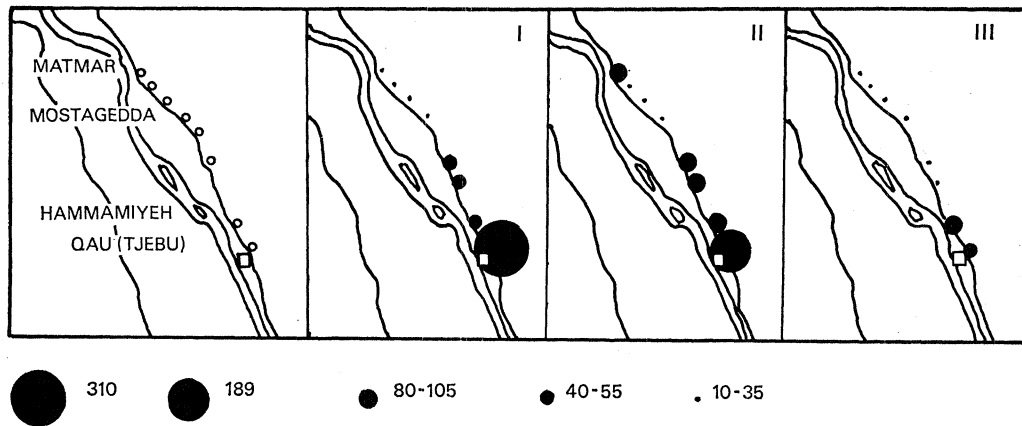
*Figure 11* Population distribution, according to cemetery data, Matmar-Qau. Later O.K. to I.I.P.

The fact that the Qau-Matmar data seem to show a great and rapid increase in the death-rate after the O.K. (*contra* Brunton 1927, I: 8) is certainly politically significant. The burial rate during phase I (561 graves, 313 years) is an average of 1·8 annually, during II (675 graves, 51 years) 13·2 and during III (232 graves, 95 years) 2·4; and in the M.K. (earlier) less than 1 (O'Connor 1972a: 86). This spurt in the mortality rate, since it is combined with an extraordinarily high number of references to famine in the I.I.P. (1972a: 94–5) and geological and historical evidence for a declining inundation and decreasing arable land at this time (Butzer 1959: 109–11; Bell 1970), was certainly not a mere local phenomenon, and suggests that political problems were not the sole or even the main reason for the I.I.P. collapse (cf. also Bell 1971). Moreover, increased mortality and the decreased fertility (reflected in the above figures) which follows famine (Katz 1972: 357–8) would have reduced the size of the labour force for some time, perhaps explaining the marked attention given to the forced labour system in the M.K. (Hayes 1972: 34f., esp. 54–6). The pressure of a gradually replenishing population upon reduced arable land may have prompted the Dynasty XII reclamation projects in the Fayum (*C.A.H.* I³, 2: 510–11).

Foreign relations, as elsewhere, were an important part of the Egyptian political system, and archaeological data are particularly important in their reconstruction. Most of the relevant O.K. and M.K. texts come from funerary or temple contexts. They idealize reality into an unvarying pattern of submissive foreigners being defeated and made tributary by the supernaturally endowed might of Egypt. Only occasionally do documents reveal the true mixture of commercial and diplomatic relations and military adventures which made up Egyptian policy.

Particularly relevant in this context is the still unsettled question of the origin and nature of the M.K. 'empire' in the Levant and Nubia. Egypt lost its former control over Lower Nubia in the early I.I.P. (Säve-Söderbergh 1941: 42–7), but contact with the indigenous Nubians (archaeologically the 'C-group', Bietak 1968) remained lively. Partly as a result of trade, but more so because of the Nubians' role as mercenaries in the O.K. and in the civil wars of the I.I.P. (*C.A.H.* I³, 2: 469–71; Fischer 1961), Egyptian

CWA

artefacts entered Nubia in considerable numbers (Bietak 1968: 133ff.). The dates of these phases of Egyptian-Nubian contact are clearly defined by these artefacts. For example, in the large C-group cemetery at Aniba some 75% of the Egyptian vessels are round-based, necked types which evidently served as containers for imported food-stuffs or liquids, and most of them are of types D–G (fig. 9), typical of the later O.K.–I.I.P. phases I and II in southern Egypt (cf. fig. 9 with Steindorff 1935: 97ff., plates 59–64); the same pattern prevails elsewhere in Nubia. Numerous seal-amulets of later O.K.-I.I.P. type (Brunton 1927, I: 55–9; Ward 1970) are also encountered in C-group graves throughout Lower Nubia (O'Connor 1969: 58–63, fig. 1; Bietak 1968: 133–5) and, if compared to the dated material from Qau and Badari (Brunton 1927, I: 55–9) are evidently also mainly of phases I and II (see table 1). The rapid diminution of imported Egyptian artefacts of phase III (= early Dynasty XI) coincides with the

TABLE I

*I.I.P. Seal-amulets in Egypt and Lower Nubia*

| Type | | Total (typable examples) | Phase I | I/II | II | III | undated |
|------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Qau/Badari | Raised and pierced back* | 76 | 15 | 6 | 35 | 1 | 19 |
| Qau/Badari | Scarabs, hemi-cylinders, rectangles† | 81 | 4 | | 25 | 27 | 25 |
| Lower Nubia | Raised and pierced back | 18 | | 18 | | | |
| | Scarabs, hemi-cylinders, rectangles | 6 | | | 6 | | |

* Brunton 1927, I: plates xxxii: 7–20, 29–96, xxxiii: 97–8.
† *Ibid.*, plates xxxii: 22–8, xxxiii: 128–91, xxxiv: 192–202, 204–20.

increasing recentralization of southern Egypt and perhaps the initiating of aggressive Egyptian campaigns into Lower Nubia. The numerous graffiti of two so-called 'Nubian' kinglets in this area (*C.A.H.* I³, 2: 486) are surely only variant names of those of Dynasty XI rulers (O'Connor 1969: 214n, 114, 215), possibly antedating Nebhepetre Mentuhotep II, whose own campaigns in Nubia are well-known (*C.A.H.* I³, 2: 485–8). Thereafter, throughout Dynasty XII, indigenous C-group graves contain few Egyptian artefacts, for the political relationship changed and the services of the C-group could be coerced by means of the M.K. fortresses of Lower Nubia (*C.A.H.* I³, 2: 497, 499, 507).

It was once thought that M.K. political control extended as far south as Kerma in

Upper Nubia (fig. 12). This misconception was caused by misidentifying as the burials of 'Nubianizing' M.K. Egyptian viceroys those of Egyptianizing indigenous chieftains of a later period (Hintze 1964). Numerous imported scarabs in these graves were critical in establishing their late Second Intermediate Period date (*c.* 1670–1570 B.C.); although their significance has been stressed (Säve-Söderbergh 1941: 112–13) it deserves re-emphasizing. The dating of scarabs of the M.K. and later is a complex problem currently receiving fresh study (Ward 1971: 63 n., 247), but analyses of a representative sample provide some crude, but useful, dating criteria (fig. 13). Comparison of the Kerma scarabs with these data clearly brings out their Second Intermediate character, even the possibly M.K. examples fitting equally well into the later period (see table 2).

It is still thought that Kerma may have had a M.K. trading post (*C.A.H.* I³, 2: 549), but this seems doubtful to this writer. There is no good supporting evidence in the textual record and the numerous M.K. statuettes and other artefacts at Kerma may well be trade-goods or plunder brought there in the Second Intermediate Period (Hintze 1964: 84–5), when the Kushites controlled much of Lower Nubia. Some, in fact, may be plunder from raids on southern Egypt (cf. fig.12 and Reisner 1923: 511

**TABLE 2**

*Scarab- and Design-types from Egypt and Kerma*

| 1. Back-Types | 1–2 (Dynasties XII/XIII) | 3 (Dynasty XV) | 4 (Dynasties XII/XIII/early XVIII) | 6 (early Dynasty XVIII) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Kerma, typable scarabs:* 42 | 9 | 28 | 5 | 0 |

| 2. Design-Types | | C | D | F | B | K | Q | N | P | M | L | other |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Kerma, typable non-indigenous:† | 68 | 2 | 5 | 10 | 9 | 2 | 7 | 18 | 4 | 4 | | 7 |
| Dyns. XII/XIII | | X‡ | X | X | X | | | | | | | |
| Dyn. XV | | X | x | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | |
| early Dyn. XVIII | | | x | X | | | X | | X | | | |

\* Reisner 1923: plate 41.
† *Ibid.*, plate 40, but excluding 87, nos 11–12 to 11–29.
‡ X indicates most probable date of type; cf. fig. 13.

no. 30 [Elephantine?]; 521 no. 39 [Coptos], no. 40 [Medamud]; 524 no. 46 [El Kab]; 527 no. 55 [El Kab]; 528 no. 59 [El Kab]) or, via the Western Desert routes, even further afield (cf. fig. 12 and Reisner 1923: 525 no. 48 [Shutb]; 527 no. 54 [Shutb]). Two large
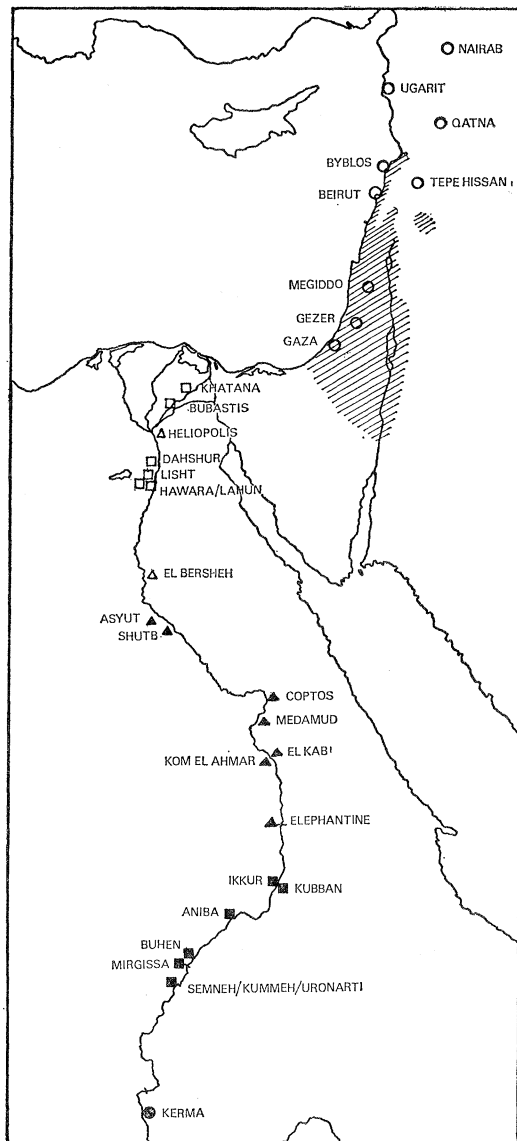
*Figure 12* The locations of M.K. inscribed artefacts, including statuary, at Kerma and of statuary alone in the Levant. □ (black for Kerma, white for the Levant) represents possible places of origin for these artefacts, and △ (with the same colour distinctions) *probable* places of origin. The shaded area represents that part of the Levant most familiar to the Egyptians (cf. the Execration Texts, *C.A.H.* I³, 2:554–6)

statues from Asyut (Reisner 1923: 513 nos 31–2) are more possibly gifts from the Kushites' allies, the Hyksos, who controlled all, but especially northern and middle, Egypt at this time.

Egyptian expansion into the Levant during the M.K. (recently reviewed by Posener in *C.A.H.* I³, 2: 532–58; Ward 1971) is also of uncertain extent and significance. While trade relations with the Levantine coast were certainly resumed by Dynasty XI, the
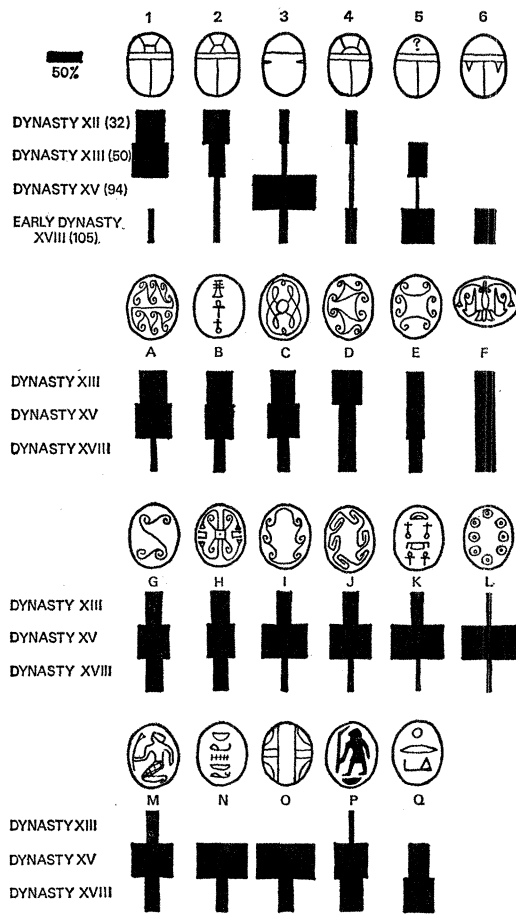
*Figure 13* Chronology of certain common scarab back- and design-types of the M.K. and Second Intermediate Period; the diagram represents percentages of the total sample of each back- or design-type. The back-type chronology is based on royal-name scarabs published in Newberry 1907; Brunton 1920: plates ii, xi; Winlock 1933; Hall 1913; Petrie 1917. The design-types are dated according to the back-type chronology established by the royal-name scarabs, and are drawn entirely from Petrie 1925

intensity of relations at this time which is implied by dating the deposition of many Egyptian artefacts at Byblos to later Dynasty XI (Ward 1971: 63) is not justified in the writer's opinion. The deposit in question contains many scarabs bearing designs which are transitional from types A or D to L, or of L itself (cf. fig.13 with Tufnell and Ward 1966: fig. 2, 32–59) and these, in such numbers, cannot be earlier than Dynasty XIII. Egyptian contact of various kinds with Palestine and Lebanon in the M.K. proper cannot be questioned, but the special political significance given to small statuettes of M.K. royalty and officials found at several Levantine sites (cf. fig. 12 and *C.A.H.* I³, 2: 544–50) seems unjustified. The local chronological framework of these artefacts is uncertain or post-M.K. and they are distributed far beyond the area with which the M.K. Egyptians were familiar. The occurrence of most of them in the Levant is most likely the result of the plundering of Egyptian sites during the Hyksos (Second Intermediate) Period (cf. also Weinstein 1974); some, in fact, appear to have come originally from sites in northern or middle Egypt (Porter and Moss 1951: 381 [El Bersheh]; Schaeffer 1951: 19–20 [Heliopolis]) and others could easily have been found in the royal palaces and tombs or the residence-cemeteries of the same regions (fig. 12).

5.xii.1973.                    *University Museum, University of Pennsylvania*

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## Abstract

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### Political systems and archaeological data in Egypt: 2600–1780 B.C.

Archaeological and textual data, which are both biased and fragmentary, are essentially comple- mentary in any effort to reconstruct the political systems prevailing in Egypt between 2600 and 1780 B.C. An examination of certain aspects of the archaeological data suggests that the political significance of royal burial complexes is rather ambiguous, but that of the cemeteries of the capital and the provinces is more explicit, once the social and chronological complexity of these

sites is understood. Some aspects of the provincial data also suggest that the collapse of the comparatively highly-centralized system of the Old Kingdom, the effects of which were still visible after 170 years of formal reunification, was due to sustained famine created by natural causes rather than a failure in the political system. Finally, any effort to reconstruct Egyptian foreign policy during this period must refer to the archaeological data since the relevant textual sources are heavily biased.