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Complexity of Ancient Egyptian Society during the First to Sixth Dynasty Based on Written Sources

– The case of Egyptian households

(Komplexita starověké egyptské společnosti během První až Šesté dynastie ve světle písemných pramenů

– Případová studie egyptských domácností)

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"Household" represents a fundamental component of early societies in the whole Mediterranean, ancient Egypt not excluding as evidenced by the works of D. Schloen for Ugarit and near East (Schloen 2001) or M. Lehner for Ancient Egypt (Lehner 2000: 275–353). Despite this, the significance of this entity was traditionally emphasized only for periods when the central authority of the Egyptian state was suppressed, typically during the First Intermediate Period (Campagno 2014, 1–33; Eyre 2011, 701–711; Franke 2006). With the change in the view on Egypt, as no longer purely centralized state where the economic relations are predominantly dictated by the redistribution of goods (Janssen 1981: 59–77; Altenmüller 2005), and with the introduction of the patrimonial model of society complemented by a system of patronage ties (Lehner 2000; Moreno García 2013; Eyre 2011), the household as such gained more importance. That might be one of the reasons why the study of houses/households has even recently emerged as a new branch of research addressing a great variety of issues, primarily related to settlement archaeology (Kemp *et al*. 1994; Kemp 2006; Kemp and Stevenson 2010). Soon after, however, such an approach appeared to be worth applying also to the evidence from funerary monuments, *i.e.* stelae and tombs as attested by recent studies by L. Olabarria (2021), M. Nelson-Hurst (2015) or S.J. Seidlmayer (2007). Plentiful archaeological evidence manifests this household-based model for ancient Egypt, expressed both in the settlement patterns and in tomb clustering on necropoleis where the same pattern of the major house/tomb encompassed by a cluster of lesser tombs/houses or shafts belonging either to family members or members of the "extended households", typically in the cemetery of the palace attendants at Giza (Roth 1995). Not only the clustering of tombs on the necropoleis but also the tomb decoration provides us with the evidence of a household encoded in its pictorial images.

The main aim of the present thesis lies in a deeper analysis of Egyptian household reflected in tomb reliefs with a special focus on the minor figures surrounding the tomb owner who were personified by their names and titles. It may seem that this is a completely new topic for the author, but she already dealt with issues of social nature during her master's thesis concentrating on sarcophagi from the Old Kingdom (Štěpánová 2012). A large part of the research was devoted to the socioeconomic implications of the sarcophagus production. In addition to material culture, she gradually began to deal with issues related to the development and functioning of Egyptian society, as evidenced by her participation in GAUK project with Martina Bardoňová focusing on the question of existence of patronage in the Old and Middle Kingdom (GAUK no. 114815 'Did patronage played an important role in the ancient Egyptian social structure and economic relations (Old Kingdom – end of the Middle Kingdom)?'; 2015-

2017), or in the project of Czech Science Foundation no. 16-07210S "Complex network methods applied to ancient Egypt data in the Old Kingdom (2700–2180 BC)"; 2016-2018) dealing with social networks of Egyptian officials lead by M. Bárta, V. Dulíková and K. Mařík. The topic of the present thesis thus became a natural outcome of the outlined direction and represents an attempt to describe and clarify how the Old Kingdom society developed on a microlevel of small social units and what evidence it gives about the complexity of Egyptian society in general.

The Old Kingdom written evidence, which was originally supposed to be an important source for this work, turned out to be not entirely suitable for the intended purpose. Although it represents a stimulating source of information, the material is not much instructive as to the household economy or its composition. The preserved archives mainly inform us about the administration of larger entities, *e.g.* individual cities (Papazian 2021 or Pillon 2021), royal funerary complexes (Vymazalová 2021) or most recently also about the management of sources necessary for the construction of Khufu's pyramid in Giza (Tallet 2022; Tallet 2019; Tallet and Lehner 2021). The evidence from Balat mentioning members of the staff involved in the administration of funerary domains of some of Balat officials represents an exceptional case (Pantalacci 2021). Regrettably, no document of the type such as Heqanakht's papers (Allen 2002) - early Middle Kingdom administrative documents and correspondence which are worth mentioning as they provide an insight into the household economy of a well-off individual of that time, has preserved from the Old Kingdom period. The so-called Letters to the Dead on the other hand do focuses on the private funerary realm, however, they almost exclude the non-kin individuals from the records putting stress almost exclusively on the immediate family environment (Gardiner and Sethe 1928; Wente 1990). Together with legal texts they both do rarely mentions kꜣ-priests but provide no information about professions or occupations outside the funerary realm, which makes this type of evidence worthless for us with regards to possible roles played by these individuals in a particular household. The textual evidence from Old Kingdom tombs, thus, represents a main source base for the present study addressing mainly the data of prosopographical nature, including names, titles, individual careers or family background; if relevant, occasionally supplemented with archaeology and hieratic inscriptions (e.g. for the tomb of vizier Ptahshepses).

A closer study of this issue revealed that a simple definition of a household is already problematic. Therefore, the research starts with Chapter 2 dealing with the definition of the household and the terminology used.

Considering that identified members of a household began to appear in tombs as early as in the Fourth Dynasty, the author in her attempt to cover the household development from the beginning of united state devoted Chapter 3 to the previous period of Early Dynastic Period. Nevertheless, the study of households in this formative period was focused only selectively targeting the phenomenon of so-called subsidiary graves. The author's reasoning is as follows. Similar to the individuals depicted in the tombs who represented the social environment of the deceased and were probably meant to symbolically accompany him in the afterlife, the people deliberately buried near the owner of the central tomb were also meant to serve him in the netherworld. This, according to the author, connects both phenomena. In Chapter 3, Emery's assumption (1954) that some items of grave goods deposited in the subsidiary graves are indicative of the profession of the deceased is examined on four main Early Dynastic cemeteries with subsidiary burials, *i.e.* North Saqqara, Abu Rawash, Tarkhan and Giza. The grave goods in subsidiary graves were evaluated with regard to the number of individual objects deposited and their type. The burials of royal retainers were taken as a comparative sample which, unlike the dependents surrounding private tombs, benefited from the presence of stelae with the names and titles of their owners (Martin 2001).

The next chapters 4 to 8 represent the main corpus of the study devoted to Old Kingdom households reflected in tomb iconography. Already during the personal examination of the tombs, it became clear that those of higher-ranking persons are more elaborate and usually contain more identified minor figures. Therefore, the tombs in this work were divided according to social categories. Individual groups of persons were differentiated, as in the author's master thesis (Štěpánová 2012) according to N. Kanawati's work (1977), who distinguishes viziers, higher, middle and lower officials according to titles characteristic for each group. The two highest ranking groups correspond to the persons discussed by N. Strudwick in his study on the six highest offices in the state (Strudwick 1985).

A selection of tombs from the whole period from Third to Sixth Dynasty was made for this part. A presence of identified minor figures outside the close family of the tomb owner, good state of preservation of the monument as well as the quality of the publication especially with regard to the presence of high resolution photos or drawings were the main prerequisites for this work. The list of officials and their tombs published by N. Strudwick (Strudwick 1985) and N. Kanawati (1977) served as a basic source base for the selection. This has been enriched by tombs from more recent studies (*e.g.* Roeten 2016; Alexanian 2001). The fundamental on-line platforms dealing with Giza cemetery, *i.e.* pages of the Harvard University

(http://giza.fas.harvard.edu/) served in this process as well. Together with a careful selection of well-published tombs, personal examination of certain tombs was also undertaken, which was particularly helpful in detecting the later added inscriptions.

A total number of 375 tombs of Egyptian officials were examined in detail with respect to the minor figures in their interior that were identified by a personal name and/or titles. Altogether 56 tombs were selected as a representative sample, derived from all three main Memphite necropoleis, i.e. Giza, Saqqara and Abusir since provincial officials began to be buried in the provinces only to the end of the Fifth Dynasty. The Sixth Dynasty provincial examples are complemented in order to provide a comprehensive picture of Egyptian household. In this respects, recent works by N. Kanawati 2012; Kanawati 2007 and Kanawati 2005 or D. Vishak (2015) served for the selection. The initial intention was to select at least six patrons for each group per a dynasty; however, it soon appeared not to be feasible for the first half of the Fourth and the second half of the Sixth Dynasty given the development of the tomb decoration.

An essential tool for the research represents a database of patrons (tomb owners) with their dependents created in MS Excel which served as a source base for this study but also as a useful tool in the analytical part of the study. The outputs from the statistical evaluation of the monitored parameters, namely the size and composition of individual households have been inserted in individual tables and charts which became an essential part of the description of individual households in Chapters 5 to 8, in order to better illustrate the observed trends.

Based on the present research, several important outputs for both parts will be put forward at this place. As for its first part, the effort to identify the deceased buried in the subsidiary burials surrounding the large mastabas of wealthy Egyptian dignitaries on the ground of deposited burial goods, have proven to be very limited. The detailed study of ca 230 subsidiary graves in total showed that although the number of objects differed from grave to grave, most of them contained a relatively uniform equipment including a few pieces of ceramic and stone vessels. Other objects such as copper or flint tools appeared quite rarely. All of these falls into the category of functional objects that served as containers for food, drink, or cosmetic oils and were placed in the burials in order to secure the needs of the deceased. This research has shown how problematic it is to mark the same objects that served to ensure eternal sustenance of the deceased as those that point to the profession of the deceased. The only exception are items of personal belongings and the so-called social status symbols that preserved in a small number of burials. Thus, the author succeeded in identifying of the owners

of less than two percent of subsidiary burials in this way. Based on these objects, the deceased derived from a group of scribes/property administrators, persons who overseeing the works or other segment of occupation, guards, and those who were engaged in the entertainment (musicians or dancers). The remaining graves containing burial equipment of common repertoire probably belonged to ordinary servants; however, it is problematic to prove.

In terms of age and gender, the re-evaluation showed that most of the deceased were adult males, although females, children and older people also occurred but in much lesser amount (Campbell 2019: 212–218, tab. 9–11). Unlike the royal retainers, it has not been even proved that the people buried in the subsidiary graves around private tombs have been deliberately killed at one moment (Campbell 2019: 296), although the use of poison prior to the death cannot be ruled out. In the case of burials of children and the elderly, it is likely that they were family members died of natural causes.

If we compare occupants of subsidiary graves around private tombs with royal retainers, the prevailing profession was there the priestly one (Martin 2001). We would expect priests to be among the dead around the private tombs as well. However, either the priestly class was responsible exclusively for the maintenance of the royal cults at this time, or the priests used the same repertoire of grave goods as the other deceased and their presence in not manifested in the archaeology at all.

As the phenomenon of human sacrifice is observable only for a limited period of Egyptian history, one observes not a development but gradual downward trend from several dozen burials until this phenomenon ceased to exist. Despite this, we can monitor the increase in the complexity of the then society indicated by an enormous expansion of tombs built on main Early Dynastic necropoleis including the large tombs surrounded by the subsidiary graves during the reign of king Den. He was the only king during his reign the phenomenon of subsidiary burials were not limited to a single burial ground, but it occupied three of four studied cemeteries, *i.e.* North Saqqara, Abu Rawash and Tarkhan. The increased construction of tombs for the Egyptian nobility, signals among others the expansion of the state and extension of its administrative apparatus.

The main corpus of the thesis concentrating on the household reflected in the Old Kingdom tomb iconography and inscriptions is dealt within the Chapters 4 to 8. It provides us without dispute with a more detailed picture of individual households than the above-mentioned evidence from the First Dynasty. The analysis of the tombs has demonstrated substantial differences in the number of dependents and diversity of their titles when tracing the diachronic and spatial development. One of the factors that significantly influences the size of the

household represents the social status of the owners. In other words, the higher the social status of the tomb owner, the higher the probability that the person in question built a large tomb with more extensive decoration and more identified persons recorded in it. Although this does not apply without exception. It has to be stressed that neither the high status of the tomb owner nor large decorated tomb guaranteed that many dependents with names and titles would have been depicted in it. Various other factors, such as personnel preferences, must also be taken into consideration. Nevertheless, as time advanced, one observes an increase in both the anonymous and identified individuals recorded in tombs during the Old Kingdom as has been confirmed by the analysed sample.

If we pay close attention to diachronic development of Egyptian households reflected in tombs, the Third Dynasty represents a certain forerunner of further development, although the relief decoration only gradually began to adorn the tombs' walls as attested by the tomb of Hesire (Quibell 1913) or Khabausokar (Mariette 1889). The figures of the close family, mainly tomb owner's consorts and children, began to be accompanied by individuals outside the family realm. However, their images remained largely anonymous. The only exception is the earliest attestation of a non-kin individual identified by his name and title coming from the tomb of Hetepi of Abusir from the end of the Third Dynasty (Bárta, Coppens, Vymazalová et al. 2010). Quite interestingly, this first identified individual was a majordomus – a person in charge of running of a household of a high dignitary.

It was only from the reign of king Khufu onwards, when the identified non-kin dependents reappeared; for the first time their number exceeds 10, and subsequently 20 individuals. although it has to be mentioned that the tombs with labelled minor figures outside the family realm still represents the minority. On the contrary, the number of anonymous dependents that were captured in reliefs gradually increased in time. While few tens of dependents were observed at the beginning of the Fourth Dynasty, it reached around 150 non-kin dependents at its end as illustrated by the sample of vizier's tombs.

Another hallmark in the development of officials' entourages represents the turn of the Fourth and Fifth Dynasty. The Fifth Dynasty iconography of the officials' tombs provides a more elaborated and diverse picture of the official's social houses than before. The first profound shift consists in the total number of identified dependents recorded in the tomb. While in the Fourth Dynasty the number of occurrences hardy reached ten, during the Fifth Dynasty it usually counts several tens of people, exceptionally extending one hundred dependents (in case of the vizier Ptahshepses and high dignitary Ti). One can observe not only an increase in

their number, but also a more regular appearance of these individuals in contrast to previous random occurrence.

Another major change represents the fact that not only the highest echelon of Egyptian society but also the officials of intermediate and lower status could afford to build a tomb as evidenced by the number of tombs that grew up in all the main burial grounds of the time (Kanawati 1977). These officials, however, incorporated identified dependents in the iconography of their tombs with certain delay only in the middle of the Fifth Dynasty.

The third significant feature consists in increasing diversity of professions of the dependents. The professions displayed in tombs dated to the Fifth Dynasty can be distinguished into several groups. Apart from family members, the first category of dependents that appeared are represented by priests, given to the cultic context, the *kꜣ*-priests dominate accompanied by lector priests or embalmers. Another large group of persons were individuals who were in charge of tomb owners' property and estates, *i.e.* household managers, most often headed by the overseer of the house who were responsible for running of the household from different points of view; some were in charge of food and linen supply, others in the administration of estates or household accounts. The leading household managers were often accompanied by ordinary servants primarily connected to food supply, namely butchers, bakers, wedepu servants, herdsmen or peasants. However, these dependents were rarely labelled by a particular name, most often only by their profession and in the vast majority of cases they were left entirely anonymous.

The educated part of the dependents recorded in tomb decoration consisted mainly of scribes and people engaged in the central administration, most typically associated with granary, treasury or *ḥwt wrt*; the professions connected to the administration. They can be considered direct subordinates of the officials being at the hand of their superiors in various activities whether working in an office or managing the official's household and estates.

All these groups of dependents were already recorded in tombs dated to the Fourth Dynasty. But in the tombs of the Fifth Dynasty, for the first time one monitors other types of professions that were either completely missing in previous dynasty or their appearance was sporadic. It consisted of titles related to the organisation of labour, various craft-related professions, individuals responsible for the body care as hairdressers, manicurists or barbers, people engaged in the field of entertainment (typical dancers or musicians often with owner's female family members included), and finally, specialists, namely physicians who do appear quite frequently in the viziers' tombs but hardly ever in the tombs of other social strata.

Not all these groups were represented in tombs of all layers and throughout the observed period. The largest and most diverse were as a rule the entourages of viziers and higher officials, while, in the tombs of middle and lower officials, dependents from only three professional areas usually appear. Priests, scribes and the household personnel were most often represented.

In addition to this diversity of particular professions, another indicator of the growing complexity of Egyptian society reflected in the titles of identified persons is the vertical structure of the organization of individual professions. The appearance of a multi-level hierarchical structure was observed especially for priestly and scribal profession, but different degrees of seniority was detected also for the organisation of labour forces, craftsmen, and the sphere of body care. Six-degree stratification consists of the overseers (*imy-r₃*), inspectors (*shd*), controllers (*hrp*), assistants (*iry-ht*), under-supervisors (*imy-ht*) and ordinary servants.

The analysis of the tombs revealed that the greatest variety in professions and at the same time the highest degree of vertical stratification of individual professions are shown by tombs from the reign of Niuserre across the social spectrum. It concerns not only the tomb of the vizier Ptahshepses and high dignitary Ti, but also entourages of middle ranked individuals Iymeri, and Kahai. The first two are exceptional in the great variety of recorded professions; the latter two also feature more varied social houses than the rest of middle ranked officials limited to professional groups of priests, scribes and those employed in the domestic sphere. All these tombs also stand out among others for the number of identified persons. In case of Ptahshepses and Ti it reached the peak; Ptahshepses incorporated around 150 dependents while Ty even more than 230. Similarly, among the middle-ranked officials, Iymery and Kahai recorded 34 and 24 dependents, respectively, while the others hardly reached ten (see attached charts).

If we trace the further development of the officials' suites, the following period of Djedkare's reign is also strongly represented in all monitored parameters which lasted until the beginning of the Sixth Dynasty, when the reign of Teti represents another peak in terms of the size of the entourages. However, the dependents of the mid-Fifth Dynasty officials still remain at the forefront in terms of the complexity of their professions. A number of individuals employed in the sphere of body care, numerous household servants and craftsmen including the presence of specialists, this all makes their social houses unequalled.

From the reign of Pepi I, the size of individual households dropped sharply, and the repertoire of recorded professions significantly decreased to three basic groups, i.e. priests,

scribes and household members, similar to the period of the Fourth Dynasty, while a turbulent development of important administrative centres at Meir, Gebrawi or Kubbet el-Hawa (Kanawati and Swinton 2018) had an impact on building of elaborate tombs with inscribed dependents. As for the two lower social classes of officials, information about their households gradually disappears in the available evidence or is preserved very selective both in the Residence and provinces. However, the wealth of provincial elite is now clearly manifested in the high number of identified dependents reaching a hundred of individuals in certain instances again. The dynamics of state development thus shifted from the centre to the provincial areas where no rapid decline with regard to observed complexity took place at this time.

To summarize, based on the study of the phenomenon of retainers' burials and households captured in the tombs of Egyptian elites, the author was able to define the periods when the complexity of social ties observed on a microlevel of individual households was the highest and vice versa. For the Early Dynastic Period observed from the point of view of a single social phenomenon, this observation is limited. Nevertheless, the reign of the ruler Den stood out since cemeteries experienced a boom in the construction of tombs and the analysed phenomenon is the most spatially widespread. The number of tombs is relatively high, and a certain social differentiation is evident both in the location of the tombs and in the burial equipment.

The study of the development of households during the Old Kingdom period allowed the author to define several different phases.

Phase 1. Third Dynasty to reign of Khufu.

A period when the tomb chapels were only gradually taking new shape and extent. The depiction of minor figures other than the tomb owner or his close family is exceptional. The very first attestation of an identified non-kin individual probably dates from this phase.

Phase 2. Late reign of Khufu to end of the Fourth Dynasty

It is only from the late reign of Khufu when a significant shift in the tomb decoration permitted the tomb owners to incorporate scenes with identified dependents. Primarily priests were represented; subordinates with titles related to state administration and those associated with property management appear only sporadically. The whole period is characterized by the random occurrence of identified dependents.

Phase 3. Early Fifth Dynasty to reign of Niuserre

For the first time, people of non-royal origin and also of lower social status - middle and lower ranked officials began to incorporate identified dependents in the scene repertoire of their tombs. Identified dependents became a common feature for tombs of all well-off officials. A steep increase in the number of recorded dependents is observed hand in hand with the bigger diversity in attached titles no more limited to three main professional groups. During the reign of King Niuserre, the complexity of individual social houses reached its peak both in the number of recorded people and in the variety of their professions.
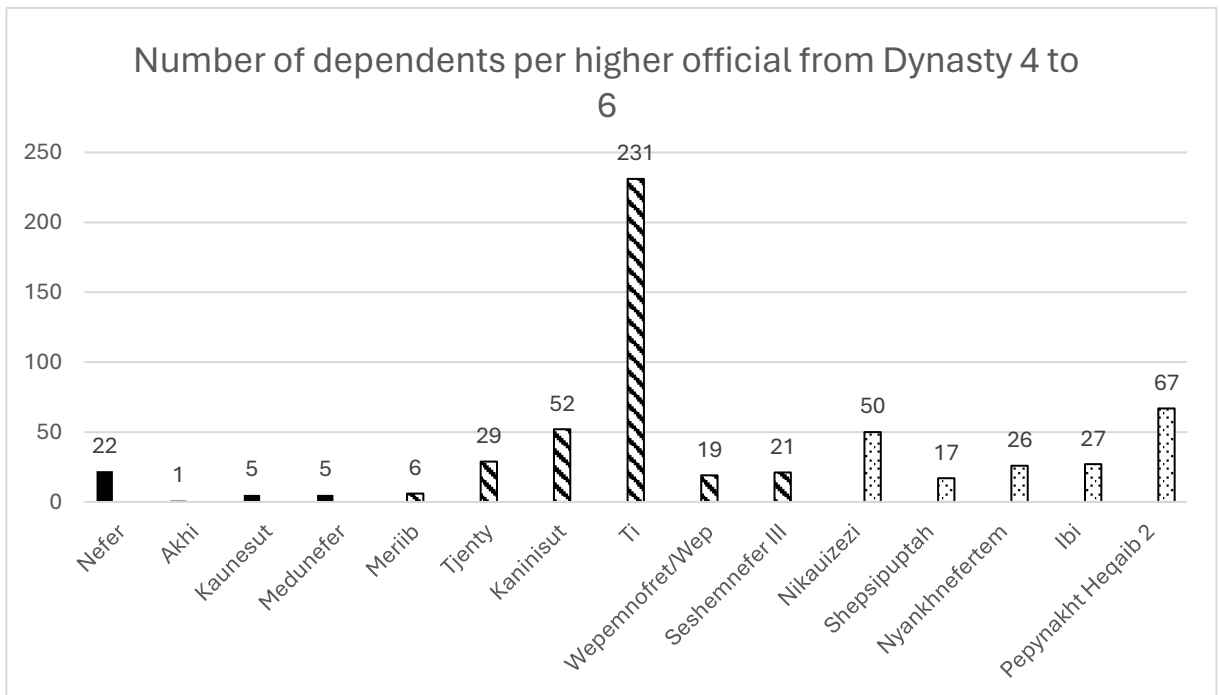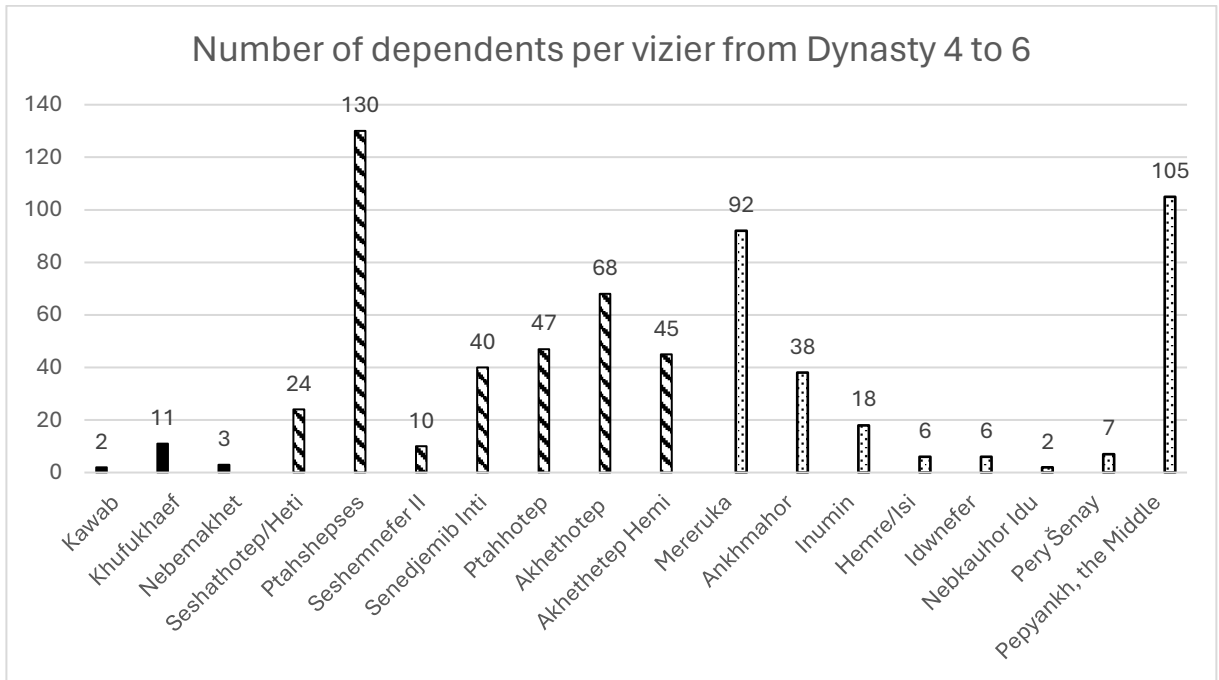
Phase 4. Djedkare to end of the Fifth Dynasty

The second half of the Fifth Dynasty is a period of massive expansion of recording of the household members in the wall decoration; by far the most tombs are characterized by this phenomenon. However, from Djedkare's reign the number slowly declined until the end of the Fifth Dynasty. This is only a slightly decreasing trend, when all monitored values, including the number of dependents and the variety of their titles, are high.
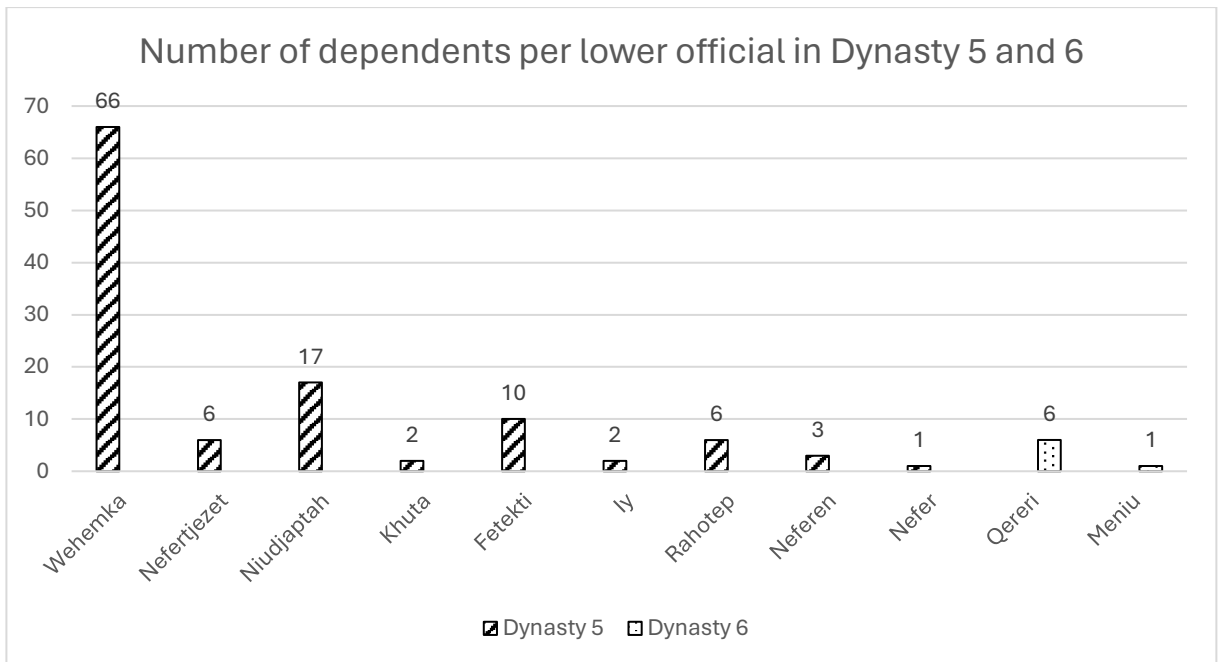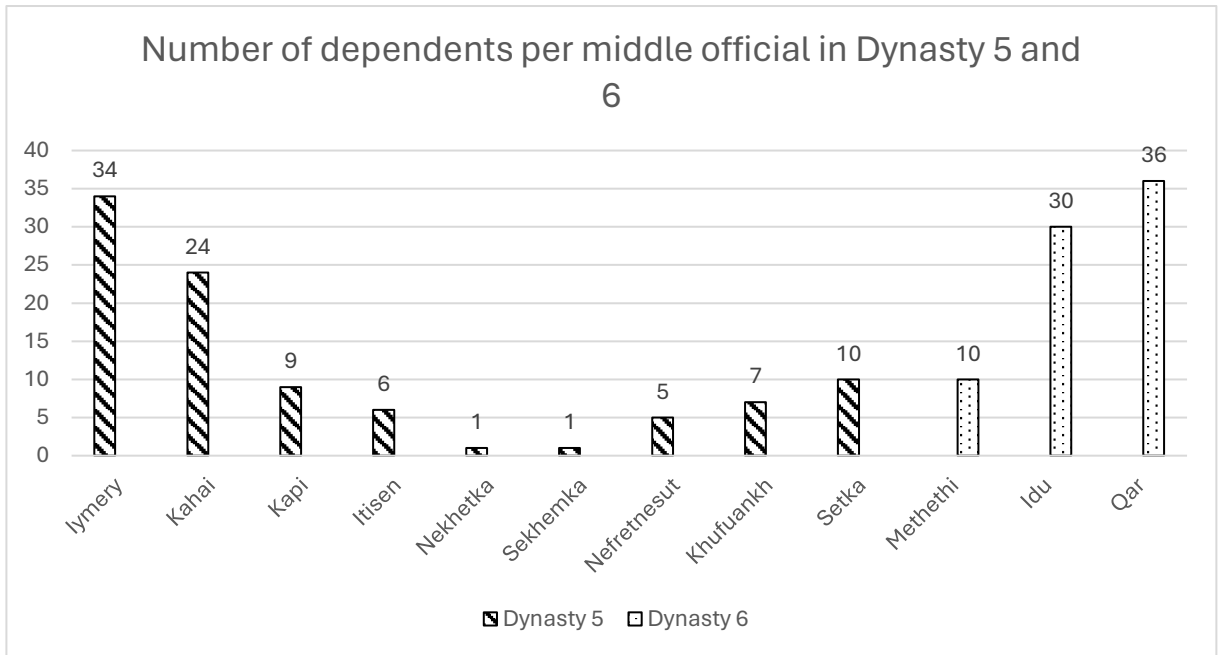
Phase 5. Teti to end of the Sixth Dynasty

The reign of Teti belonged to the second milestone although it stands slightly behind in all monitored parameters compared to the reign of Niuserre. From the reign of Teti onwards, one observes a dramatic reduction in the complexity of recorded occupations as well as in the size of individual entourages in tombs at Memphite necropoleis. The exactly opposite trend can be seen in the provincial sites, where the viziers and nomarchs adopted traditional scene repertoire from Memphite necropoleis along with the habit of recording themselves embedded within their social milieu. This gradually upward trend in the provinces increased until the second half of the reign of Pepi II, when the number of persons and the complexity of their titles reaches another maximum.

It is no coincidence that the turning points defined for the development of the Egyptian household correspond with the main social and political changes of the Old Kingdom period. Similar landmarks can also be found in the study of Egyptian kingship published by M. Bárta (2017; 2015) or in the recent dissertation focused on Old Kingdom material culture by L. Vendelová Jirásková (2021). The present study contributed to our knowledge of the history of the Old Kingdom from the perspective of the smallest social unit defining thus the periods when the level of complexity according to the number and types of ties within it was the highest for the Old Kingdom, i.e. the reign of Niuserre and Teti for the Residence, and the reign of Pepi II for the provinces, which clearly indicates the future course of the development. At a micro level,

the dissertation revealed what Egyptian household in the Old Kingdom might have looked like, how many members did it have and what was the scope of responsibilities of the leading persons in its day-to-day running. By the present analysis the author hopes to advance the wider understanding of Egyptian society in the given period.

Number of dependents per vizier from Dynasty 4 to 6

Name	Dependents
Kawab	2
Khufukhaef	11
Nebemakhet	3
Seshathotep/Heti	24
Ptahshepses	130
Seshemnefer II	10
Senedjemib Inti	40
Ptahhotep	47
Akhethotep	68
Akhethetep Hemi	45
Mereruka	92
Ankhmahor	38
Inumin	18
Hemre/Isi	6
Idwnefer	6
Nebkauhor Idu	2
Pery Šenay	7
Pepyankh, the Middle	105

Number of dependents per higher official from Dynasty 4 to 6

Name	Dependents
Nefer	22
Akhi	1
Kaunesut	5
Medunefer	5
Meriib	6
Tjenty	29
Kaninisut	52
Ti	231
Wepemnofret/Wep	19
Seshemnefer III	21
Nikauizezi	50
Shepsipuptah	17
Nyankhnefertem	26
Ibi	27
Pepynakht Heqaib 2	67

Number of dependents per middle official in Dynasty 5 and 6

Official	Value
Iymery	34
Kahai	24
Kapi	9
Itisen	6
Nekhetka	1
Sekhemka	1
Nefretnesut	5
Khufuankh	7
Setka	10
Methethi	10
Idu	30
Qar	36

Dynasty 5   Dynasty 6

Number of dependents per lower official in Dynasty 5 and 6

Official	Value
Wehemka	66
Nefertjezet	6
Niudjaptah	17
Khuta	2
Fetekti	10
Iy	2
Rahotep	6
Neferen	3
Nefer	1
Qereri	6
Meniu	1

Dynasty 5   Dynasty 6

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