

**Review of the PhD dissertation of Věra Nováková, *Complexity of Ancient Egyptian Society during the First to Sixth Dynasty Based on Written Sources – The case of Egyptian households*, Institute of Egyptology, Charles University 2024.**

The reviewed thesis, in accordance with its title, describes and analyses the development of the complexity of the Egyptian society in the Early Dynastic and the Old Kingdom periods, covering thus almost a millennium of the earliest phases of the pharaonic civilisation. The society complexity is studied by its basic unit, namely a household. The base for the study are written sources, but the archaeological and iconographic evidence is widely referred to, which makes the work as close to a holistic approach as possible. The investigation of households in the Early Dynastic period concentrates on the phenomenon of the so-called subsidiary graves, where a possible connection between the type of burial equipment and the profession of the deceased may be analysed. The main part of the thesis covering the Old Kingdom deals with the development of the households as they are reflected in the tomb iconography and texts. The author detects the changes in the composition of households, most clearly observed in the number of its members and the variability of recorded professions as expressed by their titles. The phases of household development were defined which are obviously compatible with the key periods of important political and social changes in the Egyptian state.

The dissertation contains altogether 553 pages, including 427 pages of the main text and 31 pages of Abbreviations and Bibliography. The impressive number of 529 books and articles form the base for references. The work is well illustrated with 115 figures arranged in Plates at the end of the thesis. Bibliographic Harvard references in the text are supplemented with footnotes providing additional information (not too numerous, which is, in this case, a merit).

The dissertation consists of ten main chapters, plus an Excursus at the end. In the introductory Chapter 1, the author presents the aims and structure of the work, and describes broadly its methodology and the state of research on its subject. Next chapter is devoted to the definitions and terminological issues, set against a wider theoretical reflexion. Discussion on various and different conventions of use of the term “household” by scholars representing Egyptology, archaeology and anthropology enables clarification of the meaning of this crucial social entity to avoid potential confusion of terms. Chapter 3 deals with the Early Dynastic households which were not reflected in tomb iconography, thus concentrating on archaeological sources with special focus on the so-called retainers’ graves complemented only occasionally with rare textual evidence. The discussion is broad and in depth, not avoiding, however, tiny issues, like the problem of green paint in (and on) one of Emery’s tombs at Saqqara, which is a pretext to add some information on the

rests of colour pigments in substructures of the Early Dynastic and Old Kingdom tombs (pp. 41-42).

The body of the dissertation is devoted to the Old Kingdom evidence. As the settlements are largely unpreserved for this period, and the written evidence to private households is perceptibly missing, the core of the study is based on the evidence coming from funerary monuments, more precisely targeting texts and iconography of elite tombs. The Third Dynasty representing the first occurrence of this phenomenon, and of somewhat transitory character, is treated in Chapter 4. Afterwards, instead of continuing a diachronic review of the consecutive dynasties, the author chose another mode of presentation. Assuming that the evidence of the Fourth, Fifth and Sixth Dynasty is a comparable one, she addressed the next four chapters to the tombs of four social layers sorted in descending order according to the status of the tomb owner: households of the viziers (Chapter 5), higher (Chapter 6), middle (Chapter 7) and lower ranked officials (Chapter 8). This form of presentation of the bulk of evidence should be appraised as much fortunate. Another outstanding methodological move, concerning the officials of various ranks, but particularly well working in the case of the viziers (p. 71), is the selection. Rather than simply enumerating all the cases (which are sometimes shadowy, barely attested or poorly published), the author made a conscious choice (basing on proper publications only, keeping balance in comparison between capital and provincial tombs, etc.). This means putting stress on the quality rather than the quantity of discussed and compared evidence. The task was difficult, demanding much consideration, but it seems that the author succeeded. The final part summarizes the outcomes of the study and discusses the issue in a wider historical framework (Discussion in Chapter 9).

In the Conclusions (Chapter 10), which are in fact the most important part of any dissertation, the author precisely distinguishes and briefly describes the character of the five phases of the development of the elite households in the Old Kingdom:

Phase I Third Dynasty to the reign of Khufu,

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

Phase 3 Early Fifth Dynasty to the reign of Niuserra,

Phase 4 Djedkara to the end of the Fifth Dynasty,

Phase 5 Teti to the end of the Sixth Dynasty.

“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.” (p. 408). It should be stressed that the dissertation of mgr Nováková is a conscious continuation of a line of research started by professor Miroslav Bárta. Similar landmarks can also be found in his studies of the Egyptian kingship exploring the concept of “punctuated equilibrium” and, following his view, in the recent Ph.D. dissertations of his students, focused on various aspects of the Old Kingdom

social changes and material culture (Veronika Dulíková 2016 and Lucie Vendelová Jirásková 2021).

In addition, a case study on the title of overseer of the house/the steward (*imy-r3 pr*) is attached as an Excursus at the end of the thesis in order to provide a scrutiny of the crucial person responsible for the household management. It is an example of the issue much underestimated till now, and the study is of much value not only as a detailed examination of an Old Kingdom phenomenon, but also as a reference for the scholars dealing with later periods, when the title changed its meaning and scope, and became attached to the royal court in the Middle Kingdom, and to the household of Amun in the Eighteenth Dynasty.

Leaving aside a number of particular, detailed issues, hardly a remark disputing the author's main theses can be made, the more that the work is based on a vast bibliography and most of the relevant works are included. Among those which might probably be explored more there is the book of proceedings of the 2013 conference in Chicago (Miriam Müller (ed.), *Household studies in complex societies: (micro) archaeological and textual approaches*, Chicago: Oriental Institute, University of Chicago, 2015). Only the introduction by Müller is briefly mentioned in n. 11 on p. 26, but at least one article from this volume should be referred to (Kate Spence, Ancient Egyptian houses and households: architecture, artifacts, conceptualization, and interpretation, pp. 83-99).

Certainly the subject is clearly different, concerning the royal sphere, but one cannot escape the impression that some references might be made to Michel Baud's important work (*Famille royale et pouvoir sous l'Ancien Empire*, 2 vols. Bibliothèque d'étude 126, Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 1999).

An (not much serious) allegation to the author of the reviewed thesis is that of an unnecessary modesty. The only work by her in the bibliography is an old article in Czech on the sarcophagi of the Old Kingdom. (*PES* 9, 2012). The bibliography includes none of her (later and in English) articles concerning the Old Kingdom stone sarcophagi, which may be explained by the scope of the thesis, but the article of 2017 on the household of Ptahshepses (in *PES* 19), as well as the article of 2019 on the title of *imy-r3 pr* (in *Proceedings of the Current Research in Egyptology 2018*), should be referenced, although the issues were of course treated more extensively in the thesis.

Some corrections in the Bibliography might be suggested; here, however, one may only signal two points. One, concerning a well-known colleague, should be definitely corrected (although it is a common, easily understandable, mistake). On p. 433 one may read:

DER MANUELIAN, Peter, 2009. *Mastabas of Nucleus Cemetery G 2100. Part I, Major mastabas G 2100-G2220*. Boston: MFA Publications. ISBN 978-0-87846-754-9.

DER MANUELIAN, Peter and MANUELIAN, Peter der, 2003. *Slab stelae of the Giza necropolis*. New Haven, Conn: Peabody Museum of Natural History of Yale University.

In the second case the name is unnecessarily written twice, and the second version is, by chance, correct. The point is that his name everywhere should be emended to Manuelian, Peter der. *Der* is an Armenian honorific title placed before the family name, but not being part of it. Because of the years of confusion, he now presents himself simply as Peter Manuelian (<https://harvard.academia.edu/PeterManuelian?swp=tc-au-295377>)

The other issue is of linguistic character, concerning not the middle Egyptian, however, but rather modern languages. If not the (basic) knowledge of Czech, the reviewer would certainly does not understand why the publications of Cherpion 1989 and Chyla et al. 2017 are placed between Hornung 2006 and Ikram 2003.

Of course, these shortcomings are small points indeed, without a serious impact on the assessment of the work. The language of the dissertation is not only correct, but also very clear and unequivocal, which makes the presentation easy to follow and the arguments well set for consideration. The text is well illustrated. “Based on written sources” as the title says, but amply using the available iconography. Very few typos occur. What should be especially appreciated is that the transliterations, which occur in a very great number, are made extremely carefully and the mistakes are very rare.

The thesis of Mgr. Věra Nováková meets all the standards required for a doctoral dissertations and has to be graded as “Pass” and recommended for the public defense. It is an excellent piece of scientific work, showing the extremely important aspects of the early ancient Egyptian society. Its author deserves a Doctor of Philosophy title, in hope that it is only a stage in a promising researcher’s career.

In addition, with congratulations to the thesis author, as well as to her tutor and her supervisor, I would strongly recommend to publish the dissertation, after possible improvements and additions, as a monograph by the Institute of Egyptology.

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