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Contextualising Ancient Egypt: The Social Landscape of the Oryx Nome during the Middle Kingdom, c. 1980 – 1760 BC.

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At first glance the topic of ‘Contextualising Ancient Egypt' may seem rather mundane and obvious – after all, context is of paramount importance in archaeology. However, much of Egyptian history is written from a textual perspective and often dismisses the geographic context of the ancient environment.¹ Therefore it is only in the last decade that this topic has begun to be properly appreciated with new studies and excavation regarding the ancient topography of Egypt becoming more important. The wider context of archaeological sites, and artefacts found within them, is suddenly of great interest. It is now not only essential to study sources in the context of their immediate surroundings but also within the larger, sometimes international, hinterland in which it once existed. Of course, the underlying problem is that Egyptology currently lacks a thorough understanding of the ancient geography of the Nile valley. This problem affects almost all studies regarding the ancient civilisation and is also of importance to those studying Egypt’s neighbouring states, vassals and trade networks. The methodology used here may also be of interest to those studying other ancient and historical regions.

This extended abstract does not aim to miraculously produce a solution to the above outlined problem – but it does aim to give an insight into how my research addresses this problem and how it could potentially be resolved in the future. As a case study for this research the area of the Oryx Nome² in Egypt will be studied throughout the period of the Middle Kingdom (c. 1980-1760BC).³ This period and area have been chosen due to their current lack of coherent understanding, absence of urban

¹ Occasionally the context of texts/objects is unknown, especially objects collected in the late 19th century.
² The term ‘Nome’ is the equivalent of our ‘region’ or ‘county’ and derives from the Greek Νομός.
³ All dates used in this study are taken from Hornung et al. 2006: 491-492.
evidence and sufficient funerary evidence. So far many studies have focused on the late First Intermediate Period and Middle Kingdom remains in the necropolis of Beni Hasan (the most famous monuments of the Oryx Nome). Many focus on the society of the people who created these impressive rock-cut tombs. However, none of these have fully addressed the geographical issue of where these people lived.

The Oryx Nome was the 16th Upper Egyptian Nome and is known to us from texts as early as the 3rd Dynasty. It grew in importance during the First Intermediate Period when royal centralised power at Memphis broke down allowing a more regional administrative system to develop. At this time local Nomarchs had greater control of their provinces and constructed elaborate tombs there, such as those at Beni Hasan. The Nome was known to the ancient Egyptians as Ma-Hedj, or ‘The White Oryx’, and was symbolised in a standard showing the image of an oryx atop a staff above the Egyptian hieroglyph Sepat, region. The area is also depicted on the 12th Dynasty white chapel of Senwosret I at Karnak by this symbolism. The chapel also names the chief god of the area as ‘Horus, Lord of Hebnu’. Hebnu is usually equated with some settlement remains at Zawiyet Sultan on the east bank just south of Minya and is recognised as the Old Kingdom regional centre. The chapel also gives the Nome’s length along the Nile riverbank as 4 iteru and 7 kha, roughly 45.661km. This should be a useful figure to begin recreating the landscape of the Oryx Nome and determine its boundaries – however, changes within the Nile itself make this approach futile.

The Nile, like all major river systems, is a dynamic natural feature. In the past Egypt has been described as a gift from the Nile. Without the waters and fertile silt brought by the river Egypt as a civilisation and modern state would almost certainly not have existed. The annual inundation controlled the lives of Egypt’s rural populations and affected its economy and stability. Too much or too little water during the flood could cause a collapse in central administration and separation into regional control. For these reasons, the Egyptians learnt to understand the nature of the river and lived

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4 Garstang 1907; Orel 1993; Seidlmyayer 2007; Kanawati and Woods 2010; Bommas in print.
6 Lacau and Chevrier 1956: Plate 3.
7 Moeller 2005: 29.
8 Helck 1974: 111.
9 Herodotus 2: 5.
their lives according to its attitude.\textsuperscript{10} Significant or sudden changes in the flood levels could result in shifting of channels, which over time resulted in substantial river migration – in some cases up to 9km in the past 1000 years.\textsuperscript{11} At times the river has also split into numerous branches, or reduced into one larger channel.\textsuperscript{12} River migration still occurs today in the Nile, although its affects are significantly reduced due to the controlling of the river by the construction of the Aswan High Dam in the 1960s. Floodwater discharge can now be controlled, causing less destruction in high floods and lower risks of a failed inundation.\textsuperscript{13} This has caused the river to narrow and straighten (reducing the Nile’s sinuosity index) and has allowed Egyptians to construct settlements in areas previously at risk from flooding.

The ancient levees of the river are still visible in the modern landscape in the form of old riverbanks, around 3m higher than the surrounding landscape.\textsuperscript{14} These form when the river floods and drops the largest amount of silt along its banks, eventually creating a convex floodplain. The higher levees provided suitable areas for towns to establish themselves, protected from the high floodwaters. Modern maps indicate that higher settlement mounds appear along lines parallel to the river and were most likely once located along the riverfront. Once the river migrated away from the edge of the settlement the nature of the site changed completely. Populations dependent on fishing or riverine trade and transport may have lost their livelihoods and were

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\textsuperscript{10} One of the reasons that Egyptians built in the less permanent material of mud brick is no doubt due to the uncertain stability of their settlements. Stone and wooden architectural features are among the first items that were taken from abandoned urban contexts due to their more permanent nature.\textsuperscript{11} Lutley and Bunbury 2008: 3

\textsuperscript{12} Evidence from Memphis indicates that it was once located between two Nile branches which reduced into one main eastern branch, Bunbury and Jeffreys 2011: 69.

\textsuperscript{13} Since the construction of the Aswan High Dam the ‘maximum monthly discharge has been reduced by 300%, while the minimum monthly discharge has been increased by 40%’, Saad 2002: 1.

\textsuperscript{14} Hillier et al. 2006: 3.
forced to move. Important sites may have moved with the river in a process of settlement migration. During this development it is possible to see the orientation of the settlement mound form along an east-west axis as the settlement edge moved up to the riverfront.\textsuperscript{15} We could therefore assume in excavation that the deeper and older remains would lie to the west of the mound and more recent remains would be shallower on the western edge.\textsuperscript{16} The site of Memphis is a key example of settlement migration as it was established between two Nile branches. However, the sitting up of the western channel caused the settlement to align with the eastern branch. As this branch migrated further east the city also expanded alongside. Eventually the site was largely abandoned for the more strategic location at the apex of the delta by modern Cairo and the ruins of the city now lie isolated in the centre of the west bank floodplain.\textsuperscript{17}

These studies in river topography and comparative data from other Egyptian sites will form the background for my study into the ancient landscape of the Oryx Nome during the Middle Kingdom. It is already possible to see in Google Earth imagery that older Nile branch scars are visible in the region and that ancient levees can be pinpointed through terrain elevation changes. As the Nile currently runs beneath the eastern desert cliffs it is possible at this point to theorise that the Nile once ran significantly west of its current position.\textsuperscript{18} Autobiographies from the Beni Hasan tombs mention the Nile and the natural landscape – if the natural surroundings were better understood then these texts could be used to confirm this theory.\textsuperscript{19} Eventually this study will aim to recreate the regions possible topography, and give some confidence when future excavations commence at Egyptian settlement sites. Modern habitation is growing in Egypt at alarming rates, often over ancient settlement mounds and monuments.\textsuperscript{20} Non-invasive studies such as these provide ways of

\textsuperscript{15} The trend in the Nile Valley is river migration towards the east.
\textsuperscript{16} This theory can only be proven by excavation and archaeological survey, something this study aims to assist with.
\textsuperscript{17} The apex, or head, of the delta has likely changed since antiquity, and also throughout the Pharaonic period, Bunbury and Jeffreys 2011: 71.
\textsuperscript{18} The theory of Nile migration from the west was proposed by Butzer in 1976 although has only recently been incorporated into Egyptological studies, Butzer 1976: 35.
\textsuperscript{19} A recent study by Bunbury and Jeffreys has attempted to reassess texts mentioning the landscape around Memphis in light of new geographic evidence, Bunbury and Jeffreys 2011.
\textsuperscript{20} Urban areas in Egypt have expanded by 10-200% in the last 30 years, Parcak 2008: 65.
highlighting those areas that need attention and provide a degree of certainty regarding what should be found and where.
Bibliography.

Bommas, M. in print. ‘First Intermediate Period tombs at Beni Hassan: Problems and Priorities (including BH no. 420 and the unpublished box coffin fragment BH3Liv)’.


