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More than people and pots: identity and regionalization in Ancient Egypt during the second intermediate period, ca. 1775-1550 BC

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of the present research is to examine the relationships between the sites in Egypt during the Early Second Intermediate Period and the Late Second Intermediate Period (i.e. ca. 1775 and 1550 BC). To contextualize the changes in this period, the Late Middle Kingdom (ca. 1800-1775 BC) is also included in the analysis. The Second Intermediate Period is a highly dynamic period that is not yet fully understood. During the Late Middle Kingdom, namely the period including the Twelfth Dynasty and the first half of the Thirteenth Dynasty, even though the country was still united, an incipient regionalization is evident from the pottery. This is not entirely surprising because, while Egypt can at a first glance appear as a culturally united country, especially in the periods characterized by political unity such as the Middle Kingdom, the reality is more complex. Small regional variations can be identified in the archaeological record, especially when it comes to pottery, which is used in everyday life (i.e. cooking, consuming food, drinking, storing cosmetics, and as burial goods). However, is regional variation – or even a marked regionalization such as in the Second Intermediate Period – also visible when it comes to other types of objects?

During the Early Second Intermediate Period, the country was politically divided: while the Fourteenth Dynasty, which was probably of Levantine origins, held power in Lower Egypt, Tell el-Dab'a, the kings of the second half of the Thirteenth Dynasty held power in Upper Egypt, at least in the Theban area. During the Late Second Intermediate Period, the Fifteenth Dynasty, whose kings originated from the communities coming from Syria-Palestine, ruled in Lower Egypt, while the Sixteenth Dynasty and probably the Abydos Dynasty, followed by the Seventeenth Dynasty, ruled in Upper Egypt. It is not clear how the political situation affected communication and trade inside Egypt, and what the relationships between the different areas were. Along general lines, Lower Egypt is believed to have had influence, but not direct control, over the Memphis-Fayyum area, and to have maintained contacts with Upper Egypt, especially Edfu, through desert routes and by bypassing the Theban area, which is thought to have been hostile towards Lower Egypt.

The chronological and political issues related to the phases examined in this research are discussed in Chapter 2.

The Second Intermediate Period is believed to have been a period when the access to resources (and the networks in which they circulated) was limited, because political divisions isolated the different areas. However, access to material resources is also thought to have become more difficult already in the Late Middle Kingdom. Difficulty in accessing the resources, as well as the need to articulate new identities for the new political powers, are believed to be the reasons behind the regionalization of material culture that characterizes the Second Intermediate Period. This raises the question: how can we define a region? How can we use material culture to identify regions? Based on previous research, which regions can be detected in Egypt for the period analysed in this thesis? These questions are examined in Chapter 3.

During the Late Middle Kingdom and the Second Intermediate Period, communities from Syria-Palestine were not the only foreign ones living in Egypt. During the chronological phases examined in this thesis, people originally from Nubia were also present in Egypt. They include both the groups of the so-called Pan-grave culture and groups possibly from other areas in Nubia. These groups were present especially in Upper Egypt, even though their presence in Tell el-Dab'a has also been hypothesized, based on the pottery excavated at the site. Lastly, the presence of people from Cyprus has been hypothesized for Tell el-Dab'a. Did these communities play any special role when it came to defining the relationships between sites? If yes, how did they affect them? This is another question that the present research seeks to answer. However, studying ethnicity, especially when dealing with archaeological remains, is rife with problems, which are discussed in Chapter 4.

To shed more light on the relationships mentioned above, this study focuses on the analysis of different types of objects that are in common between different sites. The idea at the base of this analysis is that contacts established between sites are reflected in material culture, i.e. the types of objects found at these sites. The closer the contacts are between two or more sites, the more similar the material culture found at these sites is likely to be. In order to examine these similarities between sites, this study makes use of network analysis. Network analysis examines the relationships between several elements based on what they have in common. It relies on algorithms: the results are, first, graphs that help visualize the relationships and their entire network, and, secondly, the calculation of mathematical measures that analyse the role (or roles) of each element in the network. Network analysis is discussed in further detail in Chapter 5.

The groups of objects taken into consideration for the analysis are beads, scarab and seal designs, stone vessels, Tell el-Yahudiyah ware, Cypriot pottery,

and weapons. These objects have been chosen because they are consumption goods, i.e. products indicating and signifying status that show different aspects of the societies in which they were used. Each group of objects provides different information:

- Beads (Chapter 7), especially the ones of faience, as well as stone vessels (Chapter 8), were used by people not only of the upper class, but also of the middle class, therefore they can help understand the involvement of different segments of society in the networks.
- Scarabs and seals (Chapter 9) were used mostly in administrative tasks, but also as amulets. Therefore, on the one hand, they can show which sites were most involved in the administrative system and in the regulation of trade. On the other hand, they can also provide information on communities with similar cultural backgrounds when similar designs were used.
- Tell el-Yahudiyah ware (Chapter 10) and Cypriot pottery (Chapter 11) were at first imported but were later imitated locally. Therefore, while most pottery has not been considered in the present analysis and – for practical reasons – has been left for future research, Tell el-Yahudiyah ware and Cypriot pottery have been included because they can show relationships with foreign lands, especially Cyprus and Syria-Palestine, and/or the presence of foreign communities in Egypt, as well as the presence of traditions which were initially not ‘Egyptian’.
- Weapons (Chapter 12), which have been excavated nearly exclusively from funerary contexts, are informative of funerary traditions. They may also signify the presence of traditions different from the Egyptian ones.

Furthermore, the objects of stone and metal demonstrate which resources were used and, consequently, which geographical areas were involved in the circulation of these resources. The main features and sources of the materials, used to produce the objects examined in the analysis, are described in Chapter 6 of the present work. Chapter 13 discusses the circulation of these materials, as based on the results of the analysis, and what this may imply regarding the reconstruction of the chronological phases examined in this thesis. Conclusions are presented in Chapter 14, followed by appendices that present the results of the mathematical measures used in this analysis, as well as the examined archaeological contexts.

