GÖTTINGER MISZELLEN

Beiträge zur ägyptologischen Diskussion

Heft 258
Göttinger Miszellen is a refereed journal

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recommended abbreviation: GM

Herausgegeben von Mitarbeitern
des Seminars für Ägyptologie und Koptologie
der Georg-August-Universität Göttingen
V.i.S.d.P.: Orell Witthuhn

Verlag der Göttinger Miszellen, Merianstraße 18, 35578 Wetzlar
Druck und Verarbeitung: druckhaus köthen GmbH & Co. KG, Köthen (Anhalt)
Die veröffentlichten Artikel geben nicht immer die Meinung der Redaktion wieder.
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€ 10.00 zuzüglich Versandkosten

ISSN 0344-385X
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Climate Change and the Rise of the Cult of Re in the Fifth Dynasty

Lloyd D. Graham, Sydney

A possible (if seemingly unremarked) instance of geomythology in action might be the rise of the solar cult in Old Kingdom Egypt, which developed in parallel with ever-worsening drought due to climate change. The climatological decline from Dynasties 1 to 6 manifested itself both in low Nile floods and in the desertification of pastures, punctuated occasionally – and paradoxically – by destructive storms. Records from the Royal Annals of Ancient Egypt and other sources show that the average Nile flood height at Memphis in early Dynasty 1 was 2.8 m, whereas by early Dynasty 5 it had dropped to 1.8 m – equivalent to just 1.3 m of water for a fixed Nilometer at which the river-bed level had risen yearly since its installation. Hunting scenes from Dynasty 5 at Saqqara and Abusir show scattered trees and shrubs on sandy or rocky desert surfaces, implying a desert savannah landscape close to Memphis, and groups of emaciated Bedouin are depicted in the mortuary temple causeways of both Sahure and Unas. It would presumably have been evident to the ancient Egyptians that the sun was the root cause of the progressive aridification that threatened their agriculture, pastoralism and hunting/fishing/gathering activities.

The population of Egypt had increased from ca. 866,000 in Dynasty 1 to ca. 1,614,000 by the end of Dynasty 4 – almost a doubling in number. During Dynasty 5, the combination of increased population density and long-term reduced productivity would have been impacting the nation’s prosperity and sustainability. At the same time, there was an upsurge of cultic activity focused on

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3 Barbara Bell (1970) “The Oldest Records of the Nile Floods,” Geographical Journal 136 (4), 569-573. The 1.8 m value cited is an average for the last king of Dynasty 4, Shepseskaf, and the first two kings of Dynasty 5, Userkaf and Sahure (4 years in total). Bell’s survey shows that the progressive decrease in flood level began from the time of state formation, with the average height being 2.8 m in the time of Djer (8 years), 2.4 m in the time of Den (15 years), 2.3 m in the time of Semerkhet (5 years), etc.

4 Butzer, Early Hydraulic Civilization in Egypt, 27.

5 Zahi Hawass and Miroslav Verner (1996) “Newly Discovered Blocks from the Causeway of Sahure,” MDAIK 52, 177-186. The indication of drought and/or famine on Sahure’s causeway at Abusir is of greater significance to the present proposal since he ruled early in Dynasty 5 and built one of the sun-temples.

6 Population estimates for 3000 BCE and 2500 BCE, from Butzer, Early Hydraulic Civilization in Egypt, 83.

7 Improvements to irrigation control may have gone some way towards mitigating the lower flood levels of Dynasties 3-6, but the basic practice had been in place since Dynasty 1 and the system remained simple, crude, decentralised and limited in scope throughout the Old Kingdom. Overall, it was “inadequate to cope with excessive or deficient floods, or with long-term trends of decreasing flood volume;” Butzer, Early Hydraulic Civilization in Egypt, 47, 50-51 & 107. Similarly Kathryn A. Bard (2015) An Introduction to the Archaeology of Ancient Egypt, Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 176.
the sun-god Re, to which the royal sun-temples at/near Abusir serve as an enduring witness. In part, the builders of these temples – six of the first seven kings of Dynasty 5 – may have wished to bolster their legitimacy by promoting their filial connection with Re, who had by this stage effectively become the state god of Egypt. But, equally, part of the motivation may have been a desire to appease the perceived wrath of the solar orb by increasing the extent of worship and offerings directed toward Re as sun-god.

There is no overt textual or pictorial articulation of such logic; however, Re was capable of inflicting his wrath on an entire land, and it is easy to see why Egyptian rulers and elites would have avoided any direct expression of dissatisfaction with the sun-god or portrayal of their country in an undesirable state due to his hyperactivity. The “Room of the Seasons,” which was integral to sun-temple function, could be seen as a veiled plea for a return of the cycle of nature to its former munificence.

If the burgeoning solar cult was (even partially) intended as a response to ongoing aridification, its lack of efficacy seems to have become evident by the end of Menkauhor’s reign, for the successors of this king dropped the theophoric element “Re/Ra” from their names and abandoned the practice of building sun-temples. The solar cult diminished in power thereafter, with the importance of Re seemingly eclipsed by a growing focus on Osiris. The rise of the latter seems not to have related to this deity’s possible connection with vegetation or the Nile flood so much as to the afterlife that he was perceived to offer. The climatological deterioration continued apace, however, culminating in the 4200 BP drought event that ended the Old Kingdom and ushered in the famine and social disorder of the First Intermediate Period.

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15 A link between Osiris and the annual Nile flood is suggested by Utterance 455 of the Pyramid Texts: “The canals are filled, the waterways are flooded by means of the purification which issued from Osiris;” Raymond O. Faulkner (1969) The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts, vol. 1, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 151. The link seems to have strengthened over time; for example, in Ptolemaic Egypt, Osiris was associated directly with the Nile flood, which was identified as the efflux from his body. Smith, Following Osiris, 450.
