

# After Collapse

The Regeneration of Complex Societies

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## “Lo, Nobles Lament, the Poor Rejoice”

### State Formation in the Wake of Social Flux

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Within a comparative framework of early state societies, pharaonic Egypt stands out as one of the most stable, integrated, and long-lasting political entities of which we have record. Indeed, in the two millennia or so that constituted Egypt’s journey from the institution of a pharaonic state in the First Dynasty to the onset of terminally troubled times at the end of the Twentieth Dynasty, Egypt experienced only two intermediate periods, each of which lasted for roughly a century or so.

The term “intermediate period” is used by Egyptologists to designate those times during which weakness in Egypt’s core—aggravated or provoked in each case by circumstances beyond governmental control—prompted the breakdown of political unity throughout the Nile Valley. During the First and Second Intermediate Periods, the patterns of collapse and regeneration followed a broadly similar pattern. Owing to the failure of strong centralized rule, the peripheries first fragmented to the level of local communities, each of which was forced then to look inward or to its nearest neighbors to cope with problems and to meet its basic needs.

Throughout the duration of these intermediate periods, however, the Egyptians maintained a strong template for political reconstruction. For centuries upon centuries, Egyptian elites had actively promoted an ideology that held that the achievement of *maat*—or order in the universe—was possible only when one sacred king ruled over a unified Nile Valley. Thus, within a few generations, local aggrandizers invariably set themselves to the task of reasserting this lost order. In the process, the best positioned and most determined of them carved out larger and larger polities, until in the end one man was able to assume the long-coveted mantle of the Good God, the king of Upper and Lower Egypt, and to reward his followers with important (and lucrative) positions in the newly reestablished governmental infrastructure.

Despite the fact that Egypt's eras of political disintegration were fewer, shorter, and milder than those experienced by any of the other civilizations discussed in this volume, the aftermath of governmental collapse in the Nile Valley was nonetheless both traumatic and transformative for those who experienced it. Within this chapter I explore, utilizing both archaeological and textual lines of evidence, the ramifications of the radical reshaping of social order that occurred during the First Intermediate Period. I argue that although numerous parallels can be drawn between the processes of state formation and those of state re-formation in Egypt, it is misleading to regard the latter as a simple replay of the former.

Although Menes and Mentuhotep II—the founders of the First Dynasty and the Middle Kingdom, respectively—were both held in special reverence by the Egyptians for their respective roles in unifying the country, the characters of the monarchies that the two men established were fundamentally different from each other. The First Dynasty, for instance, was distinguished by the sacrificial deaths of hundreds of retainers at royal funerals and by the establishment of a rigid class system. What the Middle Kingdom is known for, however, is a blurring of class boundaries and an ethos that held the king to be the concerned caretaker of his people. The differences in these outlooks had everything to do with the fact that on the eve of the First Dynasty the concept of the state remained a complete unknown, whereas throughout the First Intermediate Period the memory of pharaonic rule lingered, still relatively fresh.

While some of the reminiscences of life under the state were no doubt nostalgic, others surely were not. In the century following the collapse of the Old Kingdom government, non-elites for the first time experienced numerous social and religious freedoms that had formerly been denied to them. Rights, once tasted, are difficult to revoke, and the populace of Egypt—though they helped position the Eleventh Dynasty pharaohs in power—apparently had no intention of quietly resettling into the old social order. Cognizant of this fact, Middle Kingdom pharaohs found themselves compelled to develop an entirely new vocabulary to legitimize their rule to subjects with heightened expectations.

### **The First Intermediate Period**

The First Intermediate Period lasted from roughly 2160 to 2055 BC. Thus, at the point that it began, Upper and Lower Egypt had been unified for 850 years or so, a truly astounding breadth of time for a coherent state system.

to persist without significant interruption. This longevity must be viewed, in some respects at least, as a testament to the success of both its dominant ideology and the flexibility of its administrative infrastructure. Eventually, however, the state faltered. This is not the place to delve deeply into the multitude of reasons behind the collapse of the Old Kingdom at the end of the Sixth Dynasty, but increasing governmental corruption and lassitude as the 94-year reign of King Pepi II progressed has often been cited as a powerful contributing factor (e.g., Malek 2000:116–17; Redford 1992:57–63).

Far more damaging to any state, but especially to a sacred kingship, however, are extended bouts of ecological disasters. These came at the end of the Sixth Dynasty in the form of an unremitting series of low floods (Bell 1971; Butzer 1976:32–33, 53–55; O'Connor 1972:94). The resulting famines over a number of years expended Egypt's reserve supplies of grain and then effectively prevented the accumulation of new surpluses. Moreover, each new substandard flood exposed Pepi II and the ineffective kinglets who came after him as manifest failures in their ability either to intercede with the gods or to alleviate the suffering of their subjects.

A dimly optimistic proverb quoted in a First Intermediate Period letter states, "Being half alive is better than being dead" (trans. Kemp 1990:10). But other texts talk more soberly of people (especially Upper Egyptians) dying of hunger—a factor possibly explaining what seems to be a sharp spike in the death rate evinced in cemeteries from this period (O'Connor 1972:94). Such an evident rise in mortality may also, however, have been a symptom of increasing civil unrest and regional warfare. Contemporary texts describe the amassing of local militias and make frequent reference to "terror." Likewise, according to retrospective texts, the dangers posed by marauding bandits and foreigners prompted the prudent farmer to carry a shield when venturing out to tend his crops (for a selection of these texts, see Bell 1971; Breasted 1988:180–91; Lichtheim 1973:85–107, 139–69). Indeed, such an increased reliance on weaponry as a fact of survival almost surely accounts for the unusual prevalence in graves at this time of both functional and model weapons (Podzorski 1999:553).

What, then, can one point to as the predominant archaeological symptoms of the First Intermediate Period? A higher-than-average death rate and evidence for a greater attention to martial themes in the mortuary record are indeed witnessed. Likewise, elite monuments of any commanding size virtually disappear with the death of Pepi II. Additionally, as one might expect, ceramic forms become sharply regionalized—with the traditional high shoulders on jars prevailing in the north and with newfangled

scrapped and droopy bases all the rage in the south. Further, an even more heterogeneous regionalization is exhibited in artistic style and paleography (see Seidlmayer 1990, 2000 for summaries of the material culture of this period). Without a recognized center to dictate appropriate fashions, to educate youth, to monitor quality, and to restrict access to their services, scribes and artists were in effect left to their own devices—much to the horror of latter-day art historians.

So, indeed, the norm within Egyptology has been for studies of this period to lay their emphasis on degeneration and death. Yet the archaeological record is much more interesting than this, for hand in hand with a so-called decline in artistic standards came a whole new affordability in personal monuments and an entirely new set of consumers eager to take advantage of products that formerly had been the exclusive perquisite of the old guard elite (Richards 2000). Consequently, for the first time in nearly a millennium, Egypt's mortuary cult was infused with a new vigor. As will be discussed in greater detail below, graves of the non-elite in the First Intermediate Period are noticeably larger and better equipped than had been the case throughout the entirety of the Old Kingdom. How or why commoners should have experienced such evident prosperity at a time when the dual scourges of famine and civil distress ran rampant is not immediately intuitive.

### **Mortuary Elaboration and Social Flux**

Two possible explanations for this phenomenon are especially interesting to consider. The first is that a strong state is buoyed by high taxes, which tend to depress levels of personal wealth among the general populace. Certainly, under the Third and Fourth Dynasties especially, we know that a great portion of the country's material and human resources must have been funneled into projects connected with the building of massive stone pyramids and their associated mortuary temples. These endeavors, designed to aid the royal soul's transition from the defunct casing of its earthly incarnation to the more communal realm of potent ancestral spirits (*akhw*), thus represented a tangible investment in the future prosperity of the nation. The cult of the sacred king, which formed the centerpiece of Egyptian ideology, did not come cheap.

If the duty of all good Egyptian citizens was indeed to regularly contribute to supporting this god-king in life and in death, then the removal of such a burden in the First Intermediate Period might very well account

for why non-elites seem suddenly to have had access to significant “extra” income. Likewise, the apparent impoverishment of the nobles could be easily explained by the fact that the shattered remnant of the royal court no longer found itself in a position to subsidize the construction of elite burial monuments. Both the tidiness and the logic of this theory lend it a great appeal, and there is undoubtedly much truth in it.

I confess, however, to being intrigued by an alternative (or perhaps complementary) explanation for why non-elites in the First Intermediate Period would invest so much more in the construction and provisioning of their graves than their forefathers had done at the height of the Old Kingdom. This theory draws upon the work of Michael Parker Pearson (1982) and Aubrey Cannon (1989) in arguing that it is precisely at times when personal advancement within a society is feasible that mortuary rites become a vibrant arena for social competition. Not only does this explanatory framework reveal why the mortuary cult should have become a focus of energy during the *Sturm und Drang* that surrounded the regeneration of the state in the First Intermediate Period, but it also can be employed to demonstrate why this cult had largely lain dormant among non-elites since the period of primary state formation.

Intrigued by the possibility of problematizing the notion that elaborate burials must necessarily reflect the high social standing of the deceased, both Parker Pearson and Cannon examined a series of case studies and concluded that mortuary practices tend to become highly elaborated during times of socioeconomic foment and status uncertainty. Rites of passage—such as weddings, christenings, bar mitzvahs, and funerals—offer families and other corporate units a unique opportunity to present themselves as they would wish to be viewed before their own community. At such times when a rigid social order breaks down or is perceived as permeable, a family with resources to spare can emulate rituals typical of a “higher” social stratum and hope thereby to be perceived as having moved up in the world. The success of this strategy is witnessed in the archaeological record by a great onslaught of similarly inspired conspicuous displays of wealth.

Interestingly, the results of the studies by both Parker Pearson and Cannon suggest that this trend toward competitive display will generally continue until such persistent and aggressive outlay leads to a point of diminishing returns. When virtually all members of society are devoting so much of their corporate resources toward elevating their position by way of flashy rites of passage, “true” elites have progressively more difficulty distinguishing their own displays from those of ambitious social climbers. When mat-

ters reach such a head, the upper stratum generally initiates a movement toward restraint in burial practice. If amply empowered, this movement may even include the issuance of rules and regulations to help enforce such temperance in society at large.

### **The Evolution of Egypt's Mortuary Cult over the *Longue Durée***

Both Parker Pearson (1982:112) and Cannon (1989:437) emphasize the need to contextualize mortuary studies within an evolutionary trajectory in order to fully grasp the significance of findings from any given time period. With regard to Egypt, happily, this task is not difficult. When such a long view is taken, the trends conform to those observed by Parker Pearson and Cannon elsewhere, and it is thus worthwhile, in order to understand the First Intermediate Period, to first sketch out what preceded that period.

It is no exaggeration to state that the last time such an intense society-wide preoccupation with provisioning the dead was evidenced in the Nile Valley, the processes of state formation had only just begun to percolate in earnest. During the Nagada II period (ca. 3500–3200 BC), independent farming villages in Upper Egypt seem to have first come under the sway of a variety of burgeoning regional centers. Ambitious elites at Hierakonpolis, Nagada, Thisis, and Qustul occupied themselves at this time in aggressively jockeying for primacy over Upper Egypt and the adjacent resource-rich region of Lower Nubia.

As if in sympathy with the political struggles occurring throughout the upper Nile Valley, inhabitants of discrete communities also appear to have become caught up in the fervor of vying for status, at least insofar as mortuary rites were concerned. Excavations of Egyptian cemeteries demonstrate that funerary ritual at this time typically involved lavish feasting and the interment of the dead—even children—with a whole “kit” of specially manufactured funerary goods. In-depth studies of particular cemeteries betray the presence of as many as four or five social strata in the major centers (Bard 1989:241). Further, at cemetery N7000 at Naga ed-Deir, at least, the distribution in space and time of various ritual indicators (such as animal offerings and ash-filled pots) suggests to Stephen Savage (1997:255–56; see also Bard 1989:242) that certain high-status funerary rituals were being very deliberately imitated by others in the community. Such competitive emulation, he posits, must have fueled the progressive elaboration of the mortuary cult at this site and others throughout the Nagada II period.

Following the unification of Upper Egypt under a single ruler in the

Nagada III period (ca. 3200–3000 BC), however, a dramatic division between elite and non-elite segments of society becomes observable. Among the elites, expenditures for mortuary investment rose at this time, while non-elites seem no longer to have aspired to elaborate burials. This distinct drop-off in attention to the funerary cult and/or in prosperity among the non-elites is manifested in an increased percentage of individuals buried in small tombs with only a modest accompaniment of grave goods (Wilkinson 1996:75, 81, 86).

After the jostling for power in the Nagada II period had been largely resolved—first for Upper Egypt in the Nagada III period and then for Egypt as a whole with the advent of the First Dynasty—it may have been that the new ruling elite actively attempted to discourage such status displays among the populace. Or perhaps the move to abandon competitive display came from the bottom up. After all, the state's strict compartmentalization of society into categories of nobles, bureaucrats, and commoners may simply have convinced ordinary Egyptians that expensive attempts at boosting their social standing would come to naught. Certainly, a hallmark of the ideology typically propagated by early state societies is that economic and political inequality is not only perfectly natural, but indeed is essential to the proper functioning of the cosmos. Thus, according to these worldviews, the duty of the lower classes is to embrace their position in society, not to contest it.

Perhaps not surprisingly, then, this decline in mortuary differentiation among non-elites seems only to have intensified with the solidification of the state. From the First through Fourth Dynasties (ca. 3000–2494 BC) especially, archaeological remains demonstrate that outside of expenses lavished upon the king's funerary monument and upon those of his immediate family members, Egypt's mortuary cult was muted. While elites possessed far larger tombs than commoners did, the vast majority of the most impressive mastabas appear to have been commissioned, positioned, and constructed by the king (Baines and Yoffee 1998:245). The assumption of such responsibility by the state, although expensive, assured the pharaoh that his nobles would remain indebted to him and, hence, fully aware of their place both in this world and in the next.

As for non-elites of the early Old Kingdom, while theoretically an absence of state interest in regulating their burials could have resulted in the type of mortuary elaboration present in prehistory, it evidently did not. Ordinary people were most often interred in small tombs or pit graves together with only a spartan assemblage of grave goods. Indeed, according to

a common wisdom shared by many premodern Egyptologists and ancient tomb robbers alike, interments dating from this era simply did not repay the costs of excavation (Bard 1989:225; Seidlmayer 2000:122).

According to the theories of Parker Pearson (1982:107) and Cannon (1989:447), a strong class system renders obsolete many of the strategies otherwise employed by the non-elite to better their own status. All indications are that in the Old Kingdom, social stratification was relatively rigid. According to official dogma, human beings were divided into two groups: the *rekhyet* (who were commoners) and the *iry-p't* (who were members of the elite). In this society, the estimated 1–5 percent of the population that made up the *iry-p't* distinguished themselves from the masses by way of formal education, the wearing of clean linen, the ownership of valuable resources, the occupation of villas and (then) elaborate tombs, and the virtual monopoly that they held over prestigious civil and sacerdotal offices. According to this class system, other Egyptians either served the elite and the institutions they administered or eked out a living as “orphans,” that is, individuals who owned their own limited plots of land or herds of animals and paid taxes directly to the state (Faulkner 1962:133; Gardiner 1933:21).

The archaeological remains do little to add nuance to this picture. Individuals who possessed large tombs in the salad days of the Old Kingdom were almost uniformly members of the nobility who served in the court of the king. Moreover, at the time when the pyramids at Giza were built, a large proportion of this inner core of elites appears to have been drawn from the pharaoh's family. Settlement archaeology, unfortunately, cannot challenge this portrait, as the vast majority of preserved towns from this period had been built for the express purpose of housing state workers. In such a society—where one's status in life seems to have been ascribed, cradle to grave—elaborate and expensive display activities undoubtedly offered little payoff.

Only with the gradual transfer of the balance of power from the capital of Egypt to its peripheries in the Fifth and especially the Sixth Dynasties (ca. 2494–2181 BC) did the mortuary cult in Egypt again begin to exhibit signs of enlivenment. Despite these harbingers, full-blown, society-wide investment in the mortuary cult did not come into fruition until the First Intermediate Period—when the central state had for all intents and purposes collapsed. With no single power administering a unified Nile Valley but with numerous small polities actively involved in the formation of ever-larger political blocks, a situation came into being that was analogous to that which had existed just prior to the first formation of the state.

In First Intermediate Period cemeteries (such as Akhmim, Abydos, Elephantine, Edfu, and Cusae), non-elite graves begin once again to exhibit signs stereotypically associated with elevated prosperity. Ordinary tombs increased in size and came to be far better equipped with grave goods and amenities such as coffins than had been the case for centuries past under the supposed benefits of pharaonic rule. Indeed, Guy Brunton (who excavated many hundreds of Upper Egyptian graves in the regions of Qau and Badari) observed that “the tombs with the most objects are precisely those of the vii–viii<sup>th</sup> dyn. period. Here we find the greatest profusion of beads and amulets; no diminution in the number of alabaster vases, and all the alabaster head-rests; the greatest number of mirrors of any period; and the least number of simple, shallow graves” (Brunton 1927:76). With the sole exception of imported goods, then, non-elite interments exhibited more trappings of wealth in the First Intermediate Period than did or would their counterparts at any time when the state was strong.

### **A World Turned Upside Down**

Within stratified societies, little seems to be more threatening to the former elite stratum than to witness a reorganization of the status quo. The abandonment or rejection of a system that had jealously restricted the perks of power and prestige to one small segment of society demonstrates to all that there had been nothing natural or god-given about the system. During the First Intermediate Period and the very early years of the Middle Kingdom, the remnants of Egypt’s literati produced a genre of writings that Egyptologists term “pessimistic” but that Mesopotamian scholars might well dub “lamentation literature.”

Some of these ruminations, especially those penned under the patronage of the early Middle Kingdom pharaohs, are certainly political documents. In these, the disorder and chaos of the First Intermediate Period become the foil that highlights the benefits attendant upon the reinstatement of the monarchy. Yet despite the tendentiousness of some of these sources and the inevitable indulgence in hyperbole, there is in these purported eyewitness accounts very little that one would not *expect* to observe in a society—ancient or modern—that had suffered the effects of both environmental catastrophe and political anarchy.

A document known as the “Admonitions of Ipuwer,” for example, bemoans ravages caused by famine, civil war, pestilence, incursions of hostile foreigners, and the breakdown of law and order amid a long litany of evils

that supposedly befell Egypt during this time of upheaval. What is fascinating, however, is that the vast majority of space in the text is in fact given over to a series of strident and repetitive complaints about the inversion of social order. Commoners, the text charges, have become owners of wealth. Lo, the nobles lament, the poor rejoice. The man of rank can no longer be distinguished from he who is a nobody. Noblewomen suffer like maidservants. All female servants are free with their tongues. He who was a great man now performs his own errands. He who could not make a sarcophagus for himself is now the possessor of a tomb. Precious stones adorn the necks of maidservants, and men who used to wear fine linen are beaten, et cetera, et cetera, ad nauseam (cf. Lichtheim 1973:150–63).

Critiques of this work have long ridiculed the notion that the admonitions bear any relevance to the First Intermediate Period whatsoever, as the idea that commoners would have access to wealth during a time of social upheaval and want was met with scorn (e.g., Lichtheim 1973:150). Yet, this is precisely what we observe in the archaeological record. Although most items interred with the dead had been specially purchased as grave goods, jewelry made of hard stone, gold, or other highly valued materials seems to have been culled from the personal possessions of the deceased (Seidlmayer 2000:122). Just as Ipuwer describes, then, precious stones may indeed have adorned the necks of maidservants.

Moreover, not only did the inhabitants of non-elite cemeteries equip their graves during this period with a far greater quantity and variety of grave goods than they ever had before, but they also took the liberty of adopting for themselves tickets to an afterlife previously denied them. It is a well-deserved Egyptological cliché to speak of the First Intermediate Period as initiating a “democratization” of religion. Prior to this time, excavations suggest that only the elite had access to certain charged amuletic symbols associated with eternity, regeneration, or even kingship. Likewise, kings appear to have held the exclusive right to commission religious texts to help them navigate the perilous passage between death and eternal life. By the end of the First Intermediate Period, however, not only would individuals who could afford it be inscribing such texts on their coffins, but even humble mercenaries and people without any titles whatsoever would claim the right to directly address the most powerful of gods on their funeral stele (Richards 2000).

### **State Formation and State Re-formation: Variations on the Theme**

Thus, with regard to both the Nagada II period and the First Intermediate Period, a situation of status uncertainty evolved in which boundaries between elites and commoners were somewhat fluid. In this highly charged atmosphere, members of society at large competed with one another for status and focused great attention on the mortuary cult as a platform for social advancement. Likewise, in both instances, competition among numerous aggrandizers appears to have eventually resulted in the consolidation of power in the hands of a very few individuals.

This process, arrived at through inference with regard to the period of state formation, can be fleshed out in detail for the First Intermediate Period. Certainly, in the first few generations following the dissolution of the Old Kingdom, testaments of individuals who claimed to have worked their way up in society from modest beginnings to a position of leadership are common. These men attributed this increase in power to their own resourcefulness, which had allowed them to augment their flocks and to intensify agricultural production in a time of suffering and want. Not only their own dependents, but also members of their entire community, these men claimed, benefited from their largess (cf. the texts quoted in Bell 1971).

Archaeology has the power to reveal such bootstrap rhetoric to be just that—more bluster than autobiography—and at least one such “self-made” man of the late Old Kingdom has recently been unmasked as none other than the son of a vizier (Richards 2002). With respect to the First Intermediate Period, however, one is tempted to view such narratives of self-reliance with a little less jaundiced an eye. In a time of famine, hallowed connections to a long-gone court life would presumably do little to bolster one’s status. Likewise, at a time when no great divide separated the elite from the non-elite materially, what one did may well have counted for far more than who one was.

As the First Intermediate Period wore on, both the presence of capable providers in specific districts and the danger posed to dispersed settlers in a time of societal unrest may have contributed to the observed nucleation of settlement around particular centers (Seidlmayer 2000:122). This too parallels the situation documented archaeologically in the Nagada II period (Bard 1989:242). In both eras, the concentration of people in discrete locales, the emergence of strong leaders, and—as voiced repeatedly in the First Intermediate Period—a very real need for the acquisition of additional arable land led to the formation of alliances and the fomenting of hostilities among various regional elites.

The ultimate victor in the struggle for political and economic control of the Nile Valley in the First Intermediate Period—as in the period of state formation—hailed from Upper Egypt. Because Thebes has been extremely well excavated and studied, the emergence of this polity as a political power can be traced step by step, from its rocky start (at which time as many as seven local leaders succeeded one other in the lifespan of a single official) to the conclusion of an important political alliance with the nearby polity of Coptos. Although Thebes and Coptos were at first defeated in battle by the army of a very powerful local leader at Hierakonpolis, the Thebans and their allies would later succeed in their efforts and extend their sovereignty all the way south to Nubia (for a history of the rise of the Eleventh Dynasty, see Hayes 1971:472–88). Owing to its status as the gateway to a vast wealth of prestige goods, Nubia had also been a primary target of aggression in the earliest days of the Egyptian state.

### **The Regeneration of a Divine King**

In light of all of the parallels cited above, is it viable to view the activities of the Eleventh Dynasty Thebans more or less as a replay of politics at the time of the state's first formation? In broad outline, yes. However, some very important differences are evident between the second time the state was formed and the first. As Egypt represents one of the relatively rare examples of pristine state formation, no paradigms originally existed for the methods whereby a powerful regional leader might transform himself into the king of a nation-state. The second time the state was formed, however, numerous blueprints for the fashioning of a properly functioning national government existed.

Because the First Intermediate Period lasted for only a century or so, during much of this time the state persisted in living memory. Furthermore, to supplement old tales, monuments erected by Old Kingdom rulers served as tangible signs that powerful and pious men had indeed once reigned over a prosperous Nile Valley. While chances of southerners having witnessed firsthand such awe-inspiring monuments as the Giza pyramids are very slight, Fifth and Sixth Dynasty pharaohs had made sure to lavish significant attention on regional temples. As a result of this practice, beautifully carved scenes of kings communing with divinities and their own divine ancestors would have littered the Nile Valley.

To borrow the terminology employed by Bennet Bronson (chapter 9), Mentuhotep II's unification of Egypt in the Eleventh Dynasty can aptly be

categorized as a template regeneration, for the footprints of the Old Kingdom state were still everywhere evident. Thus, when Mentuhotep set out to the north to conquer Middle and Lower Egypt by force, he must have known that the battles ahead were not to be solely military. If his legacy was to last, battles would also have to be fought on ideological ground. Therefore, in addition to claiming responsibility in a priestly function for the major temples in his territory, Mentuhotep went several steps further. At Abydos, Dendera, possibly Thebes, and in all likelihood numerous other temples throughout his realm, he dedicated statues of himself so that they might become objects of worship in their own right. Furthermore, on the walls of numerous temples he had himself depicted—in an archaizing style consciously borrowed from Old Kingdom rulers—as physically interacting with the gods (that is, holding their hands, suckling from their breasts, and receiving from them caresses and gifts of eternal life).

To reinforce the point that in his unification of Egypt and his ascension to the throne he had been transformed from a powerful mortal into a god, Mentuhotep also had himself portrayed on monuments wearing the tall, feathered crown peculiar to the god Amun. Moreover, on at least one temple, he not only sported this same crown, but also portrayed himself masturbating with his left hand while holding his right hand aloft. This pose scrupulously mimicked that of the deity Min, caught in the act of cosmic creation. Other poses adopted by Mentuhotep II as visual confirmation of his new status—such as the “smiting enemies” pose—were those traditionally adopted by Egyptian kings since the dawn of the state (for a study of the monuments of Mentuhotep II, see Habachi 1963).

### **Re-formation and Reformation**

If we view Mentuhotep and his successors as stepping into the shoes of the first pharaohs, then we must accept that the fit was not perfect—for the nature and expectations of the people governed had undergone a radical shift during the First Intermediate Period. At the time when the first kings united Egypt, the creation of the state was a completely new venture, and those with power were free to break new ground in terms of ideology and the creation of perquisites of which they were the sole recipients. Hand in hand with the creation of the state, therefore, also came the creation of inflexible and divisive social categories.

The Middle Kingdom pharaohs who assumed control of Egypt following the First Intermediate Period, however, aspired to win the loyalty of a populace that had experienced previously unknown freedoms in the wake

of the Old Kingdom's collapse. In the course of this crucial century, the class system had for the first time become permeable. Individuals who had formerly relied on the court for power and prestige found their position precarious, while others who managed to amass provisions and dispense them wisely in a time of want rose to positions of power. At this time, as archaeology and narrative demonstrate, the non-elite were able without hindrance to assume for themselves many of the markers of status and sanctity formerly denied to them.

It is important to emphasize that the reinstatement of the state in the Middle Kingdom should not with hindsight be interpreted as inevitable, for the 99 percent or so of the people who had not and would not become part of the ruler's inner circle could simply have refused to participate in the state system. This majority must have made clear to the new leaders that they assisted to power that not everything was to be returned to the status quo. Trends such as the "democratization" of religion and the blurring of boundaries between elites and wealthy or influential commoners only intensified following reunification. Indeed, the Middle Kingdom is widely known for tremendous numbers of personal votive stelae and for the emergence in the funerary record and administrative archives of what some have interpreted as a "middle class" (cf. Richards 1997).

The Middle Kingdom is, moreover, perhaps equally famous for the state-sponsored propaganda that touted these monarchs as "good shepherds," men whose very legitimacy was embedded in the care that they took to provide for their subjects (see Richards 2000:44). Not content simply to inscribe this message upon monuments and to broadcast it aurally in public assembly, Middle Kingdom rulers also commissioned statues of themselves to communicate it visually. Once secure enough in their throne to abandon the bland archaizing styles of the Old Kingdom, the Middle Kingdom rulers adopted a mode of representation all their own that more fittingly conveyed the image of themselves that they were concerned with promoting.

Careworn brows, in combination with serious expressions and even bags under the eyes, effectively communicated to the viewer that these were men upon whom responsibility weighed heavily. Yet a visual sense of capability and strength was also expressed in the extremely large hands and strong bodies of the rulers. Perhaps most poignantly of all, however, these Middle Kingdom pharaohs seem to have sacrificed a certain amount of dignity in order to be portrayed with uncommonly large ears. These ears—like those frequently depicted upon Egyptian stelae—needed to be capacious enough to inspire confidence among all who saw them that it was the king's earnest intention to pay heed to the prayers and entreaties of his subjects (see Bourriau 1988).